

INCREASE ONLINE GRADUATE RETENTION THROUGH A STRUCTURED COMMUNITY OF PRACTICE: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The educational needs of online students are different from traditional learners and not always addressed adequately by the host college or university. Such inadequacies cause some students to be at high risk for dropping out. Drop-out rates from online programs approach 70%. In this case study, the researchers discuss a Community of Practice (CoP) created to support online doctoral students with the goal of increasing retention, supporting collaboration, community, and developing identity consolidation as an online learner. The instructors in the CoP were a quiet presence and drew on different strategies to increase engagement and group metacognition, as well as to buffer against damaging deficiencies in learner support.

Keywords: Retention, Community of Practice, online learning, graduate learners

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Online and distance learning has shown a growth trajectory over the past 14 years challenging critics who questioned its sustainability or rigor (Allen & Seaman, 2018). Distance education allows students who are unable or do not prefer to attend a traditional school to experience and pursue educational goals in a manner agreeable to their personal needs (Kara, Erdoğan, Kokoç, & Cagiltay, 2019). Yet, a non-traditional educational experience also carries unique risks. For example, and as a primary consideration, despite the continuing emergence of new programs, technologies, and curricula offerings, distance programs have been unable to prevent high online student dropout rates (De Paepe, Zhu, & DePryck, 2018). Compared to the 40% dropout rate in traditional graduate programs (Terrell, Snyder, Dringus, & Maddrey, 2012), the dropout statistic for online programs approximates 70% (Gardner, 2010; Maul, Berman, & Ames, 2018). Yalof (2014) described how competing priorities and communication problems inherent in technology-based programs work against enrollment retention by triggering self-doubt or isolation, leading to panic and anger secondary to a perception of diminished program support. In contrast, Kriner, Coffman, Adkisson, Putnam, and Monaghan (2015) noted how social interaction and social bonding are integral to developing a professional identity (Brietenbach, 2019), which gives work its purpose.

A Community of Practice (CoP; Lave & Wenger, 1991), by its communal nature, offers support for all graduate students, and in particular online students. However, CoPs do not include structured activities geared towards increasing social engagement and proven to support retention. (Kriner et al., 2015). In the following sections, we offer a review of literature highlighting differences between traditional and non-traditional students and provide a case illustration of a highly structured CoP as an effective approach to lowering attrition rates in distance programs by encouraging a sustainable social-learning community for distance learners.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

Differences between adult and traditional-age students are well known with respect to financial, familial, and social responsibilities (Kahu Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013; Kara et al., 2019). These differences highlight the central importance of distance education for adult students. Graduate education demands a particular ability to work with reasonably high levels of autonomy, especially during the later phases of programs, which often focus on a research project (e.g., capstone, thesis, or dissertation). Program administrators market completion rates as measures of success (De Paepe, Zhu, & DePryck, 2018). As such, supporting students' progress toward program completion is essential, especially during the end-project in an online program. In this regard, Maul et al. (2018) noted the dissertation phase forces learners into a less passive and more difficult period as their research skills are challenged and they must come up with a new idea to contribute to the field. The important role of self-direction, especially toward the end of a program, was underscored by Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander, and Leafman (2012) who also noted risks to program conclusion due to "lack of structured support, lack of mentorship, and poorly qualified faculty guiding students through the dissertation or research project phase of the degree" (p. 35). Maul et al. (2018) noted the strong correlation between online support systems and developing research self-efficacy, which in turn leads to greater success in online graduate courses.

In a CoP, members are part of a community of like-minded individuals with a similar interest or goal; they collaborate and search for new meaning in their work through dialogue and information sharing (Fincham, 2017). "A CoP operates like a circle, where each participant is by the side of the other participants, both being guided and providing guidance for others" (Kriner et al., 2015, p. 76). In an online program, social connections satisfy a vital need in adults for interaction with peers (Brietenbach, 2019).

Social connections help to alleviate any (real and/or perceived) distance between the teacher and learner, which inhibits learning (Falloon, 2011; Tibbets & Hector-Mason, 2015). Active participation in a CoP mitigates issues relating to lack of self-efficacy; the ability to believe in oneself is essential to success (Kriner et al, 2015; Maul et al., 2018). Participants feel less tension, as they come to rely on having a peer group to discuss issues that might otherwise impede their progress.

