Community in an online anthropology program: Friend or faux?

Oregon State University Extended Campus Research Fellow Program Proposal
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Abstract

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 and Shih, 2005). And recent research has shown that a robust social presence increases student retention rates (Boston et al., 2009). Students themselves are asking for community, but how do they envision that space and what are the benefits they expect to gain? The research proposed here will use survey and ethnographic data to answer four questions:

       1. How online students define community;

       2. What aspects of online community are perceived to be most important;

       3. What aspects of online community are perceived to be missing from their current OSU experience; and,

       4. Online venues where distance majors currently seek (and find?) a sense of community.

This research could help determine what universities and programs can do to increase a sense of community among their distance students, and thereby possibly increase retention rates for their distance students. This research proposal links directly to the goals for OSU's Strategic Plan Phase III to provide a "transformative educational experience for all learners" and to "strengthen impact and reach throughout Oregon and beyond" and provides "leadership in research, scholarship and creativity" in that it combines recent Community of Inquiry research in distance education with the ethnographic perspective and could substantively add to the literature in anthropology of education. This project presents potential as a pilot for future research.

Statement of the Learning Question

Students enrolled in the Ecampus Anthropology Program at Oregon State University frequently express a desire for "more community." Given efforts to structure and run courses within what is essentially a Community of Inquiry (COI) framework, including the use of many of the standard, recognized tools of online class community facilitation, this stated desire raises several questions, ranging from the conceptual to the more practical. Central to an initial exploration of this issue are the following questions:

- What do they mean by "community?" Are they conceptualizing "community" differently from how we tend to frame it within online course development?
- Is there agreement on the type of community they're seeking?
- Do they really want community that is conceptualized as social gatherings?
- What do they think could enhance a sense of community for them? Are these things that can be practically implemented within a program of study online?

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; Smith and Kollock, 1999). Online communities, it has been argued, are real 'third places', gathering points of sociality beyond home and work (Howard, 2001; Oldenburg, 1989; Schwienhorst, 1998; Steinkueler and Williams, 2006).

For our purposes, 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 down in a debate as to whether or not spaces of online sociality are 'real' communities; we 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" (Wellman and Gulia, 1999, p.187).

When students say they wish for "more community," the question then becomes what they mean by that. If what they have in an online classroom and in some cases an entire program of study, where they are virtually congregated for a common purpose, 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' as geographically proxemic ones (see Turkle, 1995 and 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 – the presentation of self – as well as anxieties stemming from a reliance on "worlds of weak ties," which she now argues online communities essentially are (2011, p.239).

Are we, then, grappling with students who are experiencing the sensation of being "alone together," and if that's the case, what can we do to mediate the situation in ways that help students put the online sociality of the classroom and program of study in perspective, and that may help enhance students' feelings of connectedness to each other, their instructors, the program and the university?

"Creating" Online Community For Students
According to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as developed by Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer (2000; 2009), online learning 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 by this point as a critical component of successful online learning environments (Shea et al., 2003; Stein et al., 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 et al., 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 the students is unlikely to be achieved (Arbaugh, 2008; Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison and Cleveland-Innes, 2005).

Working within the assumptions of a CoI framework, our focus here is on social presence, because we feel that students' expressed desire for "more community" is embedded within this third element. Social presence in online learning refers to the ability of students to project themselves into the environment as "real people," effectively perceived as such by others (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997:9). 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 and Shih, 2005). But, just as Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) argue that interaction is not enough to facilitate cognitive presence, we may be able to argue that social presence is not enough to create a sense of the "real" when it comes to students' perceptions of "community."

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 et al., 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 et al. (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,

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[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).

that online classes, in which the personal stakes and participation costs are inherently high, should result in a stable and strong sense of community.

That students note to our advisors that 'something is missing' in their online education experiences is reflected in the research by Stodel et al. (2006). Boston et al. (2009) draw a direct link between student persistence (retention) and indicators of social presence. Is this where the CoI framework runs up against the anxieties of presentation and a sense of weak ties that Sherry Turkle (2011) has identified? This can possibly be addressed through Ross' 2007 "back-region" research. The "back region" 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-region 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 and Taylor, 1992; Walton and Cohen, 2011). Further research indicates that online students wish to have access to a variety of student services associated with on-campus presences, including academic clubs (LaPadula, 2003). We would suggest that these more formalized and university sponsored clubs, while not as free-form and unregulated as Ross' "back-stages," can nonetheless serve as enhancing "third places" of community, as well.

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 and Shih, 2005). The standard tools of such community – discussion boards, collaborative assignments, blogs and synchronous sessions when feasible – arguably facilitate critical thinking in students and the development of articulation skills in ways that the traditional classroom can't 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 CoI (Angelino et al., 2007; Boston et al., 2011). Wallace Boston and colleagues (2011) note the trend of

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[2] Two existing examples of online "back-stage" spaces with 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 are quite active.

[3] Data specific to Oregon State University's Ecampus programs indicates that the average drop percentage for Ecampus classes is 16% vs. 10% for Corvallis campus credit hours. The average percentage for D, F or W (withdrawal) grades is 18.5%, compared to the Corvallis campus average of 10% (data compiled by Jeff Ruder, Student Retention & Success Manager, 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).

"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 concomitant loyalty – to a particular institution.

