The Online Learning Community: Friend or Faux?

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Abstract

Everyone involved in online education talks about community – what is it, how is it created, do students really want it? Most researchers now agree that online education is enhanced through a greater sense of community within the online classroom; however, the factors that make for a substantive and quality online "community of inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) remain somewhat elusive. It continues to be a challenging task to embrace the concept of community in a way that is holistic enough to resonate with all students, and it is equally challenging to definitively grasp the factors that allow for its creation within every online classroom. This paper examines the discourse on community within several social science disciplines while also exploring community in online education more broadly.

Introduction to the "Learning Community"

The design of successful online classes and degree programs, ones that deliver quality education on par with traditional classroom environments, is now recognized as being in large measure reliant upon how well these online spaces foster a 'community of learners', or what William Horton calls "social learning" (2012, p. 399). The idea of social learning is hardly new; as Horton notes, any time a student turns to another and asks a question about a lecture or course content, a learning moment involving social interaction has happened. More formally, we can point to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as developed by Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer (2000; 2009). Online learning, they argue, is best achieved through the interaction of three elements: teaching presence, cognitive presence and social presence.

The teaching presence refers to the interaction between instructional design, facilitation and instruction, and is well understood as a critical component of successful online learning environments (Shea, Pickett, & Pelz, 2003; Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). Cognitive presence is defined as the extent to which students in a community of inquiry are able to construct knowledge and meaning through sustained communication (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). The connections between teaching presence and cognitive presence seem obvious. Without the leadership and structure of a solid teaching presence, the development of cognitive presence among students is unlikely to be achieved (Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

Our focus here, however, is on the third element of social presence, which, judging by frequent wistful student comments about "community," is perhaps the hardest to successfully capture online. Social presence in online learning refers to the ability of students to project themselves into the environment as "real people," and effectively be perceived as such by others (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997, p. 9). Without this sense of the "real," "community" becomes an artifice. Social presence is not just about opportunities for self-expression and open communication, but additionally relies on group cohesion (i.e., "community") (Swan & Shih, 2005). But, just as Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that interaction is not enough to facilitate cognitive presence, it can be argued that social presence is not enough to create a sense of the "real" when it comes to students' perceptions of "community."

The Concept Of Community Online

The history of scholarship on internet-based interactions has not been consistent in agreement that such interactions can be considered "community." Most ethnographic research, however, supports the concept of community online (Boellstorff, 2008; Nardi, 2010; Pearce & Artemesia, 2009; Smith & Kollock, 1999). Online communities, it has been argued, are real "third places," gathering points of sociality beyond home and work (Howard, Rainie, & Jones, 2001; Oldenburg, 1989; Schwienhorst, 1998; Steinkueler & Williams, 2006).

A community can be defined as a network of interaction between individuals who have congregated for a common purpose. That common purpose may be narrowly limited, closely defined and transient, such as a class or university program, or it can be more open-ended and on-going as one might experience in a residential neighborhood consisting of people who live next to and interact

with each other for a number of reasons and in a number of ways. It is not particularly helpful to become too mired in a debate as to whether or not spaces of online sociality are "real" communities; it is best to work under the assumption that they are. However, it is reasonable to note that the nature of an online community is qualitatively different from the "pastoralist myth of community," meaning one that is geographically contained, tightly knit and assumed to be harmonious and homogenous (Wellman & Gulia, 1999, p. 187).

When students say they wish for "more community," the question then becomes what do they mean by that? If what they have in an online classroom, and in some cases an entire program of study, is indeed definable as a real community, is their expressed desire for more community based on a different understanding of what "community" means? Are they picturing the "pastoral myth" of community, which Tom Boellstorff notes is rooted in a traditional conceptualization of community as necessarily physically close and culturally homogenous (2008, p. 180)?

Sherry Turkle (2011), who once argued strongly for thinking of online communities as just as "real" and potentially rich as geographically proxemic ones (see Turkle, 1995 & 1997), now raises questions about the qualities of online sociality that can actually lead to feelings of alienation and anxiety. Students are present together in an online class—most often asynchronously—but at the same time alone. This feeling of being "alone together" as we are connected not face-to-face, but through technology-mediated means, can lead to forms of presentation anxiety—i.e. the presentation of self—as well as anxieties stemming from a reliance on "worlds of weak ties," which she now argues online sociality essentially leads to (2011, p. 239).