Active participation in a CoP temper many of the issues struggling online graduate students face learning in isolation with no immediate support. Social connections, however, may not be enough for a CoP to be effective in either preventing a student from dropping out of the program or instigating the most effective communal learning. In a study by Wicks, Craft,

Mason, Gritter, and Bolding (2015), a CoP consisting of faculty from various disciplines in higher education existed; it was noted: “FLCs [Faculty Learning Communities] are less successful when there is a lack of dialog between meetings or when the facilitator does not provide adequate preparation for face-to-face meetings” (p. 62). Therefore, a CoP without a formalized structure outside of the regular meetings will be less effective than one utilizing such architecture. In order to optimize the effectiveness of a CoP, the meetings should be well planned.

Further, participation in a CoP involves mentoring (Briggs, Böhmman, Schwabe, & Tuunanen, 2019; Tibbets & Hector-Mason, 2015), which provides engagement throughout the program and is crucial to encourage students during the stress of a dissertation. It is during this time a scholar continues to evolve to higher levels through contribution and feedback during group discussion (Kriner et al., 2015). Ewing et al. (2012) noted the need for more research into ways to combat high attrition rates from graduate programs. With CoP mentoring, students acquire skills and knowledge leading to increased self-efficacy, which, in turn, can help increase the likelihood of graduation (Ewing, Mathieson, Alexander, & Leafman, 2012). Additionally, the noncompetitive and collaborative nature of a CoP reduces the risk of communication breakdown and informationally-related misunderstandings (Moore, 2007), and engenders empathy as members seek solutions for others (Kara, Erdoğan, Kokoç, & Cagiltay, 2019). In this article, we seek to add to the literature utilizing case study in order to understand more fully the use of CoP to increase doctoral student retention.

2.1 About the CoP

One successful model for a group cohort, whose purpose is to guide students to graduation, is the Ewing Model (Ewing et al., 2012). Ewing et al. (2012) described the model as “characterized by a highly structured, sequential curriculum; intense facilitation and dialogue; collaborative learning within a cohort model; and performance-based assessment of core research competencies” (para. 1). According to Brietenbach (2019), the Ewing Model was followed as a way to offset and increase the low doctoral graduation rate substantially. The Ewing Model illustrates the importance of providing a distinct structure leading towards program completion. We modeled our CoP on the Ewing Model (Ewing et al., 2012) utilizing structures they recommended, which encouraged students to be active participants contributing to their self-efficacy, mutual metacognition, and sharing of resources (Ewing et al., 2012).

Prior to the inception of the CoP, discussions with chairpersons were generally limited and relegated to a rather limited time frame. No contact was typically allowed with any committee member. Consequently, students had no access to faculty for immediate concerns; such paucity of support affected their ability to produce quality material and was a grave hindrance to student success. In response to these observations, a CoP at an online post-secondary school was developed and led by two faculty members who invited two of their doctoral candidates to join. In the group, the leaders worked with the candidates to assure they had the necessary high-quality information and faculty support to advance their work. As the value of the immediate access to information and support became apparent, as evidenced by increased self-efficacy, these candidates were encouraged to invite peers who struggled with similar issues relating to the doctoral process and the specific research design.

Each member was using classic grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as the chosen research design for their dissertation.

2.2 Framework of the CoP

The CoP at this school lasted nearly nine years, with members assuming higher levels of independence. New members joined gradually. Though all four components of the Ewing Model were not employed (high structure, sequential curriculum, intense facilitation, performance-based assessment) (Ewing et al., 2012), many similarities existed in this CoP. These structures described in this section enabled the CoP to function much as a graduate course would. The technological tools employed in a collaborative learning environment were the same instruments used by e-learning and distance educators to make contact with their students: synchronous video chat, podcasts, email, and, if necessary, phone. Asynchronous chat using Skype available and active all day and night.

During the nine-year run of this CoP time, when its existence was so important to many students, the group grew from a group of four participants to approximately 21. We guided our members through the dissertation process by creating a secure breeding ground for critical thought and inquiry. We focused on providing resources relating to research methodology and interviewing techniques and just-in-time group mentorship. These supports increased self-efficacy in conducting research by raising both skill level and confidence, without which drop-out becomes more likely (Ewing et al., 2012; Kriner et al., 2015). At least 10 members of the CoP completed the dissertation and graduated. Of the 11 people who did not continue to participate, we found some were able to continue along on their own, and no longer required CoP resources. We do not know if they graduated. What we do know the initial “core group” viewed the CoP as essential and continued to participate even after they earned their graduate degree. They were committed to helping others successfully complete the program and provided support and mentoring, which they viewed as essential to their success.

