The Promise and Perils of Asynchronous Learning: How Faculty, Students, and Administrators can Collaboratively Increase Retention and Satisfaction in the Online Classroom

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the major challenges faced by faculty, students, administrators, and support staff in retaining online students, and doing so while earning high marks for the quality of each course. A number of strategies are explored beginning with the need to carefully consider effective mixes of technology, structure, and content in the classroom environment. With an emphasis on social presence and careful consideration of how students use technology to access the class learning management system (LMS), the paper offers a variety of options to build classroom spaces that foster a sense of community and collaboration. Thereafter the paper addresses best practices to turn well-considered design elements into a classroom experience which addresses issues related to retention, achieving learning outcomes, and ensuring students and faculty invest in the learning process from day one. By addressing concerns shared by the major actors in the field of online education, realistic best practices can be identified to help ensure online learning achieves, if not exceeds, retention and satisfaction levels seen from brick-and-mortar classrooms.

Introduction

Despite the Department of Education concluding in 2009 that online education was more effective than face-to-face programs, lingering doubts as to its effectiveness remain strong in the United States (Boston et al., 2009). In a 2013 speech at the State University of New York at Buffalo, then President Barack Obama laid out his vision for the future of higher education. Part of his remarks focused on online colleges, which he said were 'starting to show that online learning can help students master the same material in less time and often at lower cost' while still producing graduates just as good as those from traditional, brick-and-mortar environments (Obama, 2013, para. 62). Shortly thereafter, the President of the Association of American Universities (AAU) Ripley Rawlings III claimed there was 'little good research' on the effects of online learning and 'no good studies on what constitutes bad online pedagogy, of which there is a fair amount' (Baggaley, 2014, pp. 133-134). Rawlings offered no evidence to support his blanket damnation just as the President did not explain how, roughly 30 years after online classes were first offered, it was only now graduating students on par with traditional learners (Moore, Dixon-Deane, & Gaylen, 2011).

As of 2014, close to 30% of college undergraduates were taking at least some courses online in the United States, 14% earning their degrees exclusively online (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016). Despite these increasing numbers, online graduates still report concerns over the credibility of their degrees, the quality of the programs they completed, and their perceived value on the job market. These concerns are validated by various studies showing how employers rate applicants with online degrees below their brick-and-mortar peers (Adams, 2016; Hagan, 2013; Kaupings & Waunk, 2014; Kung, 2017). With demand increasing not only from more traditional undergraduates, but professionals seeking advanced degrees or additional credentialing but lacking the flexibility to attend traditional classrooms (Picciano, 2016), the consequences of these negative perceptions to students and their futures cannot be understated.

So what does it matter that online learning lacks a terribly positive public image? As Dziuban et al. argues (2015), the perceptions students hold going into a degree program affect reported satisfaction at its conclusion, thus negative perceptions at the start produce worse student satisfaction rates when a course ends. With so much public uncertainty expressed about online learning's effectiveness, this predisposes students—and likely employers—to look at online programs with a glass half-empty mindset. No one factor has proven more important in changing student perceptions of, and outcomes in, the virtual classroom than the presence of a strong online community, a sense of togetherness

between classroom participations that invests them in the learning process (Boston et al, 2009; Simpson, 2013; West, 2010; Yang et al., 2014). While there are broader cultural issues at play here shaping perceptions of learning environments, this paper focuses on improving the online classroom itself, for if students, faculty, and administrators do not see these classrooms in positive terms, it bodes poorly for any change in public perception more broadly.

The first step in overcoming negative perceptions of online learning is to look at the classroom itself to see if these criticisms have any basis in truth and, if so, to address them as best as possible. Identifying best practices for online courses requires a look at the major actors who traditionally support student success outside the classroom, from students, to faculty, as well as administrators and support staff. Traditionally, these actors worked together inside and outside the classroom to support student success. Online technologies now offer new ways not simply to deliver content, but to facilitate interaction between these agents to produce effective digital classroom (Bonk & Zhang, 2006; Salazar, 2010; Simpson, 2013; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013). This paper, rather than focusing on theoretical classroom design, seeks to explore some best *realistic* practices related to community-building in the virtual classroom, with the aim of increasing retention and student satisfaction. It will address how to create the best environment through specific design, content layout as well as engagement strategies where these major actors in higher education today can interact to produce the type of graduates that do credit to this field and simply by their success continue to challenge negative stereotypes regarding online learning.