More to the point, what may be behind this expression of longing is not a lack of community, but the lack of a sense of community:

> Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together. (McMillan & Chavis, 1986)

When students express a longing for "community," are they indicating a need for the sensation of being "alone together?" If that's the case, what can be done to help students put the online sociality of the classroom and program of study in perspective, and help enhance students' feelings of connectedness to each other, their instructors, the program and the university?

A Matter of Engagement

Satisfaction in relation to a "sense of community" among students in online classes is fundamentally about student engagement. Engagement is not just a matter of students' interest in the subject and enthusiasm toward the material. Rather,

> Engagement is a coming together, a merging, a fusing. Engagement points to mutual listening, to reciprocity, and dialogue but conducted in a willingness to change. It is the antithesis of separateness, of distance, of incomprehension. Engagement implies not just a coming together but an interaction. (Barnett, 2003, p. 253)

This insight derives from two closely related philosophical and theoretical frameworks: Lev Vygotsky's social constructivism (1978) and John Dewey's transactional collaborative constructivism (1938). Vygotsky held that learning most effectively comes from a person's own construction of meaning through active involvement. Students get the most out of a learning environment when they work with other students to construct knowledge (Driscoll, 2000; Garrison, 2017; Horton, 2012). Dewey, likewise, argued that the educational experience, "is always what it is because of a transaction taking place between an individual and what, at the time, constitutes his environment, [including] persons with whom he is talking about some topic or event" (1938, p. 43).

Both Dewey and Vygotsky are at the philosophical root of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as described by Garrison (2017), who makes a point of distinguishing between "cooperation" and

"collaboration." The former may bring students together for the purpose of completing a task, but emphasizes independent contributions. Conversely, the latter—collaboration—relies on working together in an atmosphere of open communication and mutually coordinated and beneficial contributions to a task:

> This shared approach expands personal construction of meaning to critically consider other thoughts and possibilities. Furthermore, this commitment to collaborative thinking and learning in an educational context requires a sense of community and cohesion. Education is a social enterprise dependent on creating a sense of purpose and belonging. The inseparability between the individual and the group draws our attention to the nature of an educational community that can support deep and meaningful learning experiences that have meaning for the individual and value to society. (Garrison, 2017, p. 35).

Purposeful collaboration in this sense, distinguished from cooperation, helps to define a community, and goes well beyond mere "connection." One of the illusions of online education is that it relies on independent effort, on the idea that we can learn in isolation, but Garrison argues that such isolated learning never happens; there is always a social environment present in some form. Students' subjective experiences may give the impression of being self-directed and alone in their efforts, and indeed, some students claim that is what they want. Much of the appeal of online education programs is centered on the flexibility that they provide to individuals who, for whatever reason, cannot or prefer not to attend a traditional campus setting and who may express contentment with the idea that they are 'on their own' (Hopper, 2003).

That said, the bulk of research on online learning supports skepticism of the ultimate efficacy of a sense of isolation (e.g., Cereijo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001; Curry, 2000; Daugherty & Funke, 1998; Galusha, 1997; Outsz, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 2007). There will always be some students who are more self-motivated and who will be content working in relative isolation than others. Even among those students, however, it is not uncommon to hear expressions of a longing for community, pointing to the fundamentally social characteristic of human engagement.

A Caution: Can there be Too Much "Community"?

Despite the research supporting the importance of social presence, social learning and fostering a sense of community in online educational experiences, for many students, sociality is fraught with anxiety-inducing potential. Some people are attracted to computer-mediated communication, in general, because of social anxiety or social reticence, within the academic environment and outside of it (Kelly, Keaten, & Finch, 2009; Patterson & Gojdycz, 2000). There are also notable exceptions to the rule of social learning when it comes to solitary learners who are solitary out of personal preference and learning style (Hopper, 2003; Ke & Carr-Chellman, 2006). And, indeed, not all students, when pointedly asked, express a particular desire for a "sense of community," even if their experiences online may be improved with it (Drouin & Vartanian, 2010).

Links have been noted between relative introversion (sometimes expressed as "shyness") and success in online learning. Individuals who consider themselves "shy" are likely to actively engage in the online environment more than they do in the traditional classroom, and conversely, more outgoing, verbally inclined students are less likely to express themselves in writing, which is strongly emphasized in online classes (Palloff & Pratt, 2007; Vonderwell, 2003).

