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A final project presented to the faculty of the
Instructional Design Master's Degree Program
University of Massachusetts at Boston

**A Case Study on a Grassroots, Student-Led Facebook Community
For Online Graduate Students and Alumni**

Submitted by
Caroline E. Frankel

In partial fulfillment for the requirement of the degree
MASTER OF EDUCATION

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Dr. Carol Ann Sharicz

Approved by Dr. Carol Ann Sharicz, Faculty

Abstract

This case study explores the evolution of a grassroots, student-led Facebook graduate student community to support graduate students within the University of Massachusetts Boston Instructional Design Program. The study explores literature supporting social presence construction within formal course environments, informal learning networks, and how social media can help bridge the gap between the formal and informal course space. A questionnaire administered to graduate students and alumni within the Instructional Design Facebook community suggests that a grassroots model has been *highly* effective at helping students feel more connected to each other. Conclusions and recommendations provided by this study will help inform and reform online graduate programs, universities, and learning management system (LMS) providers to meet the social-emotional needs of online graduate learners to feel and stay connected.

Keywords: online graduate education; learner-learner interactions; social media; community of inquiry; instructional design; adult learning

Introduction

As online learning continues to expand, institutions and programs should ensure that student's needs for community and connections are being met. There are many challenges to connecting learners within a learning environment, which inevitably impact a student's sense of community. This case study explores a grassroots student-led initiative to help bridge some of the gaps students may experience when it comes to feeling part of a bigger community and feeling connected.

Research context

The University of Massachusetts Boston's Instructional Design program is a "multi-discipline" online graduate program, which offers a "practical master's degree ideal for career professionals engaged in the education, training, and development of adult learners in the workplace" (University of Massachusetts Boston, n.d.). Most learners within the program are part-time students and full-time working professionals and practitioners within the greater field of instructional design. The Instructional Design/MEd program is a blended, online program. Instructors typically engage students with a combination of synchronous and asynchronous methodologies, and there are a couple optional on-campus opportunities for students to connect. Instruction is almost entirely online.

In January 2019, Ms. Caroline Frankel, M.Ed.(c), the researcher, founded a Facebook group for instructional design graduate program students at UMass Boston, alongside the support of a classmate, Mr. Dana Remian, M.Ed. Both students, following a group project, felt that there was a pressing need to build a virtual community for all students in the program.

From its start, the instructional design Facebook community had a strong mission statement which was an iterative process between the group's co-founders:

“The Instructional Design Facebook community fosters a safe space for learning, networking, and professional development for current students & alumni. Our community encourages the following behaviors: scholarly inquiry and dialogue; knowledge, resource, and idea sharing; soliciting and offering feedback on current academic and/or professional work; collaboration, peer-to-peer learning; and sharing career opportunities, such as job postings. As an unofficial, student-facilitated group, the student-led group administrators assume no liability for the conversations in this group and encouraged that members consult the program advisor and/or the program director for program-specific guidance.”

Ms. Frankel and Mr. Remian, both students at the time, promoted the group independently within course discussion boards, among other informal channels. The community maintained overwhelming faculty support, particularly from Dr. Carol Ann Sharicz, who encouraged that students utilize this student community. Dr. Sharicz referred new students to the program, as well. Through grassroots email outreach and advertising within “coffee shop chats” and course question & answer forums, the Facebook community grew to a total of seventy-one (71) members as of April 27, 2020.

While the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community initiative was entirely student-led, it is important to note that Koutropoulos (2010) documents the first “community of practice” within the Instructional Design Program at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Challenges with the community of practice included students not seeing an immediate benefit, as well as resource-related challenges, including managing the group. This

article is a historic documentation of previous program attempts to address a need for online students to feel connected. Koutropoulos (2010) cites challenges that are relevant to the current, grassroots community, including social media fatigue and students not participating in an optional community of practice (CoP). These challenges may also be relevant to the UMass Boston Instructional Design group on Facebook, which is entirely optional. Furthermore, Koutropoulos (2010) cites that the CoP was hosted on Ning, a lesser-known social media site which has the ability to connect to other social media groups. While this original CoP no longer is in existence, it is important to note that this student-perceived need was addressed in a previous, faculty and program-led initiative.

Problem statement & research questions

This study explores four (4) research questions surrounding UMass Boston Instructional Design Community members' participation in a private Facebook community as a space to connect to each other.

1. What compelled the UMass Boston Instructional Design graduate students and alumni to join the Facebook group community?
2. How has the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community helped graduate students and alumni form meaningful connections with peers in the program?
3. How has UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community enhanced or strengthened relationships that current students and alumni may have built in the program?
4. Finally, how has our group helped current graduate students and alumni feel connected to the greater Instructional Design program at UMass Boston?

Theoretical frameworks

Fostering a learning community where students connect and share knowledge, ideas, and lived experiences creates a more dynamic and supportive learning environment. Garrison's (2016) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is an instrumental theory for understanding the role of "social presence" within computer-mediated learning events, learning interventions, and online courses (p. 5). Garrison's (2016) research-based framework suggests that facilitating social presence is a critical need, particularly within instructor-led online courses. Vygotsky's social constructivism framework has influenced the CoI framework and has impacted movements surrounding student-centered online learning course development (as cited in Hall, 2007, p. 94). This study is largely driven on the CoI framework which is centered upon social constructivism theory.

Moreover, adult learning theory, especially the theory of "andragogy" proposed by Malcolm Knowles (as cited by Merriam, 2001, p. 3), is an important theoretical framework to the study. Knowles' theory of adult learning suggests several principles that apply to adult learners. Principles of andragogy reinforce that adults are self-directed learners, with concrete, specific reasons for approaching education. Knowles's theory of andragogy illustrates the unique needs of adult learners who approach learning with motivations and are internally motivated. Applying Knowles' theory to this research is instrumental to this case study. While some adults within a distance graduate education program may have specific needs for forming connections with classmates, some may have little to no perceived need for building meaningful connections with other students in the online classroom, aside from when it is a requirement.

In addition to andragogy, Moore's (1997) theory of transactional distance offers a systems view of distance education and is fundamental for the proposed study (Moore, 1997, as cited by Keagan, 2005). Moore defines several variables that influence learner behavior in distance education, including "instructional dialogue," "structure," and "autonomy" (Keagan, 2005, p. 23). Moore's theory of transactional distance argues that the distance and "separation" between an instructor and student creates a "transactional distance" which often creates "misunderstanding between the inputs of the instructor and those of the learner" (p. 22). The transactional distance influences learner and instructor behavior within the online learning environment which, thus, may impact a student's ability to form connections within an online classroom and the extent to which the learner may feel part of a larger learning community. Furthermore, Moore's theory also indicates that "teaching courses at the graduate level in social sciences and education offer opportunity for highly inductive, Socratic teaching approaches, with much small-group work or individual case-study and project work" (Keagan, 1997, p. 23). Moore suggests that disciplines, such as education, lend themselves to more socially driven learning models and have the capacity to foster community and connections between students.

Finally, the most current supporting theoretical framework is "critical pedagogy," a concept coined by Sean Michael Morris and Jesse Stommel (2018). In their book *An Urgency of Teachers*, Morris and Stommel (2018) insist that educators and instructional designers and teachers call for a revolution of learning in which "dignity" is prioritized over the constraints of learning management systems (LMSs). One specific area of criticism of Morris and Stommel (2018) is the discussion board, which the authors refer to as "over cultivated factory farms, in which nothing unexpected or original is permitted to flourish. Students post because they have

to, not because they enjoy doing so” (Morris & Stommel, 2018). The authors question the artificial measures of student participation by the quality of a student’s posting and quantity of student replies, which thus, impacts students’ ability to build community and connections with each other. Critical instructional design calls for reform to restore creativity and liberty to online education. Morris and Stommel’s (2018) framework align with this study on many levels — particularly since the Facebook group is a grassroots group without instructor involvement and was in reaction to perceived constraints of the learning ecosystem in place.

Literature review

The UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community emerged much in part to the challenges the founders had with connecting with classmates via online course discussions, as well as feeling connected and the urge to stay connected to each other. It was never intended to be a standalone space but, rather, a forum to help students be part of a greater community. In order to understand why UMass Boston Instructional Design students elected to join an external, voluntary Facebook Community, it is important to explore existing literature on the socio-emotional needs of online graduate learners to feel “connected” and “to connect” with peers in a greater learning community. Furthermore, this literature review will examine how learners connect formally within an online environment to understand how the Facebook community may have met social needs resulting from formal course interactions. Finally, literature surrounding “informal learning networks,” as well as current literature on social media utilization in graduate learning will be explored.