The Nature and Scope of Online Education
Before considering specific practices and theories on online learning one must confront the surprisingly thorny issue of just what 'online education' entails. Whether it is called distance learning (which dates back to correspondence courses), e-learning, online learning and so forth, for purposes of this paper it refers to an educational experience mediated by internet-based technology (Moore et al., 2009). The focus here is primarily on classes offered through a Learning Management System (LMS) where connections are primarily built between participants through asynchronous interactions. The main product of those interactions are virtual communities, which Felicia Wu Song defines as 'groups or networks that enable individuals to communicate with each other on the internet,' somewhat comparable to the idea of a commune (Wong, 2009, pp. 1-4). How these collectives work depends on the LMS design as well as the social environment cultivated by its participants, which we will explore in more detail later. While such a focus as this requires certain generalizations, this in no way means that other classroom styles do not experience similar constraints or that the line between different classroom styles can be perfectly drawn, thus some blending of formats is inevitable. As most of these courses and communities are based around Western cultural models of behavior, that too is the framework explored in the paper, though the consequences of replicating this implicit cultural set of rules will not be ignored.

To explore the production of community in online learning today, the paper emphasizes the role of design, particularly in facilitating access to content, in building a solid foundation for community and the social environment produced as a result of those efforts through participant interactions. The role of three main actors within the online learning environment constitutes the major focus within these areas of interest: those of faculty, who engage on the front lines in online learning communities, students, for whom the classes must ultimately serve, and a combination of administrators and support staff such as librarians and department staff whose efforts tend to make or break the success of online courses though their role is curiously overlooked more often than not when best practices are discussed.

Where the Classroom Begins: Creating Functional, Interactive Learning Spaces
Whether speaking about a physical or virtual classroom, there are always consequences related to design. If all the seats are positioned towards a single point for example, that puts whoever stands there in a position of considerable power. Online too, how a classroom is designed to facilitate access and interaction says much about its power dynamics, including the value of student input, a critical factor keeping motivation high and retaining students over the long haul (Moallem, 2008). With students often choosing online education because it allows them to time-shift responsibilities, they need a design that mirrors the distributed, collaborative workforces of many businesses today. Doing so places the emphasis on their ability to work wherever, and on whatever device, they have at the ready, ensuring

their participation is the focus of a learning space (Hochberg, 2006; Tobin, 2014; Kinash, Knight, & McLean, 2015).

To create an interface in which students feel most comfortable to learn, faculty quickly find social presence listed time and again as the most important design outcome. Social presence is ultimately an emotion, created through the engagement between individuals online and a key factor in student satisfaction (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). Virtual communities are built on social presence, and here the work of faculty to build these opportunities into a course collides with the conflicted interests of students. While instructors/facilitators play a critical role is encouraging dialogue, students must be willing to emotionally invest in these conversations too. Building the right framework to encourage this right from the start is thus critical. Most studies suggest initiating the process by creating a space where students introduce themselves and talk about their personal lives at the start of a class. As students get to know each other as more than just a name, their comfort level with sharing ideas related to the course content expands accordingly (West, 2010; Yang et al., 2014). Creating easily accessible spaces for informal dialogue spaces is critical not just in sharing a sense of self—it also subverts traditional classroom hierarchies while still keeping instructors in their traditional role of guides. Thus the more visible those spaces are, they more likely students will take the time to participate, though there is a caveat. If discussions are too large to keep up with all the posts, or students fail to engage in these early discussions, course satisfaction and student success drop precipitously (Shea, 2006; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahutny, 2015; Thompson, et al, 2013). Since instructors are almost always required to monitor interactions, it also behooves faculty and administrators to limit discussion size so problematic interactions are easier to spot and learning outcomes more easily achieved (Saltmarsh & Sutherland-Smith, 2010).