Yet too much pressure to interact while projecting oneself socially and emotionally, can lead to presentation anxiety, particularly in the initial days of a class (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Computer mediated communication technologies, themselves, can be a sources of apprehension for students, even those of the so-called "digital native generation" who have grown up immersed in these technologies (Sherblom, 2010). The nature of text-based communication can lead to miscues and misunderstandings, also resulting in distress (Hara,

2000). In seeming contrariness to Barnett's (2003) strong argument for the role sociality plays in students' engagement online, Dianne Conrad (2002) found that engagement is more dependent upon connections to the material when first entering a class, rather than with either the instructor or other students. "Good" course beginnings allow plenty of time to acclimate to the course, to "mentally prepare" with foundational information about course (and the instructor's) expectations (Conrad, 2002, p. 211). Of least importance in terms of assuaging anxieties and fostering engagement, she found, were interactions in introductory forums, which are commonly used to help foster social presence at the beginning of an online class.

Offir, Bezelel, and Barth (2007) found a clear correlation between cognitive style and achievement; achievement of introverts tends to be higher than that of extroverts in online classes using video-conferencing, which one might assume would increase social presence over text-based interactions, and lead to greater levels of anxiety. However, what they found was that once more extroverted students are given a taste of greater, personal interactivity, they want more, and video-conferencing does not go far enough. For introverted students, the video-conferencing allows them to concentrate on what is being said, if they are not expected to actively participate as speakers. Extroverts want to interact and talk spontaneously, while introverts are more likely to want to sit back and think about things before they say anything.

It is possible, too, for social presence to overwhelm, and thus undermine the construction of knowledge and meaning. Specifically, Jahng, Chan, and Nielsen (2010) found that student groups sharing significant amounts of social communication also shared a correspondingly fewer number of cognitive communications. In other words, they were so caught up in personal, social chatter that they let the type of collaborative communications needed to complete tasks slide.

Finally, constructivist approaches carry with them social risks, in general. Constructivist approaches to teaching conclude that learning happens when students are actively engaged in the collaborative construction of knowledge and meaning. For social risk-averse students—ranging from the self-described "shy" to those with a clinically diagnosed social anxiety disorder—collaborative social learning can be a challenge in any kind of classroom (Hills, 2007). As Sherry Turkle notes about life on the screen, "even as [the socially anxious] are able to better function because they feel in control, online communication also offers an opportunity to ignore other people's feelings," and, conversely, have their own feelings ignored (2011, pp. 183-184). Furthermore, as we present ourselves onscreen, we reduce ourselves to simplified, easy to read representations of self, and feel some pressure to conform to those reduced representations. One very recent study on perceived social isolation, giving weight to Turkle's observations, actually finds an association between high levels of social media use and increased feelings of social isolation (Primack et al., 2017). While it is difficult to say how much of the type of anxiety wrought by computer-mediated sociality comes into play in an online classroom environment, it is worth considering as a factor.

Social Presence: The First Step to "Community"

Coming together online in something that is recognized and felt as community requires social presence, and as noted by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), social presence is dependent upon how "real" others seem and how well individuals can "project themselves socially and emotionally" into a computer-mediated, largely text-based learning environment (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 94). How do you create a "real" presence online? Research into this from several fields of study has one common characteristic—the more information available about a person online the more "real" (or popular, or invested) they become in an online venue (Panzarasa, Opsahl, & Carley, 2009; Ren et al., 2012). While Matzat's 2010 research found that offline interactions were the best way to develop online identities and membership stability. Butler, Bateman, Gray, and Diamant (2014) found that higher participation costs—that is, the time and effort required to engage with content in an online community—often lead to greater membership stability, possibly because this type of online

community is composed only of members willing to invest significantly in the site[1]. One would assume, then, that online classes, in which the personal stakes and participation costs are inherently high, should result in a stable and strong sense of community.