Socio-emotional challenges unique to online learners

Delahunty et al. (2014) examine socio-emotional challenges unique to online learners, such as negotiating the “psychological and communications space” coined by Moore (Moore, 1993, as cited by Delahunty et al., 2014). Delahunty et al. (2014) argues that “lack of sense of community or feeling disconnected from the learning community are key issues for online learners (Rovai, 2002a; White, 2003; Hughes, 2007; Gallagher-Lepak, Reilly & Killion, 2009, as cited by Delahunty, 2014. p. 11). Delahunty (2014) confirms how the rapid growth of educational technology makes it challenging to address specific interventions to support online learners’ ability to form meaningful connections. The challenges associated with both asynchronous and synchronous communication models may explain why feeling disconnected is a unique challenge of online learners. The UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community may be an example of a specific intervention to address these greater socio-emotional and communication needs.

In addition, Phirange and Malec (2017) specifically explore challenges that online students experience in terms of “social identity, social presence, and sense of community,” which provides keen insights on connection development within the online learning space. Specifically, the authors explore “social presence,” or “feeling as though someone is there when communicating online” (Whitman, 2002, as cited by Phirange et al, 2017, p. 17). In a multiple case study design, Phirange and Malec (2017) study how online students are “othered” within an online course, which includes the feeling of “otherness” or “identity incongruence,” as a weakened sense of community (p. 161). While the authors note that students may succeed academically within the online course, Phirange and Malec (2017) provide evidence suggesting that “the experience of being othered created feelings of disconnection, isolation, and lack of

community with their peers and/or their instructors and negatively influenced their learning experiences in their online courses" (p. 161). Feeling the "other" is complex and may occur for a variety of reasons; nonetheless, it impacts overall learning.

Connection and community within asynchronous and synchronous course communications

Understanding the role of asynchronous and synchronous communications within the broader environment of online learning is important to reinforce challenges students may experience with feeling connected to others in an online course environment, including interactions with course content, the course instructor, and with peers. Asynchronous and synchronous communications may pose unique challenges to learners connecting in the online classroom.

Exploring asynchronous learner-learner connections

Oztok et al. (2013) argue that "asynchronous communication is currently the dominant form of educational computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Johnson & Aragon, 2003, as cited by Oztok et al., 2013, p. 88). The most popular asynchronous platform that supports student connections and course community is the discussion board, which is a prominent tool used within UMass Boston's instructional design courses. Discussion boards typically consist of prompts, or forums, that often take place on a weekly basis in which students post a thread, or respond to a topic, and reply to student postings. Aloni and Harrington (2018) explain how a discussion board functions for "asynchronous online discussions": students engage in a conversation about a topic related to the course content by providing initial responses to a question posed, responding to ideas shared by others, and by additional contributions" (Aloni and Harrington, 2018, p. 272).

All UMass Boston Instructional Design courses use discussion boards as a tool to connect learners with each other in guided activities; some courses use the discussion board as a space for students to share content they may have created for a course project (i.e. an e-learning module students may have developed for a course). The exact utilization of the discussion varies from instructor to instructor, however undoubtedly, discussion boards are the primary forum where students connect within the course space.

A major benefit of the asynchronous discussion board is that it allows students to learn from others posts and negotiate further meaning from the course content in a flexible format (p. 727). However, Aloni and Harington (2018) cite several challenges with the asynchronous discussion board including “low student participation and engagement” (p. 273). In addition, Phirangee (2016) cites many challenges with asynchronous discussions within the online course environment which may weaken interpersonal connections and course community. Common challenges students experienced included: lack of “meaningful dialogue”; monopolization of conversations by the “keener,” or over-contributing student, repetition of posts”; “selective listening”; “lack of attribution” ;“going off on tangents”; “editing posts”; and “cultural exclusion” (Phirangee, 2016, pp. 21-28). These challenges associated with asynchronous instruction may explain disconnect that may arise in an online course. Fragmentation in the asynchronous conversation may explain some of the challenges that students face in connecting with other colleagues in the online course environment and feeling part of a larger community.

High impact practices for asynchronous discussions to foster connections and community

An instructor’s interventions to focus class discussions will increase a student’s ability to feel connected to the greater course conversation, community, and to classmates. For instance,

leveraging “rubrics” to specify discussion expectations is a recommended “best practice” to help reinforce the “purpose” of the discussion at hand, “expectations” for student behavior and engagement with classmates, as well as guidelines for student posting and follow-up response. In addition, small group discussions in an online course contribute to more focused course discussion. Aloni & Harrington (2018) recommend that the “optimal size for small group discussions should be about five participants” (Aloni & Harrington, 2018, p. 279). Specifically, they cite a study by Akacoglu and Lee (2016) which reported that “students felt more connected to their peers and reported experiencing a more positive learning environment in discussions with four to five students compared with whole class discussions” (p. 279). Aloni & Harrington’s (2018) research reinforces the instructor’s powerful role in helping students feel connected to each other and building community. This research reinforces that meaningful learner-learner connection and community via asynchronous discussions are attributed to intentional instructor intervention. Students who feel particularly connected with other classmates in the course may feel this way because their instructor has intentionally planned community and social presence within their course. This research is important because it reemphasizes how important the instructor’s role is in helping students feel connected, which is a crucial element to consider when exploring the formation of the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community. The Facebook community expands upon community already established formally by course interactions.

Video as community-building solutions

There is a significant amount of early literature on how leveraging video discussions may help students perceive course and program community. Using the “community of inquiry framework (CoI) as a theoretical guide, Delmas (2017) cites VoiceThread as a tool which helps

reinforce community within the online course environment. VoiceThread is a collaborative, cloud-based tool that allows users to share content (including videos, audio files, presentations and images with over 50 different types of media” (VoiceThread n.d., as cited by Delmas, 2017, p. 597). The study revealed that offering students the ability to interact via video or even just “hearing” a voice, while showing a student’s avatar, helped students feel more connected as opposed to just reading text on a page (p. 598). While VoiceThread is used in some UMass Boston Instructional Design courses, encouraging the use of this tool to facilitate conversations, in lieu of text-based responses, may support course community and social presence efforts. Other tools, such as FlipGrid, are specifically designed to create interactive discussions and may help with social learning and course community (Stoszkowski, 2018).

Synchronous approaches to learner-learner interaction

There is an increasing amount of literature that shows how synchronous communications help online students feel connected with each other. In synchronous learning events, students connect with each other, and often with their instructor facilitating an interactive event at the same time, and in the same space. For instance, Grogan (2015) provides evidence supporting how synchronous, interactive chat sessions help students understand course content, connecting with each other, building community, and reinforce cognitive presence within a course (p. 341). Chat sessions that take place within a course can reinforce course community and help students build meaningful connections with each other. Furthermore, there is a significant amount of evidence that suggests that exclusively synchronous instruction has the same level of student performance as in face-to-face models. Francescucci (2018) cites the growth of online learning programs and challenges with student and instructor interactions in an asynchronous model.

Virtual, real-time synchronous instruction seems to increase learner engagement and sense of community.

Improvements to synchronous web-conferencing tools are continuing to show promise in helping students feel connected to each other within a course and part of a greater learning community. Watts (2016) argues that “synchronous interaction is becoming a more integral part of communication among students and between students and their instructors” (Watts, 2016, p. 27). Synchronous meeting tools, such as web-conferencing, can help bridge the time and space gap in distance learning and, thus, help students form more connections with each other. Watts states that research in distance learning has suggested that “students view synchronous interactions positively because of instantaneous feedback, being able to see their classmates, and because they report feeling more engaged in the online experience” (p. 27). Offering real-time feedback to students and seeing others, including the classmates and instructor, offers opportunities for some students to feel connected and engaged within the virtual environment. Watts asserts that “instructors must take into consideration the motivation and needs of their students, the specific demands of the course content, and the available technical support before deciding what method of interaction is appropriate for their courses (p. 31). For instance, while web-conferencing may help some students connect who can attend in real-time, this tool may alienate students who are unable to attend a session for a variety of personal and professional reasons and may limit the flexibility and access of the synchronous environment (Watts, 2016). While Watts (2016) does not cite evidence that a synchronous or asynchronous technology may improve student connections, Watts (2016) states that instructors must understand their course outcomes, students, and plan appropriately to help students feel connected to each other.