As noted earlier, beyond a design that fosters social presence, faculty must consider the variety of technologies that students use to access a course just as much as the different learning styles each bring to the classroom. Students may lack fast internet connections to load large files, or must look at course content in small fragments as they try and keep up with their studies on breaks from work, or after children are in bed. Smartphones are not terribly good at accessing certain file formats either, let alone in a size that is easily read (Tobin, 2014). Studies show that students do best when offered innovative delivery methods they can interact with on the go, from podcasts to greater use of short videos like YouTube that they use in their everyday lives. In providing these multiple content streams faculty simultaneously address another student criticism, that online design does not often seem very responsive to how they learn through technology (Tonsing-Meyer, 2012). To this end, offering the same information (say a lecture) in multiple on-demand media that is always available for download in a course and easy to find allows students to choose the format that best resonates with their specific learning style, the time they have available, and improves overall course satisfaction (Steele et al., 2017). This logic extends to assignments as well. Building multiple methods to complete an assignment into the course design lets students shape individual projects to their strengths, instead of forcing all to write the traditional academic paper which may well not best fit the goals of the assignment anyway (Kinash et al., 2015). Opening access to assignments when the course opens further allows students to brainstorm in their free time, well in advance of the due date.

While the role of student and faculty likely stand out when thinking about who design should be catered towards, administrators and support staff should not be forgotten. The idea of making online classes a sort of closed system is often encouraged as it creates predictability, but it shuts out all but faculty and students from intra-course engagement (Nye, 2015; Loertsher & Koechlin, 2013). In brick-and-mortar settings, such a style would be unlikely, as having a librarian speak about research skills or inviting a guest speaker was a matter-of-fact process. In the rush online, these external connections are greatly underemphasized. This limits access to a critical means of support for building knowledge and information literacy skills that, when integrated into virtual classrooms, facilitate student success and ease the workload of faculty who, in the absence of institutional support, must teach remedial skills on top of course content if the goal is achieving the highest level of student success (Beck, 2015; Boyer, Butner, & Smith, 2006; Gabriel, 2008; Read & Morasch, 2016). There is evidence too that online assessment practices often mirror brick-and-mortar pedagogical expectations, meaning administrators may be missing the mark in identifying effective course design all while reinforcing biases that make brick-and-mortar classes appear more effective than their online counterparts (Kim, Smith, & Maeng,

2008; Li & Akins, 2005). As much as possible then, space must be made for support staff to easily engage with classroom spaces and for their digital spaces (like online libraries and department webpages) to be integrated into the course structure for easy access. While this will not end potential assessment bias, the more staff observe classrooms in action, the more readily apparent it should be that assessment techniques need to adapt to their unique environments.

One final point to consider with respect to the collision between design and assessment relates to the emphasis today on rubrics. At best, they routinize assessment, allowing students and administrators effective means to chart progress and ensure learning outcomes are achieved. At worse, they quantify every aspect of the learning process, falling in line with companies like StraigherLine that sell courses as if they were products you could pick and choose off a shelf at your local grocery store and schools— particularly in the for-profit sector—that package courses for reuse (Kamentz, 2012; Stone, 2017). Treating education in such a way threatens both the teaching and learning process by defining positive outcomes based more on grade distributions and consistency than knowledge gained while disarming faculty from using their unique experience and style to produce an effective learning environment (Saltmarsh & Sutherland-Smith, 2010; Tenam-Zemach & Flynn, 2015; Wilson, 2006). The above evidence offers a bleak picture of the present that seems to reinforce the concerns noted at the start, for as staff are cut in favor of these premade courses with little to no outside support, faculty lose key allies, students lose an important asset in research assistance, and college administrators damage the dynamics of virtual communities because they separate students from traditional forms of staff support that help with retention, not to mention treat students and faculty like commodities. There are however some promising ways to use these very concerns to build better classrooms.