Students noting that "something is missing" in their online education experiences is reflected in the research by Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald (2006). Moreover, Boston et al. (2009) draw a direct link between student persistence (retention) and indicators of social presence. This may be where the CoI framework runs up against the anxieties of presentation that Sherry Turkle (2011) has identified, and can possibly be addressed through Ross's (2007) "back-stages" research. The "back-stage" is an authority free space that allows people to interact with each other without fearing that their comments will have an adverse impact on their scholastic or professional careers. Reasonably considered as a type of "third place" as described by Oldenburg (1989), comments in this area are often confessional, bawdy, or about authority figures and bureaucratic requirements. In this way, an online site that is created and driven by its members as a back-stage is much more like campus coffee shops and study halls. These are spaces where students can come together, some dominating the discussion, but all gaining a sense that they are not alone. It may be this community that distance students yearn for, rather than a space created by the university or department that is meant to create community but feels like a blind date with a co-worker (Ren et al., 2012).[2]

Conversely, academic clubs sponsored by institutions and departments provide spaces for on-campus students to develop a sense of belonging, and involvement in them is credited with contributing to student success (Aspinwall & Taylor, 1992; Walton & Cohen, 2011). Further research indicates that online students wish to have access to a variety of student services associated with on-campus presences, such as academic talks and clubs (LaPadula, 2003). More formalized and university sponsored clubs, while not as free-form and unregulated as Ross's "back-stages," can none-the-less serve as enhancing "third places" of community.

It is generally recognized in pedagogical and androgogical circles that "building community," particularly a "community of inquiry" among online students is a necessity of successful online instruction (Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison et al., 2000; Swan & Shih, 2005). The standard tools of such community—discussion boards, collaborative assignments, blogs and synchronous sessions, when feasible—facilitate critical thinking in students and the development of articulation skills, arguably in ways that the traditional classroom cannot achieve. That said, in comparison with traditional classroom environments, online education has notably high attrition rates.[3] High rates of attrition are partly attributable by many to the lack of engagement in a community of inquiry (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Boston, Ice & Gibson, 2011). Boston and colleagues (2011) note the trend of "swirling," a term used to describe the practice of online students migrating between multiple institutions, as contributing to attrition. They further suggest that student involvement in "institution-centric social networking media" (i.e., involvement in an institution-centric community) may reduce "swirling" by fostering a greater connection—and

[1] Passive members are a large portion of any online site and many researchers have discussed the benefits these passive members (aka lurkers or free-riders) receive from online communities (Hartman et al., 2015; Ross, 2007).

[2] Two existing examples of online "back-stage" spaces with Oregon State University (OSU) links are the Facebook groups, Things Overheard at OSU and Things Unheard at OSU. While not completely free of authority figures in the form of university faculty and staff, such members tend to lurk as opposed to regularly engaging in active participation; participation and tone of discussion are driven by current and former OSU students and both groups have been quite active, but perhaps less so in recent months.

[3] Data specific to Oregon State University's programs indicates that the average percentage of W (withdrawal) grades is 8.8% for Ecampus undergraduate classes compared to the on-campus undergraduate course withdrawal average of 3.4% (2016-2017 data compiled by Ecampus, Oregon State University). Historical data puts attrition rates for classes taught through distance education as 10-20% higher than those taught in the conventional face-to-face setting (Angelino et al., 2007).

concomitant loyalty—to a particular institution ("Conclusion," para. 2).

Virtual Classroom Best Practices

Regardless of how and whether online students are able to connect outside of the classroom and program environment, a number of in-class best practices have been identified and developed over the past 20 years of growth in post-secondary online education, many of which are aimed specifically at fostering a sense of community/social learning/social presence. By this point, it is generally agreed that a sense of community through collaborative learning can enhance the online education experience for many or even most students. Ouzts (2006) found specifically that students who rated online classes as providing a high sense of community, also expressed greater satisfaction with them, as opposed to classes that rated low in terms of sense of community. That said, subsequent research suggests that a higher sense of community, while correlating with satisfaction, does not necessarily result in higher grades or even retention (Drouin, 2008; Drouin & Vartanian, 2010).

A high sense of community is fostered by high levels of interactivity with both the instructor and other students. Outzs found instructors who are present, guiding, open, honest and "human" (i.e., perceived as "real") contribute most to a sense of community, while instructors who are disengaged, unavailable, or who give little to no feedback create a low sense of community in their classrooms (2006, pp. 291-292). Student-to-student interactions, such as projects that require personal contact with other students, chat rooms where students can come together amongst themselves, and small group problem solving all help build a sense of connection with fellow students living in various locations around the world, while at the same time providing variations in perspectives. If a course provides for no interaction in assignments, no threaded discussion interaction and no opportunities for collaboration or the "negotiation of meaning" with fellow students, learning may well happen, but with both a low sense of community and a corresponding low level of enjoyment (2006, p. 292). Phirangee, Epp, and Hewitt (2016) have more recently noted, however, that instructor involvement and facilitation surpasses more peer-facilitated course structure in fostering a sense of community.