Social media as a promising tool for engagement

Social media may offer a more familiar way for students to interact with classmates and may help students connect and feel part of a greater learning community. Kurtz (2014) notes how social media initially was designed for non-academic uses; however, Facebook's technologies ability of "grouping individuals by interest, knowledge sharing, group discussions, and self-expression, brought it to the attention of educators as a potential learning environment" (Allen, 2012; Bates 2011; Cerdà and Planas, 2011; Estus, 2010; Redecker, Ala-Mutka, and Punie 2010 ; Woodley and Meredith 2012, as cited by Kurtz, 2014, p. 253). In a study in which Facebook is used within a course website as an augmentation to the learning management system, (LMS), Kurtz (2014) concludes that Facebook "can be used as a virtual environment for discussion and sharing knowledge" (p. 261). Students navigating the Facebook group reported high levels of engagement and activity with the course content and discussions. Potential conclusions support that Facebook offers students "a sense of ownership of the learning process"; whereas, "the course website is more of a top-down approach imposed by the instructor" (Kurtz, 2014, p. 261). Wang (2012) provides an early case for using Facebook in lieu of a learning management system (LMS) suggesting the following. First, Wang (2012) argues that a "Facebook group can be used as an LMS as it has certain pedagogical, social and technological affordance" (Wang, 2012, p. 428). Secondly, he claims that students are satisfied with the way of using the Facebook group as an LMS (p. 428). Finally, Wang (2012) recognizes that using Facebook groups as an LMS has many limitations: "it does not support [posting] other format files; its discussions are not listed in threads; and it is not perceived as a safe environment" (p. 429). Although the UMass Boston Instructional Design community was never intended to substitute the formal learning space (per the community's mission statement), it is

helpful to note that Facebook could support a larger formal learning environment and that there is early research suggesting that augmenting Facebook groups for more formal learning opportunities is of interest in greater conversations of community.

Several other instances provide significant evidence that social media helps students connect and collaborate with each other when integrated into a formal learning environment. Salmon et al. (2015) explore how social media enhances student's ability to collaborate and share ideas outside of the Learning Management System (LMS). They argue that "social media platforms tend to be more popular with students for peer-to-peer connections due to their familiarity and flexibility" (Salmon et al., 2015, p. 1). The qualitative study explores a case of how social media increased student engagement within a massive open online course (MOOC) delivered within a learning management system (LMS). Students who engaged within the group found benefits from professional networking to knowledge sharing; some saw no perceived value of social media within the formal learning space. The user-friendly, familiar interface of social media helps students engage in the space and, thus, build connections and meet other members of the course community, which is a valuable context for the UMass Boston Instructional Design program.

Community on Facebook

Furthermore, social media may help conceptualize the boundaries of formal and informal learning, as well as serve as an intermediary between synchronous and asynchronous communication outputs. Greenhow et al. (2016) argue that "learning social media practices seem well aligned with social constructivist views of learning as participation in a social context and values of knowledge as decentralized, accessible, and co-constructed among a broad base of users" (p. 8). Social media, and other Web 2.0 technologies, offer insights on how platforms

where users can contribute content, including ideas and experiences, may offer insights on reform for existing learning management systems (LMSs) to offer similar features within a secure environment to support social constructivism and community-oriented efforts.

Bridging distance through social media

Additional research suggests that geographic and physical displacements do not always influence in maintaining relationships in social media, which provides promising evidence for the utilization of social media communities to connect graduate learners who may be geographically distanced from each other. Romero-Hall (2017) explores how diasporic communities leverage social media to form identity. The study uses this evidence as a basis to argue that people's community orientation is equally strong offline as it is online. The study addresses the “uses and gratification” of social media between US and graduate students at a doctoral program in Illinois. This study is relevant as a majority of students enrolled in the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community are out-of-state or international students who may find the social media platform as a practical relationship-building tool and one that unifies all students. Romero-Hall (2017) explores a doctoral instructional design and technology (IDT) cohort who belong in the program’s social media channels and explores how these students maximize their education by combining their formal and informal learning. The results of the study indicate that students who belong to the social media channels tended to feel part of a greater community, found it helpful from a professional development standpoint, and helped students stay aware of important ID&T opportunities, such as events, graduate opportunities, internships, job opportunities, and generally deepened their practice (Romero-Hall, 2017). Romero-Hall (2017) provides evidence that social media communities engage instructional design and technology students. The study’s population aligns very closely to the UMass Boston

Instructional Design Community and offers evidence that Facebook increases student engagement and sense of community as an extension of the formal classroom space.

Blending informal & formal learning networks

The UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community may align with early research on the effectiveness of blending informal and formal learning networks to support learner engagement and community engagement. Czerkawski (2016) studies how informal learning networks increase student engagement with formal learning through academic course content. Czerkawski (2016) explores the concept of “informal learning” and how mobile technologies, such as Facebook and other social media tools, have increased their prevalence in the online course space, which has thus, “blurred the distinction between informal and formal learning” (Dron & Anderson, 2014, p.19, as cited by Czerkawski, 2016, p. 138). In a mixed-methods study, Czerkawski (2016) surveys online graduate students to understand their use of informal learning networks, such as social media. Her findings show that informal learning networks “carry opportunities for self-regulated, autonomous, and engaging learning opportunities while offering the most current, authentic, and diverse knowledge and skills” (Czerkawski, 2016, p. 150). An informal learning network, such as the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community, may attribute to students’ ability to become stronger, more self-regulated learners.

Additional challenges, according to Czerkawski, (2016), are that instructors, who encouraged the use of informal learning networks, did not formally interact within the space, or integrate the social media tools within the course work, which posed problems for student engagement within the informal learning networks. The study suggests that instructor presence,

or support, of social media utilization increases overall student engagement within the group. Instructor support of an informal learning network, such as social media, increases student adoption and engagement of the tool. The UMass Boston Instructional Design community received early support from program faculty, primarily from Dr. Sharicz, which may offer insights as to why the Facebook support group grew so rapidly and has become a popular resource for students.

Challenges with using social media in an educational context

There are a variety of conflicts of using social media within the context of formal learning events, courses, and programs—all of which should be noted regarding the birth and evolution of the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community. Greenhow et al. (2016) cite a converse correlation between the amount of time spent on social media and academic performance for college students. While the proposed case study explores an online graduate population, over-exposure to social media may pose analogous, detrimental problems to an online graduate population in terms of academic achievement. It is important to note that a significant amount of Greenhow et al. (2016) literature review surrounds use within the k-12 context, which is outside of the scope of the case study; the UMass Boston Facebook community is a graduate student population.

Research design & methodology

As a phenomenological case study, the research undertakes a qualitative approach to illustrate the complexity of how the Facebook group supported instructional design students to connect and build community within a virtual space.

Research Sample

The population of this study are all members of the UMass Boston Instructional Design community (n= 71), which includes current students and recent alumni who have joined the community. The sample of this population is twenty-five (25) students who responded to the survey, which is 35% of the entire population of the Facebook group.

Instrumentation

Given the limited literature on the Facebook group communities as tools to connect graduate learners and address common online learning barriers, the researcher designed a novel, open-ended, anonymous questionnaire, which was sent to current instructional design members in the community asking the following questions:

1. What compelled you to join the Facebook group community?
2. How has the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community helped you form meaningful connections with peers in the program?
3. How has the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community enhanced or strengthened relationships that you may have built in the program?
4. Finally, how has our group helped you feel connected to the greater Instructional Design program at UMass Boston?

Since this study is driven by a social constructivism framework, the open-ended questionnaire seemed to be the most reliable method to gaining insights on how the Facebook community transformed participants' ability to connect with each other, and also, to encapsulate beliefs, opinions, and attitudes. Coding responses and categorizing the theme to which aspects of participant responses aligned with was an effort to quantify aspects of the qualitative study and

to solidify the frequency of trends, particularly given the many themes that emerged from participant responses. Finally, it is important to acknowledge that having a second researcher conduct an analysis of themes would produce a more valid study and would help determine the reliability of the current instrumentation, as well as any changes that would help measure students' connectedness within the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community. Secondly, the researcher will reference some conversations of the Facebook group to illustrate themes that emerged from the questionnaire.

Data collection and ethical considerations

There are several ethical considerations that should be documented for this case study. First, all participant information will remain confidential. All participants consented to participate in the questionnaire and will have their confidentiality withheld. The survey did not ask participants to disclose any personal information, including information about race and ethnic background, gender, sexuality, nationality, disability, or employment status.

Data Analysis

The research explored themes that emerged from each of the qualitative statements posed in the survey. The researcher summarized main themes from each of the questions posed in the survey and tallied the frequency of the themes that emerged. The tables listed show main themes which emerged from each question of the questionnaire, as well as sample responses which aligned with each theme. The frequency of each theme is listed, as well. It should be noted that the themes are not mutually exclusive but coded separately. Some participant responses may contain multiple themes presented for each response. For example, if the first half of a student response refers to Theme 1, and the second half of a student's response suggests Theme 2, then

the content in the participant's response will be coded once for Theme 1 and once for Theme 2. All survey responses are color coded and can be found within the Appendix A. As a secondary source of data, themes of the actual Facebook content have been referenced to help contextualize themes, although the actual content in the Facebook group is not referenced specifically in an effort to preserve community confidentiality. However, some sample posts are referenced in Appendix C.

