Cultivating and sustaining a Positive Online Learning Community:

Affirming all Learners is Key

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Abstract

This paper discusses the significance of developing and nurturing a classroom community within asynchronous/online learning networks. It examines ways in which an online learning environment can provide validation of diverse learners, foster a sense of belonging, and affirm and make transparent, the challenges among diverse learners who are physically separated from each other. The authors of this paper highlight the following factors as they relate to this topic of interest: social connections, celebrating cultural identity, expanding worldviews, respectful interactions, feeling emotionally supported, time zone challenges and group work, technology challenges, and fostering empathy.

Keywords: synchronous & asynchronous learning networks, sense of belongingness, diverse learners, validation, online-community

Introduction

Cultivating and sustaining a positive online learning community requires much more than simply adding technology to a course syllabus. Haggerty (2007) believes that a positive sense of social connection is key to helping students develop the necessary skills and attitudes required for success. The authors of this paper believe that if learners feel isolated or marginalized, due to communication or cultural differences, learning can be negatively impacted. Learners from diverse backgrounds need to know that their language, communities, contributions, and cultures are celebrated and affirmed.

Numerous studies have examined the cultural differences between various learner worldviews, specifically western and eastern educational practices. Generally, western educational philosophies celebrate critical thinking and interactions with a teacher. International students may be coming from cultures and worldviews where this is not the norm. If learners believe that they have weak language skills, they may be hesitant to engage fully with others in public text exchanges online. Of particular relevance to this topic are issues of technological deficiencies or lack of a safe learning environment. When these factors are present, some learners can be compromised in participating in online class delivery.

Collaboration promotes more significant learning, and for collaboration to occur, people need to feel comfortable communicating with each other. (Jeong &. Hmelo-Silver, 2016). All learning is social, and responding to the opinions and ideas of colleagues can greatly enrich the experience. In order to engage fully, students must feel that they are socially supported. A good understanding of diversity in cultural learning styles will enhance the comfort levels for all learners in online settings (Gilbert & Dabbagh, 2005). An encouraging, respectful course instructor is essential to providing a safe space for diverse online learners to interact and learn. Providing time for thoughtful discussions, posting regular contributions, providing feedback, and showing concern for learners' challenges is essential in sustaining a positive online community for all.

Our research questions include the following:

1. What steps might instructors and course facilitators take to establish a supportive learning community online for all students?

2. How does a thorough understanding of students' cultural learning styles and backgrounds enhance the delivery of material in an online setting?

3. How might course assignments be more inclusively designed to celebrate and affirm all learners?

Literature Review

As classrooms and other modes of in-person learning were transformed entirely into online learning due to the pandemic, many students experienced drastic changes and unexpected obstacles on their learning journey. There is substantial research supporting the notion that learning happens best in communities and in relation to others. To establish a strong sense of community, instructors of some online courses recognized the need to develop ways to make students feel more closely connected. As Young & Bruce (2011) indicate, instructors who plan intentional learning experiences that invite interactions between students, are more likely to increase the sense of community. As a result of finding out more about each other, learners feel more confident expressing their ideas in the

class. Interpersonal interactions expand one's perceptions of others, and these perceptions can transform the way exchange happens in discussions and after class. Learning is social, and when personal narratives are invited and shared, new relationships and understandings result.

What steps might instructors and course facilitators take to establish a supportive learning community online for all students?

Learning is uncertain without determined educators and engaged learners, regardless of whether the instruction is synchronous or asynchronous. Students' emotional, social, and intellectual development necessitate positive, purposeful learning settings. Various aspects ensure a positive learning environment for diverse learners. These factors include creating an inspiring learning environment, where taking risks is encouraged, trusting and affirming the opinions of others is modeled, and encouraging open, honest and thoughtful communication is fostered.

It is critical to discover each student's interests, talents, and learning styles. By adapting teaching methods and strategies to meet the needs of diverse learners, students' engagement in an online learning community is enhanced. Lack of online experience can cause anxiety, leading to personal doubt and ambiguity about how to effectively engage and interact online. Sometimes, if a learner is made to feel insecure in contributing to an online classroom setting, he or she will become disengaged or silenced. According to Davis (2019), one solution to sustain motivation in online classes is to nurture the personal connections between teachers and students. Humans are social beings, and their social life and interactions with others greatly impacts emotional and physical well-being.