Planned Intervention and Scope of Research

An initial survey sent to distance anthropology majors at Oregon State University indicates that they tend to feel "somewhat" connected to the university and the anthropology department, and a little less so to fellow students.[4] To the question of whether or not they would like more interaction with fellow students, 21% of total respondents gave no answer, possibly indicating that they have no particular interest in such interaction. Of those who did respond to the question, however, 35% gave an unequivocal positive response; 12% indicated that they would like more interaction, but didn't see how it could be feasible for them; and 18% indicated no interest in more interaction with fellow students.[5]

Intended Project Outcomes
Our research will focus on determining what distance students are asking for when they ask for a greater sense of community. We will begin by selecting 20 distance anthropology majors for in-depth ethnographic interviews. Ethnographic interviews are less focused on generalizable and statistical data than surveys. Instead their focus is on the particularity of individual experience, within an organic format, providing researchers with a way to examine the inter-relationships present among groups of people. This research method is meant to uncover deeper meanings within surface behaviors and narratives. This then informs the creation of more quantitative surveys, which are grounded in the language and understandings of the studied population. Our second step will be just such a survey of the distance anthropology majors (>200). From this process we hope to discover:
>   1. How online students define community;
>   2. What aspects of online community are perceived to be most important;
>   3. What aspects of online community are perceived to be missing from their current OSU experience;
>   4. Online venues where distance majors currently seek (and find?) a sense of community, and;
>   5. What type of venues they are most interested in creating or joining (high-degree of authority oversight, such as a university sponsored online anthropology club; minimal

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[4] We achieved a response rate of about 20%, or 43 out of 210, but the population it was sent to – all students in the program for which we have campus email – may not have universally received it before the survey was closed. Online teaching and course evaluations surveys tend to have lower response rates than paper surveys – 20-40% vs. 30-75% – largely due to students not feeling compelled to attend to the survey in their own time (Nulty, 2008).
[5] As one of the latter indicated, "I don't have the time or the energy to deal with 'extra' people at this time. It is one of the reasons I am a distance student." Another noted, "I tend to be a loner and unless there was some overriding reason that I should connect with others I would rather spend the time reading a good book or something like that." It must be acknowledged that for some online students, the lack of sociality is precisely what is attractive about distance education.

authority oversight, such as less formal student organizations; or, an authority-free zone, similar to the Things Overheard at OSU on Facebook).

While the proposed research at this point is largely conceptual, focused on determining student understanding of "community" in the context of their classes and program of study in anthropology, results may point to further opportunities for research. This would be important preliminary research, which will become an informative basis for surveying and ethnographic interviews with distance students across OSU and within other universities. Our long-term goal is to extend this research into an evaluation of the efficacy of efforts to create greater sense of community among students and how this effort impacts retention. Additionally, it could provide some early indications of what universities and programs can do to increase a sense of community among their distance students.

Evaluation of Outcomes
If participation in an anthropology club such as has been attempted on campus at various times, is indicated as an appealing idea, we envision facilitating the development of one for our online students.[6] Several online extracurricular clubs have appeared at other universities with online degree programs, and the establishment of such a presence for our students could benefit from the models they provide (Kolowich, 2010). If the majority of distance students are seeking a community with less authority present we will work with students who are identified through this research project as being highly interested in this type of community, fostering their effort to establish an unsponsored university student organization or other less formal social media community. Finally, if we discover students really are asking for an authority-free zone, we will identify potential student leaders for this venue type, make sure they are aware of any tools and resources available to them for this effort, and then step back from any involvement in creating the community or participating in the community. All of these potential venue outcomes offer opportunities for future research within OSU and more generally in online education regardless of our level of direct participation in the venue outcome. More specific to this research project, we hope to monitor whatever community is created (authoritative, less-formalized authority, or authority-free) with funding from future research grants.

Regardless of the venue created, our long-term goal is to continue monitoring and evaluating the efficacy of a student-centric social networking venue based on their involvement in a particular university program of online study. In this way, this proposal can be considered a potential pilot study. This continuation could go in many directions, and could speak to student retention, success, sense of personal involvement and overall satisfaction with their online educational experience.

Links to University Strategic Plan
We have aimed to address a point of inquiry and research plan that links to Oregon State University's core values and the goals of the university's Strategic Plan Phase III, specifically Goal 1 of Phase III, "Provide a transformative educational experience for all learners," and Goal 3, "Strengthen impact and reach throughout Oregon and beyond" (OSU Strategic Plan, 2015). It

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[6] An examination of the lack of success in maintaining an on-campus anthropology club, while tangential to the proposed study, may provide valuable information if we are to consider the establishment of a club for distance students.

should be said, however, that Goal 2, "Demonstrate leadership in research, scholarship and creativity while enhancing preeminence in the three signature areas of distinction," is significantly addressed by this proposed project in that it will incorporate the most recent aspects of CoI research in distance education while providing a fresh approach coming from an ethnographic perspective. Likewise, it has the potential to add substantively to the literature in the anthropology of education.

Additionally, our institution's core values of accountability, diversity, integrity, respect and social responsibility all have a significant role in the way the research will be conducted and the potential uses for the research.

Dissemination of Research
We will be disseminating the information in a variety of venues within the Oregon State University community and beyond. The scope of research should be of interest to those in the field of education and anthropology, and we foresee opportunities for presentation across disciplines.

The expected product of a white paper for the OSU Extended Campus Research Unit and a presentation at the Ecampus Faculty Forum will help inform online teaching and learning within Ecampus programs across OSU. We further expect to take advantage of opportunities to present the research at online teaching and learning conferences outside the OSU community (e.g. the Online Learning Consortium annual conference).

Outside the limits of this granting period, we intent to explore publication opportunities in peer reviewed journals such as *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, The American Journal of Distance Education,* or *Internet and Higher Education.*

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