Finally, the researcher used Word Cloud technology (WorditOut) to help visualize word frequencies for each of the questions and participant responses. The word clouds are listed in Appendix B which provide informative visuals for word frequencies for each of the four research questions.

Positionality

The researcher and UMass Boston Instructional Design Community co-founder, Caroline Frankel, is a graduate student within the UMass Boston Instructional Design program completing this study in partial fulfillment of the Master of Education degree. In addition, she is currently a full-time instructional design practitioner at MCPHS (Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences) University in Boston, MA. Both of these experiences afford her insights of online course development and the complexity of community engagement within distance education.

As an online graduate student, the researcher experienced challenges without having face-to-face connections with both her peers and the program faculty. The researcher also experienced limitations to feel connected within the learning management system (LMS) technology, which of the UMass Instructional Design Program, is Blackboard Learn Original Experience Learning Management System (LMS). Notwithstanding these barriers, the

researcher built several connections with classmates throughout the program, mostly through synchronous connections, group projects, and social media interactions via the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community and independently of the Facebook group. She is passionate about helping students (and instructors) who may experience this feeling of disconnect and is interested in literature surrounding this very important problem of practice.

Finally, the researcher's relationship with the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community is an important distinction in this positionality statement. As co-founder and administrator, Ms. Frankel has developed a leadership role within the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community, which puts her in an authoritative position; her relationship to the Facebook community may impact how students interacted with the questionnaire. Her biases inevitably affect the design, results, and subsequent conclusions of this study.

Results

The results of this study provide a significant amount of evidence suggesting that the Instructional Design Facebook grassroots community increased student's ability to connect with each other and to feel part of a community. Each survey question yielded a variety of responses and insights to the current state of the UMass Instructional Design Community.

Community and Connection Driving Why Students Joined the Facebook Community

The first question of the study sought to understand why students joined the Facebook community. Overwhelmingly, the primary reason why participants joined the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community on Facebook was because students wanted to be part of a long-standing community of practice—a theme which emerged in responses sixteen (16) times.

Community-oriented responses consisted of answers such as “knowledge-sharing,” “community of IDs,” and “camaraderie” (UMass Boston Instructional Design Community Survey, 2020).

These results are significant as participants clearly indicated that they were looking for and seeking a way not only to simply connect and feel connected, but to be part of a true community.

Building connections was the second greatest theme that emerged in the first question of the questionnaire. Several student participants indicated that as online learners, they were looking for avenues to connect with each other, which had a high frequency showing up within participant responses at least fourteen (14) times. The theme “connecting” consolidated a variety of reasons for why students were looking to connect, including a space outside the formal course environments. One participant who identified as an “out-of-state online graduate student” indicated that they felt “very disconnected” and that they “long for connection” (UMass Boston Instructional Design Community Survey, 2020). While not mutually exclusive, additional themes which emerged in terms of why students joined the Facebook community included professional networking and career-related opportunities; this theme was mentioned a total of seven (7) times. Finally, four (4) participants specifically stated that they joined the community because they were interested in staying current in the instructional design field. Table 1 provides an overview of emergent themes in order of the frequency that they occurred.

Table 1: Why Did You Join the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community?

| Theme | Frequency | Examples |
|---|------------------|--|
| Community | 16 | <i>Being part of a larger community; extension of program; camaraderie; rare to meet fellow instructional designers (IDs)</i> |
| Connecting | 11 | <i>Connecting with others; longing for connection</i> |
| Knowledge and experience sharing | 8 | <i>Asking questions, getting advice (i.e. professional or on academic course work); sharing experiences; learning from others' experience; gaining insights from others.</i> |

| | | |
|--|---|---|
| Professional networking & opportunities | 6 | <i>Career opportunities, being part of a network, having a professional network</i> |
| Staying current in the field | 4 | <i>Keeping up with ID trends; reading note-worthy articles</i> |
| Contributing as alumni | 2 | <i>Alumni engagement; joining after graduating from program</i> |

Forming Meaningful Connections with Other Graduate Students and Alumni

Instead of pointing to individual connections made within the program, the overarching theme that emerged from this question was that the Facebook Community enhanced student's ability to feel connected as a group, as opposed to facilitating individual connections. Being part of a long-lasting, Instructional Design community turned out to be the most collective connection emerging from the responses; this theme surfaced sixteen (16) times. While not mutually exclusive, the theme of sharing resources, opportunities, knowledge, and advice had a high frequency emerging eight (8) times in all responses to this question.

Thus, the group dynamic seemed to be the basis of the meaningful connections. There was only one response suggesting that the platform helped to deepen a relationship with an existing classmate connection (2020). Finally, it is important to note that this question had a high frequency of indecisive or incomplete answers. This may be a flaw with the question, such as a failure to define "meaningful" clearly, or that participants were confused by the question. Several students did not find this question relevant at all and marked it as "N/A," not applicable, or physically stated that it did not apply to them or left the question blank. Table 2 provides a breakdown of emergent themes of the survey and their associated frequencies of each theme.

Table 2: How has our group helped you form meaningful connections with other students and alumni in the program?

| Emergent Theme | Frequency | Examples |
|--|------------------|--|
| Being part of a long-lasting community | 16 | <i>Having a group to turn to; being part of a cohort</i> |
| Sharing resources, opportunities, and knowledge | 8 | <i>Sharing resources, articles, offering and receiving help and advice from classmates</i> |
| Not Applicable / Not Yet / No Response | 7 | <i>I don't use Facebook for relationship; no response given; I'm new so I'm not sure</i> |
| Personal, Informal Setting | 6 | <i>Humanizes online learning environment; more personal and friendly platform</i> |
| Career opportunities | 4 | <i>Surprised by how many students would share career-related information</i> |

Enhancing and strengthening relationships built in the program

The third research question specifically strived to understand more about interpersonal relationships students may have built within their formal courses. This question had the highest frequency of incomplete responses, as well as responses indicating that this question was not applicable to the participant, occurring fourteen (14) times. It is important to note that some participants disclosed that they were alumni and joined the Facebook community late within their careers, which may explain why they were not able to use the social media platform to enhance and strengthen relationships built in the academic program. However, several participants did note that the actual Facebook group enhanced relationships that may have occurred or existed in the program. Participants note that the community expands access to each other, particularly since it allows for communication following completion of the program.

Table 3: How has our group enhanced/strengthened relationships that you may have built-in the program?

| Emerging Theme | Frequency | Examples |
|---|------------------|--|
| N/A, no response, or not yet | 14 | <i>Sadly, not yet; not as much; not applicable</i> |
| Expanded network and access to each other | 6 | <i>Being able to stay connected after graduation; an extra forum to stay in touch; easier to stay in touch</i> |
| Knowledge and resource Sharing | 3 | <i>Knowing that we have shared experiences</i> |
| Familiarity | 2 | <i>Feeling more like friends than formal acquaintances; humanizes each other.</i> |

Feeling Connected to the Greater Instructional Design Program at UMass Boston

The last question queried how the UMass Boston student-led Instructional Design community actually helped students in feeling connected to the Instructional Design Program at

UMass Boston. Study participants offered a variety of insights in terms of how the student-led community bolstered and reinforced relationships with the academic program. A major theme emerging from participant responses included that the Facebook community makes it easier for students to access each other and connect with each other. Since students in online programs primarily engage with their courses via a learning management system (LMS), the Facebook platform offered a platform that students can use independent of their LMS. Furthermore, students lose access to a course at the end of each semester. Since the Facebook community is a constant place which students can join, students can access this group and each other as much or as little as they need to. Finally, it should be noted that a significant amount of self-reported alumni did not find this question to be applicable. Again, for those who joined the Facebook Community late in their academic careers, they may not have had as great a need to feel connected to the University.

| Emergent Theme | Frequency | Examples |
|--|------------------|---|
| Makes it easier to connect with, access, and support each other | 12 | <i>Connecting with each other after graduation, connecting with each other after the semester.</i> |
| N/A, Not Yet, No Response | 7 | <i>I joined the program at the end of the program and no longer feel this applies to me; this question does not apply to me</i> |
| Accountability for program and official support | 6 | <i>Asking questions about courses; when you do not hear back right away; navigating changes in program leadership</i> |
| Extending the learning experience beyond the online course environment | 4 | <i>Extending opportunities to learn from each other; learning from others' professional experiences</i> |

Discussion

Community

The role of community appeared as a critical theme following this study. Participants in the study expressed an overwhelming desire to feel connected with each other in a greater learning community. Following this initial research, members of the group, both current graduate students and alumni, alike, expressed interest in being part of a community and suggested that the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community at least partially filled some of their need to be part of a community.