The first step in addressing these concerns relates to a critical, if often unexamined, link between design and retention. For a variety of reasons schools and faculty want students to maintain their enrollments, and degree completion benefits students in many obvious ways as well. More than anything, a sense of isolation—from peers and/or an instructor—leads students to drop out (Simpson, 2013). Overcoming this barrier through engagement will be discussed later, but there are other noteworthy ways faculty can increase student retention and produce better course outcomes through the way information is presented in the virtual classroom. Most critically is to recognize the need for self-regulation from students. Given their many responsibilities, building clear deadlines into assignments as they are loaded into the LMS (which can auto-notify students of upcoming assignment deadlines), posting or linking to course content/information in visible locations (ideally right when one logs into the course) for students to access at their leisure, and spelling out expectations not just in an online syllabi but reinforcing them under specific assignment locations helps them maximize their time in the LMS. Since there is no real-time presence in a classroom to track down an instructor with questions, instructional clarity and visibility means students do not necessarily have to send last-minute emails if they are confused on an assignment, but means they know just where to find instructor contact information if they feel that need. While addressing these elements is no guarantee of success, the more faculty can address this in the layout of course content, the less of an issue self-regulation should become when a class runs. Students too must use the lines of communication open to their instructors and peers to ask for assistance when needed (Norton & Hathaway, 2008; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013; Tobin, 2014). These efforts are not just a numbers game either—one recent study indicated that classroom failures significantly increased incidents of depression and domestic violence (Simpson, 2013).

These design elements may sound daunting, and particularly as the different actors in online learning get their feet wet with the technologies behind the classroom it can be a very frustrating experience at times. Much of these elements and expectations come easily with a relatively short amount of experience however. This being said, there are some very real, practical obstacles to the aforementioned design goals. Above all, there is the pre-packaged course syllabus mentioned above, where faculty facilitate content designed and loaded into an LMS without their input. This creates a situation where faculty lack power to alter course design, reinforce expectations beyond what has already been programmed, or easily offer multiple media formats in accessible locations for class content. When faculty are faced with so little control, their best hope is to focus on interaction and feedback, as those are the areas generally left to them, though this comes with the threat of grade inflation in order to meet minimum student satisfaction rates (Bourne & Moore, 2003; Fagen-Wilen et al., 2006). Nonetheless, when one poor student satisfaction survey or significant student attrition in a

course can mean the loss of future employment, particularly for adjuncts (Fagen-Wilen et al., 2006; Hutto, 2017), poor course design is more than a frustration, it threatens the livelihood of faculty, the success of the learning experience for the student, and the credibility of an institution as a whole.

Along these same lines, even when faculty do have control over LMS implementation, it does not mean they have the time to devote to learning its ins and outs entirely, nor students to fully investigate every nook and cranny a course offers. With the majority of faculty in the US now part-time according to the AAUP (2017), it is hardly a surprise faculty juggling multiple responsibilities lack the requisite time to carefully craft content they might teach only once, or have only days to lay out and produce course content before the course begins. The push for rubrics too encourages standardization of assignments to prove to department chairs through grade distributions learning outcomes were met. While rubrics are certainly a factor in all classroom designs today, students online may focus so much on rubrics they dismiss the value of faculty-student interactions which would better clarify assignment expectations and learning outcomes (Haught, Ahern, & Ruberg, 2017). The seductiveness of simply replicating brick-and-mortar thinking online thus remains strong, not just because of these constraints but also since LMS design often encourages it by its own construction of the virtual classroom experience (Christie & Jurado, 2009; Norton & Hathaway, 2008). As cost dominates more and more on the administrative end, class sizes rise, meaning faculty at some point will find it impossible to keep up with every student and every comment and prove the harshest critics of online education, that is little more than a diploma mill, correct. Innovation too, when it does not work as intended, can end a career. As mentioned before, one bad student evaluation might result in faculty not asked to return to teach a class. Each instructor must decide for themselves if the risk of trying something new in classroom design outweighs the potential risk.

Finally, there remains the thorny issue of culture. The internet is a product of Western design standards, which dramatically shape the terms of engagement for students through design, putting those who lack a Western background at a decided disadvantage (Jakubowicz, 2004; Tonsing-Meyer, 2012; Yang et al., 2014). Support staff here play a critical role in ensuring students have requisite skills before they enter a classroom, but profit margins often weaken this safety net for students. Faculty though, when they have design control, can empower classroom design to lessen these limitations on student success the more they know about the cultural values of their students. For this very reason, faculty should be given as much information about the student population they will teach before they begin the design process, so they can best adjust for cultural barriers right at the start.