Chat. One of the worries of online students is the lack of immediate access to a faculty member. Timely feedback is key to mitigating negative feelings and anxiety (Yalof & Chametzky, 2016). Some issues may stymie progress and frustration can cause a build-up of stress. We used our Skype chat to establish an ongoing, timely dialogue of information that was helpful to those who needed it. When reaching out for help by typing a question in the group chat area, a person could get a helpful response often within minutes. By having a safe place for discourse related to dissertation issues, the research process became smoother and less pressured. Errors caught and issues addressed by the CoP members shortened the time it took to complete the program.

The purpose of the chat was the need to emphasize student-to-student discourse and stimulate the process of active knowledge construction; in this way, students were more directly involved in their own learning development (Moore, 2007). The instructors did contribute at key points to the discussions with a question to stimulate critical reflection. This subtle contribution trained us to be more aware of the techniques employed by skillful interviewers to entice subjects to think more deeply and to communicate more comfortably.

Skype meetings. From the plethora of video conferencing tools available, we chose Skype for several reasons. First, it was free. Second, we were able to stream live video instead of an icon or static graphic of each person. By seeing people's facial expressions, the environment became more intimate and participants became more comfortable actively engaging in the sessions. We easily shared screens and annotated group documents. We enjoyed each other's lively commentary so much it became fun to learn. Third, the chat feature enabled immediate upload of links and documents in many formats. Skype's chat feature allowed public and private side conversations, comments, and emojis to lighten the mood. Fourth and last, we were able to record each session. Missing a session did not mean losing vital information.

Additionally, video conference capability allowed guest speakers to be located anywhere in the world and be part of the group. Information from the speakers was informative and helped us reflect on the direction of our work and how we might best implement our dissertation requirements. With the Internet's ubiquitous convenient presence, CoP members had immediate access to the resources necessary to understand more clearly and fully how to create a scholarly research paper.

In order to mitigate a common feeling of suffering "from insufficient interaction with both tutors and other students" (Kara et al., 2019, p. 15), members of the CoP had regularly scheduled meetings, which were recorded and uploaded to the group wiki page. Initially, meetings were scheduled bi-weekly. As membership grew, we decided to meet weekly. After about four months, meetings were held even in the absence of the two faculty mentors. Because adult students tend to be able to apply "broader life skills" (Kahu et al., 2013, p. 200) to online learning, our ability to self-organize became apparent. Solidarity was established and our CoP membership was able to grow in number and self-efficacy skills. Students were encouraged to take an administrative role and sent out announcements and agendas to encourage members to contribute. We followed the agenda assiduously, assuming everyone's concern, deserved merit. Many times, several group members remained online beyond the designated endpoint when a weekly topic sparked camaraderie or passionate discourse. In this way, leadership and expertise evolved.

Wiki as an information repository. Because the CoP did not follow a sequential curriculum, and because we wanted a repository for our work, we decided to post everything online on a group wiki. The wiki was readily accessible; each member was provided full editing rights. The accessibility was helpful for any members who joined later, as the facilitators started on a rather basic level and slowly, but intentionally, progressed to more complicated topics. The members took responsibility for keeping all information on the wiki current. Each meeting was recorded and uploaded to the wiki as well.

The wiki was organized by tabs (e.g. Resources for learning research methodology, recordings of meetings, homework [e.g. coding practice and interviews], guest speaker publications, peer review articles of note, and member publications) differentiated by topic. Members encouraged each other to upload work so everyone could benefit from feedback. This peer interaction allowed students to collaborate to deepen their understanding of essential material and while broadening their own perspectives. When a member needed a particular resource, he or she was easily able to review the information on the wiki.

Homework. For the benefit of all members, homework was assigned at each meeting to be discussed at the upcoming sessions; it provided necessary practice so everyone was adequately prepared, when the time came, to gather and analyze data. Initially, homework was assigned by the faculty mentors. Eventually, the group members became increasingly active in constructing assignments, as they recognized their weak areas and knew what needed to be practiced or researched. For example, practice interviews and mock data analyses were discussed throughout the week in the Skype chat and in various private meetings. Adhering to the tenets of classic grounded theory took time and practice; the CoP afforded its members this opportunity. Because learning occurs as a result of the relationships people foster, the CoP focused on peer support not peer pressure to encourage constructive feedback and learning. All of the practice interviews were shared on the wiki for group members to reference and study as needed. As Kahu et al. (2013) noted, “Students’ collaboration with other students to actively construct their knowledge” (p. 795) is a vital part of assigning and discussing homework.