While a prevalent guiding theoretical framework of this study was the Community of Inquiry (CoI), participants revealed that being part of a professional, instructional design-specific community was what they loved within the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community. Marken and Dickenson (2013) differentiate how CoIs and CoPs concentrate on enabling effective practice:

“CoIs have as a goal the investigation or examination of a topic of shared concerns. CoIs tend to be defined as cohorts or classes in a formal academic institution with learning (usually academic content) as the goal. CoIs derive directly from the foundational work of CoPs (Lave, 1988; Lave & Wenger, 1991), with the distinction being that the “practice” in question is that of learning” (Marken and Dickenson, 2013, p. 301).

The UMass Boston Instructional Design Community on Facebook emphasized inquiry in its founding, suggesting its influence of a CoI. However, based on data from the study, the CoP

framework is helpful as it focuses on enabling effective practice and may inform future directions of the Facebook community to support students not just in scholarly dialogue but to support students and alumni in being the best instructional design practitioners possible.

The UMass Boston Instructional Design Community has become such a powerful resource much in part because of its talented, intelligent, and wonderfully diverse member base that generously shares knowledge, experiences, and resources with each other. The community has transformed into a vibrant place where students freely discuss their ideas, ask questions, and gain insights from others. Participants revealed that being part of a community was what they loved within the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community.

Humanizing the online learning environment

Facebook also seemed to humanize the online learning environment making the Facebook Community a safe, enjoyable space to learn, share ideas, and receive feedback from others. Garrison (2016) reinforces the importance of the learning environment:

We never learn in isolation. It is an illusion, a mistaken belief, which makes us think we are self-directed learners—that we think and learn as individuals. The reality is that we cannot avoid being influenced by our environment. We are influenced directly through our experiences whether that is with our physical world or through communications with others . . . In educational contexts, this is first done through expression, and if the environment will allow it, by applying ideas and getting feedback as to the outcome of specific actions” (Garrison, 2016, p. 11).

In several regards, the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community has been transformational as it has provided students and alumni with an environment to express their ideas, to apply concepts, and to solicit feedback from other members of the group. Thus, the fact that several members have expressed favorable feedback that the Facebook group has helped members learn from each other and share knowledge suggest that a significant amount of learning has occurred within this space and that the Facebook group is, in fact, conducive to learning.

Connecting learners with the home institution

The importance of connecting online students to not just a greater student community and network but to their home learning institution appeared as an important theme of this study. Some participants overtly mentioned, or alluded to, that they were seeking closer community with the University of Massachusetts at Boston. Skelcher et al. (2020) suggests that enabling students to connect outside of their courses could improve social presence for online graduate students. Although Skelcher et al.'s (2020) study does not specifically mention the role of social media eased communities of practice, it supports further scaffolding services and communications to support online learning outside of the formal course environment, as well as the concept of a school learning management system (LMS) that would be accessible by all students within the University. This latter recommendation is relevant as it proposes a more secure, managed possibility to build a formal community for students than that of the grassroots, community of practice hosted on Facebook, reserving Facebook for alumni engagement initiatives.

Recommendations

In addition to the above discussion, there are a variety of recommendations that derive from this study that may be relevant to online instructors, online programs, and information services (IS) departments, institutions of learning, and learning management system providers (LMS).

Soliciting feedback from online learners

Ensuring online graduate student community-related needs are met is a critical conversation that should be undertaken at the course, program, and university level to understand the unique needs of online students. Soliciting feedback via formal course evaluations can be an excellent opportunity to evaluate the extent to which students felt part of a greater learning community (Garrison, 2016). Program evaluations may present similar opportunities. Conducting a needs analysis at the program level may yield information as to what type of resources learners may need, including a platform to stay connected. Universities and their accreditors should determine specific measures that can help assess and evaluate the extent to which online learners feel part of a greater community.

Furthermore, federal and state quarantine measures following the COVID-19 crisis have resulted in a sudden shift to remote learning. Learners had to suddenly navigate a remote delivery space and may feel disconnected from their institution of learning, as well as their program and peers. This study anticipates that students will continue to vocalize their needs for community in a remote environment. In certain cases, social media private platforms, or similar technologies, may help learners stay connected with each other and feel part of a greater community, particularly during times of crisis.

Exploring, Obtaining, or Developing Better Community-Oriented Platforms

Developing robust, interactive, mobile-friendly social media like social spaces *within* learning management systems is a strong recommendation of this study. While this survey and the researcher's knowledge stems from the Blackboard environment, most learning management systems (LMSs) focus their infrastructure on the actual course environment. Building community or organization within the LMS may help formalize community-oriented efforts, leaving tools like Facebook for purely informal communication efforts. Interestingly, effective April 15, 2020, Blackboard announced its plan to discontinue social learning tools space effective immediately. The administrator notes did not mention future plans to address social learning or to develop a better social learning platform. While there are upgraded versions of Blackboard available, Blackboard Ultra does not have spaces dedicated directly to learner communities, although courses or organization spaces can be aligned to fit these needs. Universities should assess available technology to provide students with a virtual arena to connect.

A Grassroots Approach

A grassroots student-led approach is a resource effective way to implement a community since students drive the content. Most students have Facebook accounts and account creation is free. There is no cost to build a Facebook group—aside from the time it takes to manage the group, admit members, and generate dialogue. Surveying the needs of a program base may inform decisions as to whether graduate students may be interested and willing in using Facebook as a platform to connect with peers and alumni of the program.

The UMass Boston Instructional Design Community is in early conversations of continuity and growth planning. The researcher has found an additional administrator who will work to expand and promote group membership.

Advice to online graduate students

If you are an online graduate student interested in furthering community within your online graduate program or if you long for more community within your program, this study wholeheartedly encourages you to take action within your learning community. Facebook has helped the Instructional Design program at UMass Boston and members who are part of the group seem to feel a better sense of community. Another recommendation to online graduate learners is to understand that classmates are one of many resources. Online graduate learners should not hesitate to connect with classmates to support –or to build small community, support networks.

Limitations

This study has several limitations which should be considered for further research on the topic, primarily privacy-related concerns on Facebook.

Privacy concerns with Facebook

There are legitimate privacy concerns and, thus, ethical concerns with using Facebook within any educational context which questions using a Facebook community for educational uses whatsoever, particularly if they are student led. Wang states that “privacy and Internet safety become a critical concern in social learning environments (Wishart, 2004, as cited by Wang, 2012, p. 436). Students should feel “safe, secure and comfortable when they are using

socially enabled environments (Karahasanovic et al., 2009, as cited by Wang, 2012, p. 436).

While there was not a single response directly disapproving of the use of Facebook as a platform, two (2) responses out of the twenty-five (25) indicated a slight discomfort with using Facebook.

One (1) response indicated that the participant did not normally use Facebook. Another one (1) response indicated “I am not a huge fan of Facebook, so I don’t often use the platform as a tool to develop relationships” (UMass Boston, Instructional Design Community Survey, 2020).

Facebook users interact with ads, and the website collects data from user engagement within the site. Driving students to a Facebook community increases their exposure to advertising and exposes student privacy. On the contrary, another educational or business-oriented tool may not expose users to as many concerns and, for this reason, may suggest that seeking an alternative platform. However, the overwhelming popularity of the tool and its steady increase in growth suggests that UMass Boston Instructional Design Community users have found Facebook to be an appropriate platform. Since the users of the group have voluntarily joined and are all adult learners, it may be assumed that users are aware of the privacy risks that they incur through daily utilization of Facebook.

Conclusion

While the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook community is an early effort, this case study intended to encapsulate some of the early successes in the initiative and provided insights on how students found social media as a helpful platform in fostering community. The Facebook group helped meet online graduate student community-related needs, while also allowing students to connect in ways beyond what is possible within a formal course environment. As the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community continues to mature and

gain additional members, the community's identity will continue to develop as an ever-evolving resource for students and program alumni.