The primary goal in all these efforts, and the very reason why design and pre-prepared content and its layout necessitates so much attention, is that, when done right a classroom has a strong foundation from which to build community. As Nye argues based on her experience building a virtual student community, 'Focusing on student self-conceptualization and inclusivity and encouraging students to blur the boundaries between themselves and their lecturers' is critical in fostering a productive learning environment (Nye, 2015, p.120). With those early efforts in place to build bridges between all members of a learning community to cultivate a strong and consistent sense of social presence as a singular peer group (not a hierarchical one), the next hurdle that emerges is how good design and easily accessible content into a strong basis for critical explorations of a class's subject matter.

Engagement: The Ties That Bind Community Together
Once the right design and layout is found for a given student population, the main actors must then execute those elements in order to build a successful classroom experience, and that starts with engagement. Since each class is unique, turning engagement into community is a constantly renewing process. When it does work, studies strongly indicate it significantly increases student satisfaction and retention (Boston et al, 2009; West, 2010). Given the varied personalities within an online environment, there is no easy template to build community, but there are some techniques that offer the greatest likelihood of turning a well-prepared classroom into a strong community of virtual learners. In LMS-based courses, the locus of this community-building are discussion spaces, where students and faculty alike explore the content through questions, answers, and commentary (Norton & Hathaway, 2008).

As mentioned earlier, if the design elements and content are already in place to foster social presence at the start of a course with more informal discourse, a strong foundation should already have been laid to

turn social presence into a bonded community. Design itself, while facilitating peer interaction in all sorts of virtual discussions, somewhat paradoxically can lessen feelings of community, since individuals come and go as they please, even if interactions are graded (Deuze, 2009). In these early interactions, instructors must create rapport—if not a new language of sorts—to ensure students communicate effectively within the technological limits of the space they and feel invested enough to stick with the group. This could mean posting emoji's, audio/visual cues, personal pictures and so forth. The key point is that the more students feel safe to express themselves and that people are invested in them as individuals, the more easily knowledge can be built through collaborative critical thinking. When students do not know the values of their peers they struggle to work together, so the more sharing that happens, the stronger roots are grown to cultivate a successful virtual community. Using discussion prompts that allow students to use prior experiences or connect previous course content with present also offer a great deal of promise with respect to building critical thinking and engagement (Bradley et al, 2008). Emphasizing discourse along these lines offers critical benefits not just to a classroom community as a whole, but smaller group-based interactions as well. Such engagement also does much to diminish initial feelings of isolation many students feel at the start of an online course and keep them from dropping out later in the term (Simpson, 2013; West, 2010; Yang et al., 2014). The richer a medium of communication is in its ability to express emotion, certainly including the embrace of social media styles preferred by younger students most of all, the more it will foster connectedness with the space and those sharing it (Bonk & Zhang, 2006; Wei et al, 2012; Yang et al, 2014). Administrators would do well to consider this when choosing an LMS.

From the faculty perspective, there are several key contributions they make in the creation of a successful virtual community. First and foremost, the tone a faculty uses with their students matters. Faculty should be sure they follow one simple rule above all: facilitate, do not dominate. This can start simply with what you indicate you wish to be called (Professor, Dr. Ms./Mr., first name, etc), but more than anything the type and amount of feedback provided proves critical to maintaining student engagement. Be personal (using the preferred name of the student is a good start), but be specific in commenting on an idea. This shows the student their instructor is interested in their ideas and helps them develop their critical thinking as they reply. Such feedback tells students how they are doing, leading to positive grading outcomes and higher student satisfaction with a course (Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). Setting the right tone also means that, when instructors do comment, it is taken as impetus to further discussion, not as a sign authority has spoken and discussion must cease. Students report that with clear instruction built into the design and feedback focused on both form and content, that as long as faculty continue to support them, students produce their best work (Alvarez, Espasa, & Guasch, 2012).