Special guest speakers. A few times a year, the CoP meetings were privileged to have guest lecturers whose articles and books we had been discussing each week. These individuals were renowned scholars who were connections of the faculty members. They were asked to give a brief presentation and led a question-and-answer session afterward. The speakers then turned the tables and asked us probing, challenging questions about our research. Critical thinking and active learning certainly helped us solidify our research ideas. The guest lecturers kindly gave their time to chat informally with us. Sometimes, students from other programs presented and discussed their research with us. Members of the CoP benefited greatly from these enriching educational experiences. These opportunities afforded members the chance to meet other graduate students and renowned scholars and form collaborative relationships with people in similar fields of study.

2.3 Recommendations for your own CoP

Based on experience gained through the start and development of the structured CoP, we offer are four recommendations for initiating and sustaining a non-obligatory, successful group cohort.

- **Online repository.** Initially, the group must have an online repository where all students have access and editing rights. Choose a site or venue that allows an unlimited number of editors so the responsibility of maintaining the site can be shared. Many free webpage builders or resource collectors are free online and would be ideal such as Wix, Weebly, Wakelet, or Google Classroom. A learning management system could also be formatted so the site is created as a course. Blackboard and Canvas allow free access to their sites for those people who wish to build online courses. Create an organization for the site with enough room to grow. In the repository, provide links to outside resources and multimedia presentations (like webinars, research articles, PowerPoint presentations, etc.). Have students be active participants in the ongoing process of resource gathering.
- **Schedule frequent meetings.** These frequent sessions set our CoP apart from other groups with no dependable scheduled time for discourse and to allay feelings of

isolation, and to provide just-in-time information. Use group consensus to determine the next meeting time during each meeting.

- **Assignment of responsibilities.** Assign a volunteer responsible to start the meeting the week ahead. Send out agendas and determine meeting times; assign a volunteer to record the meetings. Include guest speakers in the announcements.
- **Homework.** The importance of making a commitment to prepare for the group meeting is essential. Assigning homework and working to co-create artifacts as practice for future research using authentic assignments keep motivation levels sufficiently high. And with high motivation, self-efficacy is elevated as well (Chametzky, 2014).

3.0 CONCLUSION

For us, the need to understand the processes involved in writing a dissertation was the driving force to start and maintain the CoP. In the absence of a faculty mentor, or if students feel they may not ask for mentorship directly, they can collaborate to begin the CoP. Kahu et al. (2013) showed older students appreciate and thrive with social factors, which contribute greatly to their learning and helps them thrive. Students are always encouraged to develop peer relationships, yet it takes more effort for adult online students (Kahu, Stephens, Leach, & Zepke, 2013; Kara et al., 2019). Some universities set up elaborate areas for online students to interact and share hobbies and interests; we concentrated mainly on academics.

We believe the fact the CoP was separate from a university site enabled us to be proactive and participate fully and candidly in the CoP. Learning came first; sharing other more personal parts of our lives came later. The result was an outstanding and successful graduate school experience. University faculty members and administrators should be more aware of the importance of the opportunity for adult online students to form meaningful relationships. It would serve them well to figure out how to provide this effectively (Kahu et al., 2013). A well-organized CoP is an ideal venue to enrich and strengthen interest in learning. If a group of students came to either of the authors of this paper, they would be delighted to contribute, as many faculty members would.

The continual growth of online graduate programs and the number of students enrolled makes finding solutions to problems preventing graduation imperative. Student failure to complete a dissertation is a serious business affecting the bottom lines of institutions of learning and students. A cohesive CoP builds student competence and self-efficacy as it provides a path to program completion.

All 10 of the most active students in the CoP earned their doctorate and still maintain close contact and serve as consultants and co-writers and laud each other's achievements. The power of peer support via social discourse, capitalizing on social media, is unparalleled. Lastly, as we move forward, the identification of ways to increase motivation to create and join structured CoPs will further assist researchers in understanding how to decrease drop-out rates from graduate programs.

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