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Appendix A: Coded Survey Responses

Table A1: Responses to Question 1, “Why did you join the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community?”

| |
|--|
| I was looking for a way to connect professionally with other students and alumni of the UMB ID program. |
| As an out-of-state online grad student, I feel very disconnected from UMass and long for connection . |
| to stay connected to classmates and hear about job opportunities |
| To connect with my classmates and be part of a long lasting ID community |
| I like the idea of keeping in touch with my classmates/cohort after graduation . |
| For community knowledge-sharing , for social connection , and recently, for a job search |
| I was in the ID program when it was created. |
| To stay connected to my colleagues |
| To learn and interact with other students and alumni from the program |
| Camaraderie and professional networking and guidance |
| I was completing my certificate and wanted to keep in touch with the program and the other students. |
| Being new to the field , I joined in order to be a part of a community of IDs . While our field is growing , it is still rare to run into other IDs, its great to have a place to ask questions, get advice, and read articles posted by peers . |
| I joined because I was invited by one of my classmates and thought it would be a great way to stay connected . |
| Possible networking/job opportunities as well as community of practice benefits (latest trends, research, and challenges in the field ; seeing how people approach problems differently; etc) |
| Interest in keeping the CoP environment of online classes going |
| I'm an alum |
| To learn and network |

| |
|--|
| I thought it would be a good way to stay connected with peers going through the same experience as me. I also thought it would be a good place to share ideas and network. |
| To feel more connected to my classmates |
| As an online student. I was really wanting a community and the opportunity to connect with peers in the program. |
| To share experiences with other program grads and to follow developments in the field. |
| Wanted to stay in touch outside of class and have a go-to group |
| To keep up to date about what is going on in the ID field and do networking. |
| I found out about it and figured I could meaningfully contribute to it as an alumni. |
| I am alumni |

Table A2: Emergent Theme to Question 1

| Emergent Theme | Frequency |
|--|------------------|
| Connect | 11 |
| UMass Boston ID Community | 16 |
| Sharing knowledge & experience | 8 |
| Staying Current in the Field | 4 |
| Professional Networking & Job Opportunities | 7 |
| Contributing as alumni: | 2 |

:

Table A3: Responses to Question 2, “How has our group helped you form meaningful connections with other students and alumni in the program?”

| |
|--|
| It has helped me see other active participants and to gain knowledge from their posts about ID program and ID careers. |
| It's been great to hear others' stories, questions, advice. |
| It feels more personal than a LinkedIn group because of its small size and the platform is more friendly. |
| Being part of an online cohort, it is easy to feel isolated and not part of a community. The group in an informal setting helped make me feel like I'm part of something and we're really going through something together!! |
| So far, just keeping in touch and seeing what people are doing is interesting. I like knowing it's a network I can reach out to if needed. |
| I've read great shared articles, shared articles myself, and seen interesting responses to questions |
| Helped keep in touch with the many wonderful students I met through the courses |
| It has helped me stay connected to a few of them, which would otherwise be difficult as I live half way across the world. |
| I have been in the group for less than a week |
| It has been great to have a group to turn to when asking ID related questions based on experience or expertise. |
| I am not on Facebook very often, but I have received some good suggestions from other participants when I have logged in. |
| n/a |
| I was surprised at how many students would post career opportunities and share important updates. I have made at least one meaningful connection where I keep in contact weekly with a fellow student. |
| Right now, I'm mostly observing others' conversations, but I think that maintaining these connections and continuing to learn from my peers will be valuable throughout my career (especially because I was fortunate to attend school with so many thoughtful, intelligent, talented people!) |
| Yes, it has allowed me to have more personal connections and continue to share resources with classmates, both people I'd met before and new people. |

| |
|--|
| Keeps me active in relevant conversations and also anywhere I am able to help |
| I just joined recently |
| I feel that I have a peer group who I can ask for advice and help to support them in kind. |
| Increased my interaction with them |
| I am not a huge fan of Facebook so I don't often use the platform as a tool to develop relationships. |
| Not yet |
| Haven't used it too much for help but nice to keep up with others out in the field |
| Nothing |
| I've found I've been able to go to the group to share resources, opportunities, etc as well as find out things about how the group is going. |
| Yes |

Table A4: Emergent Themes of Question 2

| Emergent Theme | Frequency |
|---|-----------|
| Personal, Informal Setting | 6 |
| Being Part of a Long-Lasting Community | 16 |
| Sharing Resources, Opportunities, and Knowledge | 8 |
| Career Opportunities | 4 |
| Not Applicable / Not Yet / No Response | 7 |

Table A5: Responses to Question 3, “How has our group enhanced/strengthened relationships that you may have built-in the program?” (if applicable)

| |
|--|
| It hasn't really helped in this area. |
| n/a |
| Being able to get to know each other in a bit more of an informal setting humanizes us!! |
| Staying in touch with people who have graduated, and hopefully will help keep me connected after I graduate. |
| I have at least once talked or asked my classmates about an assignment |
| Many members I would not have interacted with post-school, but have been able to interact with through the community |
| My colleagues professional challenges and insights have helped me learn and stay aware |
| n/a |
| I feel that I can ask a question or get suggestions from people contributing to this site. I also know that we have shared experiences and learning. |
| I am an online only student, so having an additional forum to keep in contact has been extremely beneficial. |
| Sadly not applicable (yet!) |
| Important networking connections and resources have emerged |
| N/a, I already have strong relationships with my colleagues in the UMASS M.Ed. ID program |
| Just by being closely connected, I feel that the familiarity feels more like friends than just schoolmates. |
| |
| N/A |
| Not as much but rather connected me with people from beyond who was in the program at the time. |
| n/a |
| |

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Table A6: Emergent Themes to Question 3

| Theme | Frequency |
|---|------------------|
| Familiarity | 2 |
| Expanded network and access to each other | 6 |
| Knowledge of Resource Sharing | 3 |
| N/A, no response, or or not yet | 14 |

Table A7: Responses to Question 4, “How has our group helped you feel connected to the greater Instructional Design program at UMass Boston?”

| |
|--|
| It has helped increase my awareness of others who have completed the program and the type of work they are doing now. |
| When others ask questions I have, I feel less alone. Provides accountability for ID program AND augments official channels of support |
| It's nice to have a place to ask questions - e.g., when you don't hear back from the program office, when you are thinking about registration. |
| I think I touched on this but we also get to support each other in areas not specifically related to classes |
| I don't feel connected to the program itself as much as to the students. |
| At a time when we lost our leadership, it's helped to keep me connected by asking questions and giving updates |
| Even though I'm not in the program anymore (or even the ID field), I like being able to see what others are doing and help when I can. |
| It has helped me maintain the umbilical cord, and still feel part of the community. |
| I feel that now is going to be easier to get in touch with students from the program |
| I guess there is some pride building |
| I felt connected to the people in my classes in a way that I wasn't sure I could be in an online setting. The Facebook site is an extension of that experience. |
| It has helped me by not just being a group of IDs, but a group of IDs that are going through similar experiences that I am going through. It's not just a great place to get advice and post articles, but it has been a forum for people in the program to ask specific program related questions, and hear from others that have or are experiencing the same thing. |
| Yes |
| It has been nice to know that I have ways to contact people I enjoyed working with during the program, especially given that I never met most of them in person |
| I joined the group at the tail-end of my degree, so it did not form a meaningful part of my experience in the program, but certainly as an alumni |
| Keeps me active in relevant conversations and also anywhere I am able to help |
| It is a relief to be connected and be able to have access to other students and IDs. |
| We can discuss projects that we're working on and discuss in more detail what the courses are like. It helps us to know what to expect in the courses. |
| As an online student it makes the program more "real" |
| It's great to know that I have a professional or program related question that I will always get a helpful response from the group. There has also been some helpful resources posted. It also nice to see some familiar names from classes. |
| Through postings and comments of other group members |
| I like knowing that people I've "met" online might be around after graduation |
| I think the group is pretty useful, but I haven't experienced any connection deep connection yet. |

I'm not sure that it has as I've not felt particular connected to the program but just a few faculty within the program who I continue to connect with. It's just been nice knowing that I can tap into and contribute to folks who have been in the same program.

No

Table A8: Emergent Themes from Question 4

| Emergent Theme | Frequency |
|--|-----------|
| Accountability for program and official support | 6 |
| Extending the learning experience beyond the online course environment | 4 |
| Makes it easier to connect with, access, and support each other | 12 |
| N/A | 7 |

Table A 9

| |
|--|
| Please share any other feedback regarding your experiences in our UMass Boston ID Facebook group: |
| It is really well run and a positive place. |
| Thank you for putting it together, Caroline!! It really has enhanced my experience in this course :) |
| Just filling out this survey I thought of something I could post. I'm not an avid Facebook user--more of a lurker--but I really like knowing this group exists for me. |
| Caroline, you're awesome. Best of luck! |
| It's a nice way to see what is going on with my classmates. Thank you for your leadership. |
| The addition of FB live interactions relating to the program or networking would be a fun and interactive initiative. |
| I think it's a great resource! Thank you for setting it up! |
| It would be nice whether alumnis could share their experience during taking the course, as well which classes they recommend, etc. |
| Perhaps, have a separated forum for this. |
| N/A |

Appendix B: Word Cloud of Student Responses

Image B1: Word Cloud of Participant Responses to “Why did you join the UMass Boston Instructional Design Facebook Community?”