The focus on tone-setting should not be limited to text either—faculty who expand learning communities outside the classroom, such as offering real-time office hours (via phone, Skype, instant messaging, etc) as a supplement the asynchronous nature of the learning environment itself and use pictures, video, and social media in their posts otherwise typically earned the highest marks in student satisfaction, particularly in complimenting the instructor's asynchronous social presence (Coates, 2006; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015). Some suggest giving students as much freedom as possible to direct the discussions according to their interest and experiences, which again increases a sense of shared community values focused on the majority views of the group and subverts traditional hierarchies. As students and faculty critically engage communally, rather than the old one-way lecture model, students report higher feelings of community and knowledge-building (Pelz, 2004; Tonsing-Meyer, 2012; Shea, 2006). With online technologies allowing for a level of diversity typically impossible in a traditional classroom—peoples from across the world can literally come together in an online classroom—virtual classrooms have the potential to take this contemporary emphasis on collaborative learning and make it more inclusive of different cultural viewpoints within the classroom than ever before.

Returning the focus to students, they play just as critical role, if not even moreso, in building community in the classroom than faculty, no matter the form. In an online environment, they do so primarily through participation with other students, the content, instructors, and the design elements of the course. Given that students have the most to gain from peer-to-peer interactions, this proves the greatest—if not necessarily the most obvious—motivation for students to engage in community-building (West, 2010). Students should take seriously informal communication spaces too, from introduction

boards to student-led chat areas, as the more engaged they are in such spaces at the very start of the semester, the more satisfied they report to be with their classes. Additionally, those that do are more likely to ask for help when they need it, which significantly improves retention. Coupled with substantive faculty input in these boards, creating a sense of presence traditional classrooms lack since instructors cannot come and go as wanted, the results lead to better all-around satisfaction for faculty and students alike (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Shea, 2006; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013).

Faculty and students play fairly clear roles in community-building, and not terribly different from the physical classroom as far as shaping social presence. The often silent set of actors here are the administrators and support staff, which directly relates to the negative perceptions of online learning in general. As one recent study showed, for online faculty—adjuncts most of all—programs tend to keep them at arm's length, alienating them from their fellow faculty and the college as a whole. Such treatment hardly proves a solid foundation for building a good learning community with students (Glazer, Breslin, & Wanstreet, 2013). With online faculty already physically distant, this behavior only magnifies their disconnect from the school as a whole. This dovetails with another, equally critical failure administrators and support staff make when their programs share on-campus and online students. Mass emails and announcements tout on-campus happenings and opportunities, totally ignoring online students or giving them opportunities for virtual participation. This leaves students feeling less important than their on-campus peers. The stigmatization reinforces the casual putdowns people hear about online education, making online graduates less confident about their degree and reinforcing employer uncertainty about online graduates as a whole. If administrators were more active within classroom environments, they might have some of their misconceptions curtailed that hurt student success rates and address such negative behaviors. It also behooves administrators to encourage alumni to connect with their virtual communities to reinforce the value of their hard work as it relates to career outcomes (Nye, 2015; O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Thompson, Miller, and Franz, 2013). As with design elements, the participation of support staff and administrations, including visiting online classes occasionally (which is far easier online than in person), goes a long way towards creating better unity within a college as a whole.

There are of course some limitations in creating community related to the combustibility of different personality types and cultural differences. Different cultures with different learning styles project different expectations of community into a classroom, so in a true multicultural classroom, it takes a great deal of additional effort and open-mindedness from all participants to work through these differences (Yang et al., 2014). Life itself is a critical barrier too. Students typically choose to study online because they juggle multiple responsibilities. This only makes it harder to organize their time to complete necessary tasks, and classroom participation and assignment completion are often the first expectations to get set aside when other responsibilities grow. This leads some students to avoid social presence altogether, looking at the classroom as a job to complete rather than a place where community would benefit their educational experience (O'Shea, Stone, & Delahunty, 2015; Thompson, Miller, & Franz, 2013). While there is no sure-fire way to address such concerns as it varies greatly based on the specific student population being served, the more engaged an instructor is, the more likely students will collaborate in the learning process and to seek out help when they need it (Shea, 2006).