Asynchronous discussions are a standard best practice tool for promoting Barnett's (2003) mutual "coming together" in online education (Dennon, 2005; Grabinger & Dunlap, 2000; Kanuka, Rourke, & Laflamme, 2007). Debates, in particular, have been shown to be effective at engaging students in traditional classroom settings, especially on controversial subjects (Bellon, 2000; Healy, 2012). Online, their applicability and efficacy is equally supported (Humbert, 2007; Kirby, 1999; Ouzts, 2006; Shaw, 2012).

Asynchronous communications lend themselves well to in-depth explorations on a subject between students (Aitken & Shedletsky, 2002; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). However, they are not necessarily conducive of dialogue and a subsequent development of a sense of community (Dawson, 2006; Holloway, 2016). Shane Dawson specifically finds that asynchronous forums with many "orphaned" posts—that is contributions to which no one replies—negatively correlates with a strong sense of community (2006, p. 505). Actual social interplay is critical to the fostering of an engaged community of learners who feel a sense of community.

McInnerney and Roberts (2004, pp. 78-79) further identify three basic protocols aiding social interaction online:

1. The use of synchronous communication, echoing the observations of Jahng, Chan, and Nielsen (2010) and Jahng and Bullen (2012).
2. A forming or warm up stage, similar to attendance at an orientation session, and allowing for informal social communications.
3. The employment of effective communication techniques, emphasizing clarity of requirements and communication protocols (e.g. "netiquette" rules).

The importance of social interplay suggests to McInnerney and Roberts (2004) that a blend of synchronous and asynchronous communication

opportunities are valuable. Synchronous tools such as live chat rooms and video conferencing provide for a type of socialization that is hard to achieve in asynchronous forums. There are admitted challenges to the use of synchronous communication, namely the fact that students are likely scattered across numerous time zones and coming to their educational experience with a wide variety of schedule demands. One suggested work-around is to allocate students to small group interactions, which limit the number of time conflicts participants bring to the table.

Jahng and colleagues (2010) also argue that small group interactions are generally more likely to foster collaboration and subsequent community among students. Students who are in some degree shy, socially anxious or introverted, may feel safer in small group interactions, as they provide students who tend to be passive in larger groups opportunities to play more active roles. That said, not all small group dynamics lead to greater levels of activity and sociality. A student who is very passive in forums in which the entire class participates as one large group may tend to be a relatively inactive participant in a small group if grouped with other passive, inactive “lurkers” (Jahng & Bullen, 2012). It is important, then, that instructors evaluate whole class participation before breaking students up into smaller, collaborative work and discussion groups, if at all feasible.

Chapman, Ramondt and Smiley (2005) note that there are characteristics of communication that are more likely to foster a strong sense of community, as well, and note that it is important for instructors to model these characteristics for students: “informality, familiarity, honesty, openess, heart, passion, dialogue, rapport, empathy, trust, authenticity, disclosure, humour and diversity of opinion” (2005, p. 218). Drawing from Richard Daft (1999), they describe dialogue as involving the revelation of feelings, but in an atmosphere promoting the questioning of assumptions and an openness to suspending convictions. Discussion is more likely to begin and end with an exchange of points of views, with an emphasis on “winning” an argument, whereas dialogue is constituted by suspension of convictions in an open exploration of ideas (Senge, 2010). Champan et al. suggest emphasizing dialogue as opposed to discussion, “the building on each others’ utterances in the light of new insight,” noting, however, that the nature of asynchronous communications can hamper the development of such genuine dialogue (2005, p. 221). Their work leads to a strong association between levels or characteristics of community-centered thinking and communication style, and the depth of learning.