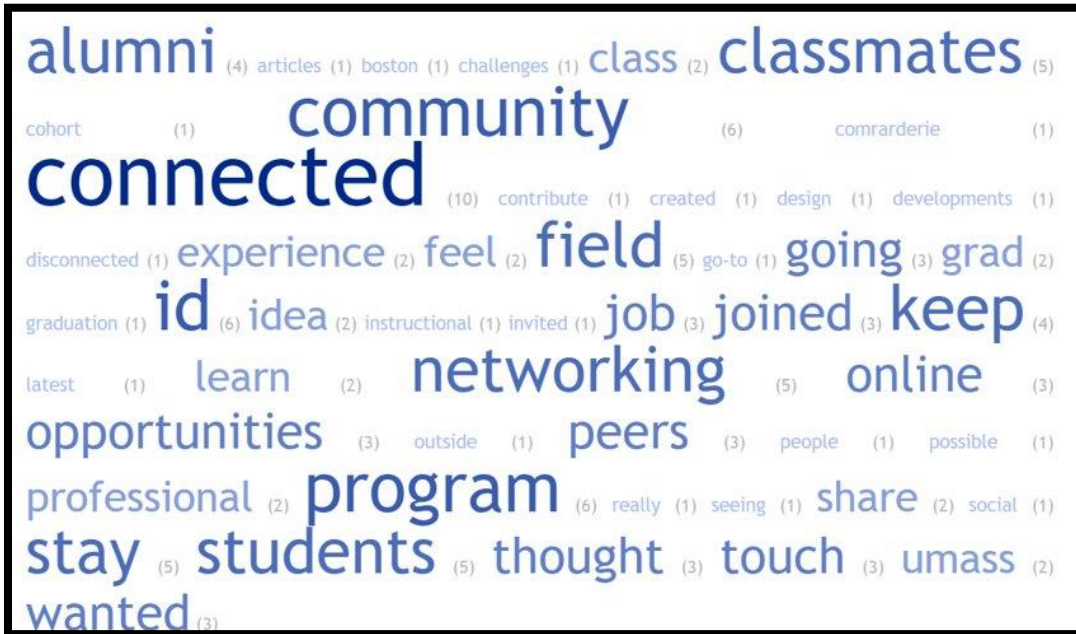


Image B2: Participant responses to “How has our group helped you form meaningful connections with other students and alumni in the program?”



Image B3: Participant responses to “How has our group strengthened or enhanced relationships you may have built in the program?”

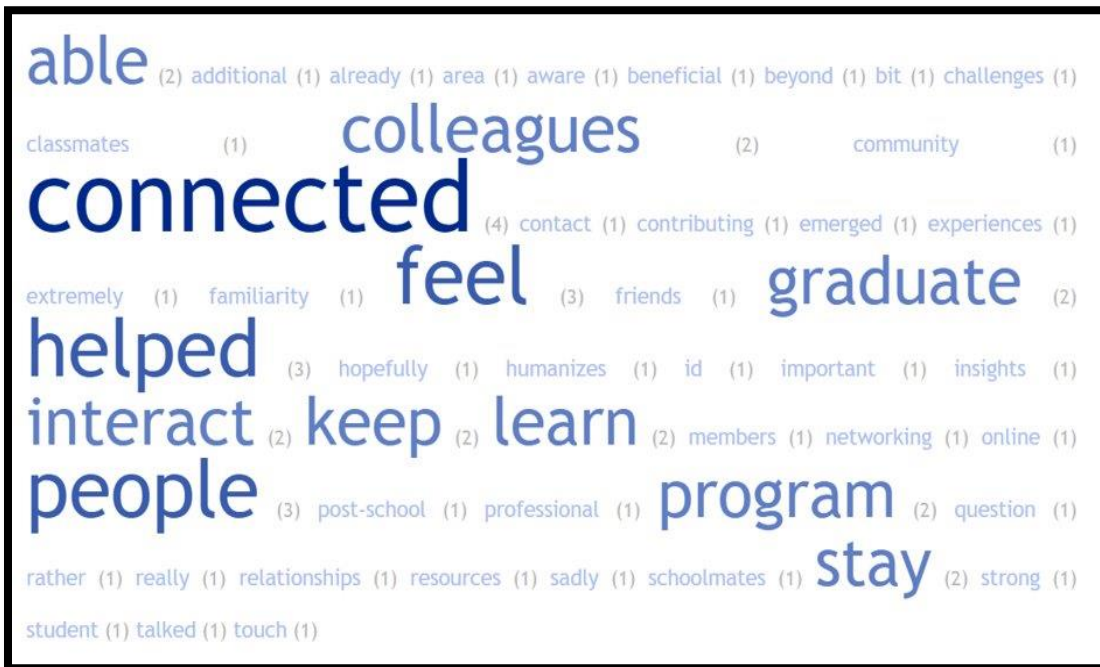
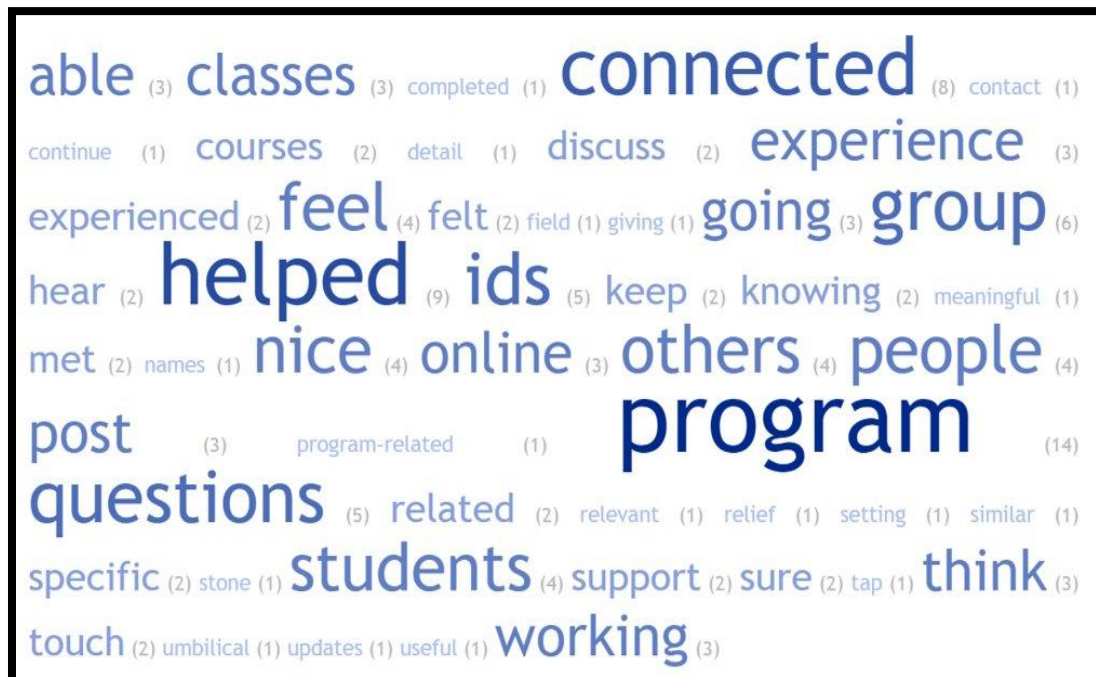


Image B4: Participant responses to “How has the group helped you feel connected to the greater Instructional Design Community at UMass Boston?”



Appendix C: Screen Shots of UMass Boston Instructional Design Community

Image C1: Image of the “cover page” for the UMass Boston Instructional Design Community

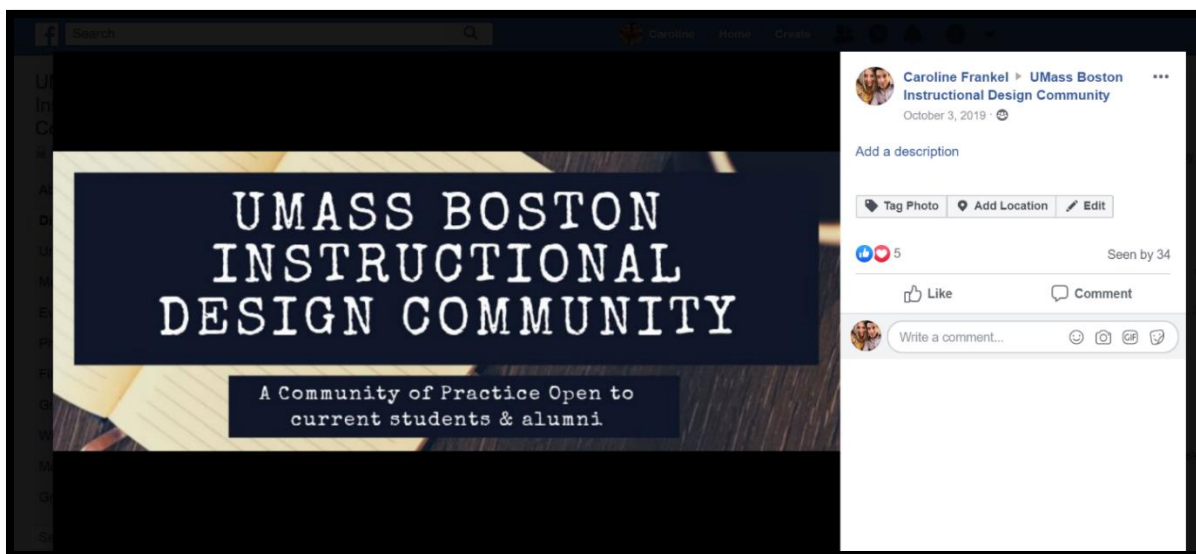







Image C2: Screen shot of the group’s description




DESCRIPTION Edit

The goal of this community is to foster a safe space for learning, networking, and professional development within the Instructional Design community at UMass Boston.