According to Larreamendy & Leinhardt (2006), online social connectedness has been associated with lower depression and reduced anxiety, greater satisfaction with life, and a sense of belonging. This is because social connections feed the need for community and sense of belonging. Student engagement is commonly viewed as students' enthusiasm for the subject being taught, their interaction with the content, instructor, peers, and desire to learn and progress through the course.

The ways in which people communicate with one another in their daily lives has been greatly transformed due to technological advancements. Online learning presents new challenges compared to a traditional classroom. Posting an electronic message for students who are starting the program and advertising virtual office hours for students are just a few examples to be considered. The goal of this process is to give diversified learners interaction opportunities, help learners become more aware of their support networks, and realize the critical importance of being socially connected through online-classroom communities.

How does a thorough understanding of students' cultural learning styles and backgrounds enhance the delivery of material in an online setting?

Larreamendy and Leinhardt (2006) state that it is imperative to avoid disassociation from the existing classroom culture during online instruction. In an online community, educators may be the hope which keeps the diverse learners active and involved. Alghawaby (2019) rightly declares that "true diversity remains elusive," and education, whether synchronized or unsynchronized, must be about sharing the actual knowledge and understandings of diverse cultures. The curriculum should reflect the backgrounds and cultures of the students.

During one online course, I realized that my professor supported each student in her class by validating diverse learners and fostering a sense of belongingness, even through an online course. It was through this course that I was able to lens the world of education more profoundly. I am determined to continue the legacy of her way of teaching and inspiring every student in my life. Of course, she fulfills all the metaphors of an educator. ~Syeda's personal narrative

Together we can make a positive change in society if we push back our unknown biases and cultivate among our students the sense of belongingness to celebrate cultural diversity. Learning online can be a boon to support each other through harsh times. We often hear that diversity is a fact, but inclusion is a choice (Frost, 2014). Helping our students understand diverse cultural existence will develop in them a sense of respectful understanding towards these differences and help build positive online teaching-learning communities.

How might course assignments be more inclusively designed to celebrate and affirm all learners?

Diversity among learners is a critical issue to be addressed in education; many students find schooling an improper fit, or contrary to their background culture, or their understanding of the world. Strict educational policies that insist on only particular approaches of instruction and evaluation stop the learning process for many students who have not practiced these educational strategies. Teachers' attitudes and deep knowledge of students' differences set the tone for more flexibility in classrooms. Teachers who frequently emphasize multicultural norms in their classrooms may reduce the likelihood of a majority group bias, and, thus, allow students to make positive social inferences from the relationship between the teacher and majority-group classmates (Geerlings et al.,2019).

Technological issues are among the most significant obstacles that online learning presents to both learners and educators. In terms of international students' online learning, this becomes a more contentious and problematic issue. Most students attending face-to-face classes can use on-campus computer devices in a time of trouble. However, for remote learners, especially international students, the possibility of such equal opportunities has diminished. That is where the diversity of the socioeconomic status of international students can directly affect their educational performance in online courses. According to Means & Neisler (2021), "despite the proliferation of broadband internet connections and computing devices, they are still unavailable in many households, especially low-income households." In addition, there are still some countries where power outages occur regularly during rush hours, or users are deprived of stable Internet connections. As a result, there are numerous challenges to attending synchronous online classes and being unable to do much without significant effort. Since "exhibiting care" and "building connectedness" are fundamental principles of education (Owusu-Ansah & Kyei-Blankson, 2016), educators must devote extra effort and attention to reducing these gaps. This reduction could happen through a regular check of students' presence by instructors to assure them of the value of their attendance, despite all the technological issues.

Moreover, time differences can also be a significant problem for international students during synchronous sessions, and it affects not only their performance during the classes, but also their personal lifestyles in many aspects.

As an international student using online platforms, I always have connection issues during synchronous classes. I remember once, I was fully prepared for my final project in a course, and since I anticipated having technological problems during my presentation, I chose the medium of silence for presenting my final project in the course of Decolonizing Pedagogies to overcome my problem, which was truly one of the most difficult tasks I have ever done.   ~Khatereh's personal narrative

Discussion and Conclusion

All learners need a supportive and safe community in order to learn and exchange ideas with each other and with the instructor. With a crisis like COVID-19, there are already fears, insecurities and feelings of isolation present, and a welcoming online environment can help with nurturing positive mental wellness. For some instructors and students, migrating to an online community has meant re-thinking ways of offering course material. For example, offering space and time for informal interaction is important. This might mean that students are having discussions in break-out rooms, or it might mean that there is time at the end of each class for discussion with the instructor. Above all, taking time to listen and reflect on what is happening is key.

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