All the above barriers to success are notable, and there are many others, but one that necessitates particular scrutiny involves problematic and offensive speech, as the internet has proven to be an excellent breeding ground for hate. Ideally, online participants share ideas respectfully and differences of opinion are met with consideration and understanding. The lack of visual markers and direct personal interactions in virtual spaces may even make people more willing to share ideas (Pelz, 2004). The internet, however, is not an ideal world. Quite the contrary, it seems that without direct consequences to their public selves, individuals online sometimes post comments that toss expectations of civility aside (Epstein & Reich, 2010; Papacharissi, 2004). Though most any college or university has a code of conduct which warns such behavior is unacceptable, that does not make it simply disappear. Faculty must walk a fine line between the free sharing of ideas critical to a successful virtual community and enforcing rules that ensure students that the expression of their ideas will not lead to personal attacks, which tend to either escalate or mute the target (Bissonette, 2014; Li & Akins, 2005). Whether it is a student or faculty member who finds themselves a target, avoid an immediate response—anger neither produces the most eloquent of responses nor tamps down divisive rhetoric. In communities where a

sense of unity has been built, participants often rally to the victim which in and of itself quiets the offender, ideally producing apologies and a frank discussion of the underlying issue(s) which benefits all (West, 2010). Here administrators and support staff are key allies, as they handle code of conduct violations. Their speedy action—and interaction on a discussion board—can save a virtual community ready to crumble under the weight of hate speech while reinforcing to students that they too are vested in maintaining a safe learning environment.

The temporary nature of academic virtual communities may limit personal investment, but just like a physical classroom, students will likely have classes with some of the same peers and/or faculty in the future. Boston et al. (2009) showed virtual communities which departments created to connect students within a single program were a key factor in increasing retention with brick-and-mortar and online schools and Lai (2015) also found in looking at a specific online graduate program that a shift towards 'a collaborative, community-based' learning environment produced high levels of engagement and knowledge attainment (p. 575). Building connections early also helps create a broader support system for students to get through their degree programs in a mutually supportive way (Nye, 2015). Increased retention, as noted earlier, is another critical outcome to community-building which benefits all the major actors in virtual learning.

Final Frontiers in Online Education
Building the better classroom does not end with design, layout, and effective community interactions of course. The learning materials chosen and the style an instructor uses to facilitate the learning process is just as critical, but it remains the most subjective aspect of the online classroom given it is born from a combination of factors including the discipline the course is rooted in, requirements assigned by the university, cost considerations, faculty expertise, and so forth. The diversity of disciplines belies obvious generalizations, save the aforementioned need to present ideas in multiple ways and offer students flexibility in assignment design to adjust for different learning styles and cultivate student success regardless of their learning styles. With the right design to start and techniques to build a sense of comfort and community at the ready to eliminate opportunities where individuals feel alienated from their peers or the content, all the actors in the online educational system should have the best chance to thrive no matter the precise material chosen (Simpson, 2013).

All the elements spoken of in the paper ultimately relate to one unifying purpose—to motivate faculty, students, administrators, and support staff to engage in the online system collaboratively and frequently. When this happens, retention goes up, student satisfaction increases, and faculty morale is boosted (Glazer, Breslin, & Wanstreet, 2013). However, the real world often sees one or all of these groups failing to live up to their expectations—often for very understandable reasons, which only empowers critics of online learning as a whole (even if brick-and-mortar classrooms could be equally critiqued for such issues). Given how important each of the major actors are in this learning model, a mutual support system that facilitates communication to ensure best practices are followed and supports each in making each classroom as successful as possible is likely the most important element in online learning today. While mediated by pixels, online education is just as much about people and their interpretations of ideas as any physical classroom. If all parties engaged in the process remember that and extend respect to others as well as the process of learning, the more quickly the field as a whole can tear down negative stereotypes and ensure graduates get the most out of their time in the virtual classroom as well as the full respect they deserve in earning their degrees and the benefits that come with it.

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