We encourage :

-  Scholarly inquiry and dialogue
-  Knowledge, resource, and idea sharing
-  Soliciting and offering feedback on current academic and/or professional work
-  Networking, collaboration, and peer-to-peer learning
-  Sharing career opportunities, such as job postings

Student Admins*

-  Caroline Frankel
-  Dana Remian
-  Tod Hebenton

This is an unofficial, student facilitated group. The admins assume no liability for the conversations in this group. Please consult your program advisor and/or the program director for program specific advice.

GROUP TYPE

Social Learning

Image C3: A posting of a student sharing an instructional design job opportunity

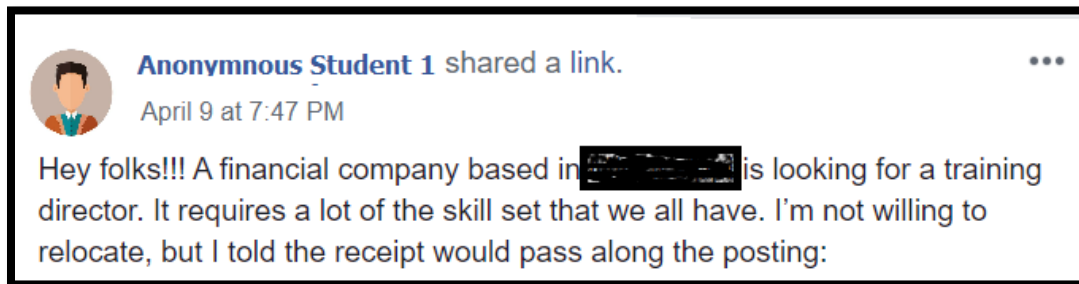


Image C4: A posting of a student sharing COVID-19 related instructional design resources

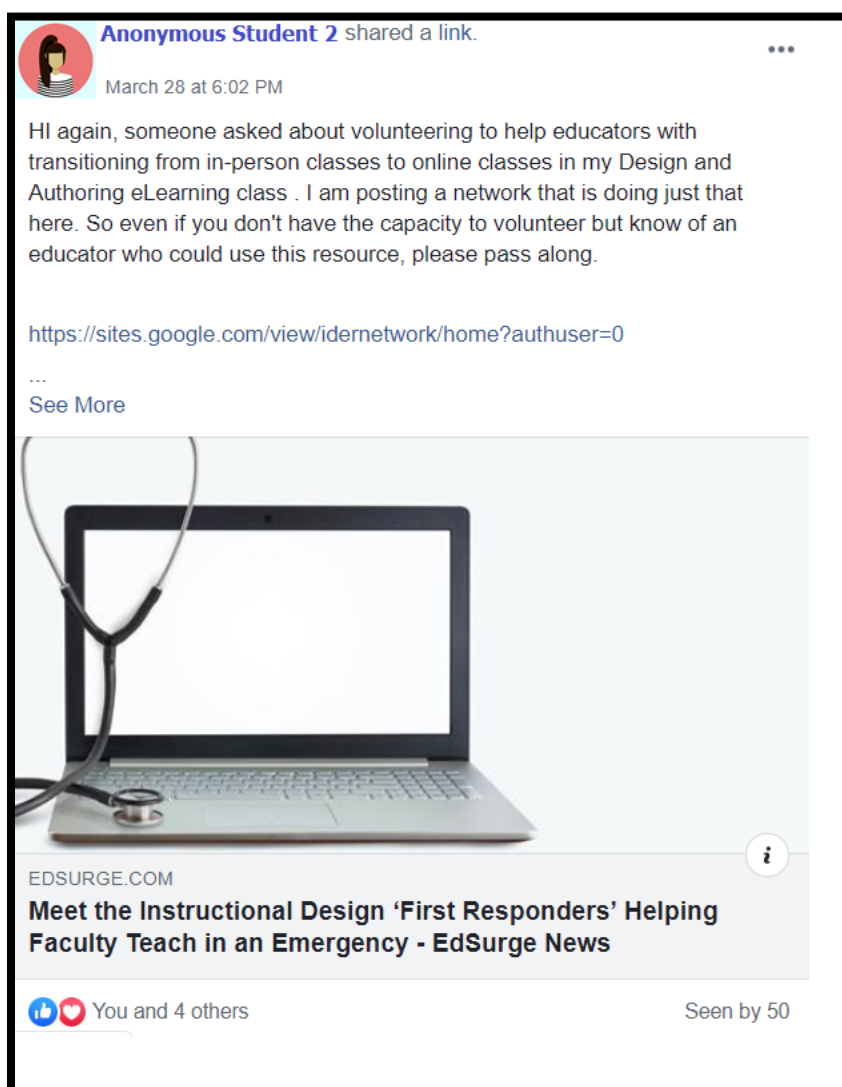


Image C5: A post from the administrator asking “How has the Coronavirus Pandemic effected your work in Instructional Design. This post is a place where we can share tips and offer each other support”

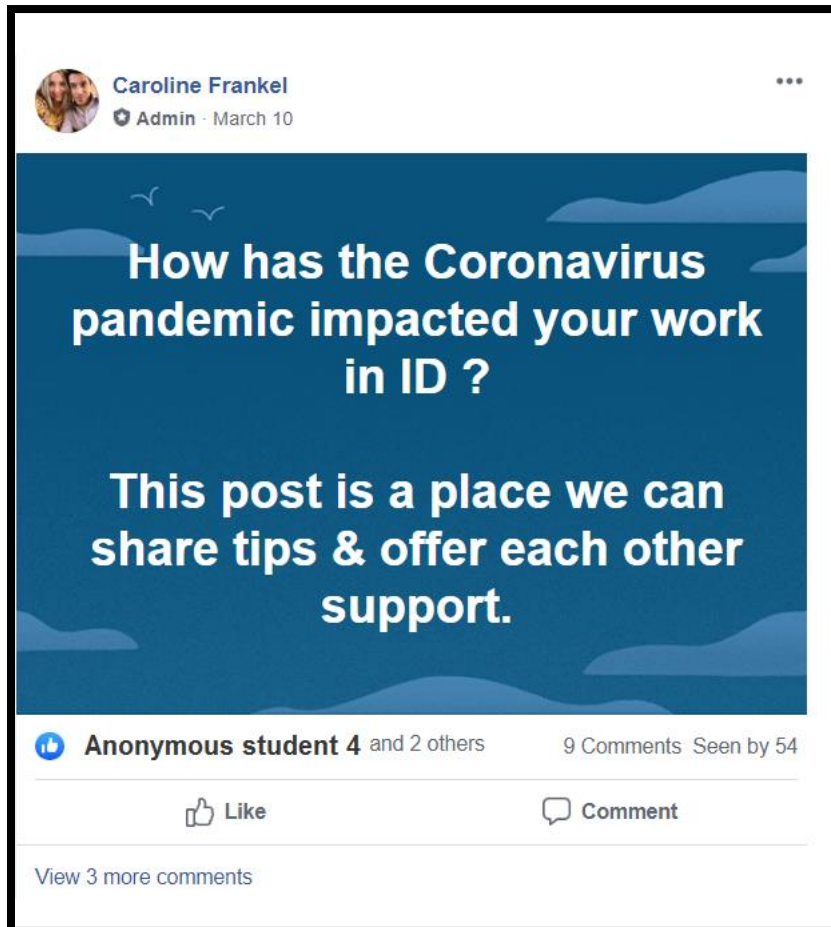


Image C6: A welcome message in January 2019 to welcome new members to the Facebook Community which is typically pinned on the top of the Facebook group to invite students to introduce themselves.