The level of community scale (Chapman et al., 2005) ranges from a weak sense of community to a strong one. The scale transitions from an egocentric perspective (“me”/“my”-centered) to a more inclusive sense of “we/us.” Looked at in a rather linear fashion, the sense of community among students is then further enhanced by opportunities for humor, the expression of passions, venting and disclosures of more personal information. As students build on these types of social communications, conversations in which acknowledgement of, reference to and agreements with each others’ experiences and contributions comes into play. That does not mean that everyone need be in total agreement with everyone else; intimacy is actually enhanced by discussions in which debate is allowed to happen. Finally, the greatest sense of community is indicated when students start initiating and driving conversation on their own and come together amongst themselves in their own self-initiated learning circles—in other words, when they take ownership of the community.

The corresponding “evidence of learning” scale, (Chapman et. al., 2005), moves from a fairly surface-level, initiatory offering of ideas, resources, etc. to asking questions; to stating, explaining and supporting personal positions of issues (articulating); to reflecting on other contributions; to exploring, expanding upon, critiquing and challenging others’ contributions through discussion and feedback; to allowing new insights to adjust one’s understandings; to the proposing of action indicating a depth in learning.

The implication, according to Chapman et al., is that "allowing time for trust and a strong sense of community ethos to develop is rewarded by discourse that more readily demonstrates deep learning" (2005, p. 226). How this can be best achieved, they suggest, is to make the evidenced scale of learning explicit to students. Because it takes time for people to establish genuine rapport with one another, it may also be beneficial to think of the level of community scale as something that is built up over time within an entire program of study; that is not strictly within individual classes as stand-alone "communities of inquiry," but on a larger program of study basis, such as a cohort of students moving through a major in a degree program together.

Conclusion

While real community does happen in a wide variety of social settings, both online and off-line, a *sense* of community—the emotional recognition of being in communion with others in a group with members that matter to each other—can be an intangible and elusive social quality to achieve. If it is possible to technically be a member of a community (or more realistically, as most of us are, multiple communities) without a strong sense of it in "real life" settings with physical proximity to others, it should come as no surprise that an online, virtual sense of community might be especially tenuous.

Within the framework of social psychology, McMillan and Chavis (1986, p. 9) identified four critical factors contributing to that sense:

- Membership: a bounded identity of group belonging distinguishing between insiders and outsiders.
- Influence: a two-way relationship that allows the individual to exert control over the group, as well as be controlled by it, creating the feeling that one and one another matter.
- Integration and fulfillment of needs: the association of the individual with the group is a rewarding experience.
- Shared emotional connection: built though a cohesive history or shared events and experiences.

One might liken these factors, in anthropological terms, to the concept of communitas as developed by Victor and Edith Turner (Turner, 2012; Turner, 1969), which simply defined is the sense of sharing and connected intimacy experienced by members of a group as they transition through periods of change or come together in rites of intensification serving to remind them all of mutual group belonging and purpose:

> Communitas often appears unexpectedly. It has to do with the sense felt by a group of people when their life together takes on full meaning. It could be called a collective *satori*[4] or *unio mystica*[5] , but the phenomenon is far more common the mystical states. Communitas can only be conveyed properly through stories.... Communitas fountains up unpredictably within the wide array of human life... Communitas occurs through the readiness of people – perhaps from necessity – to rid themselves of their concern for status and dependence on structures, and see their fellows as they are. Why it comes is unanswerable, except through the mercies of the energy of nature through spirits. One can answer with a functionalist explanation, but the randomness of the events renders this ineffective. Besides, experiencers of communitas will say, "There is more to it than that. (Turner, 2012, pp. 1-2)

In the end, Turner (2012) and Turner (1969) might suggest that while there are things that instructors and online program administrators can do to foster a sense of community or facilitate its organic development, it ultimately depends upon group dynamics that "fountain up unpredictably."

[4] Sudden enlightenment

[5] Mystical union between human and diety

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About the Research Unit at Oregon State Ecampus

Vision

The Ecampus Research Unit supports Oregon State University's mission and vision by conducting world-class research on online education that develops knowledge, serves our students and contributes to the economic, social, cultural and environmental progress of Oregonians, as well as national and international communities of teachers and learners.

Mission

The Ecampus Research Unit (ECRU) makes research actionable through the creation of evidence-based resources related to effective online teaching, learning and program administration toward the fulfillment of the goals of Oregon State's mission. Specifically, the research unit conducts original research, creates and validates instruments, supports full-cycle assessment loops for internal programs, and provides resources to encourage faculty research and external grant applications related to online teaching and learning.

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