# Building productive communities within online, distance learning programmes

Introduction

As part of a partnership with Pearson, Northumbria University's popular Distance Learning MSc in Surveying was redesigned in the academic year 2018–19. Research was conducted to understand the student experience when studying on this fully online programme *before* and *after* the redesign process.

The formation of a supportive community of learners on the course was always important to the Programme Leader, who took a *Community of Inquiry (COI)* framework[1] approach. The COI Framework is a model that has generated significant interest from researchers of online learning. The authors, Garrison, *et al*., argue that effective online learning/teaching is best understood in terms of three types of presence and the interrelationship between them, as shown in the figure below:
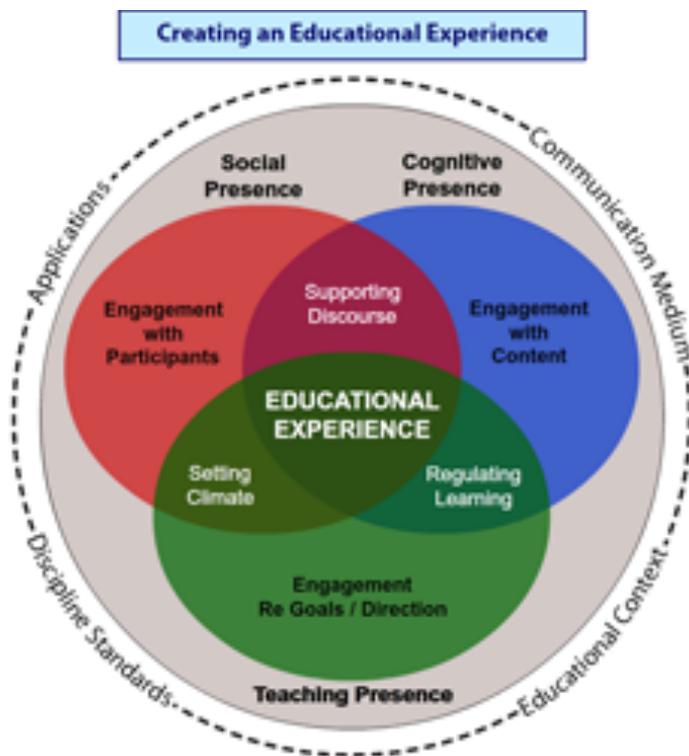
Source: Community of Inquiry Framework: https://coi.athabascau.ca/

Our research with the Northumbria University course participants revealed that students also placed high value on community – or the social presence in the COI framework – and highlighted the importance of a considered teaching presence in relation to that. (Note that cognitive presence is covered in more detail in our study on the course design of the programme[2].) We've integrated the Northumbria University student comments on "community" throughout this paper so that we clearly hear the student voice.

Here we share our **5 tips to build community** within an online course; that serves to be functional, productive and supportive for both students and faculty. We cover both formal and informal collaborative spaces, suggesting some ways to manage them.

Tip 1 – Creating a productive formal collaborative learning space

It's a good idea to use formal online discussions, which are part of the expected learning hours on the course, in a structured way. This supports students' understanding and application of course content and provides them with a scaffolded way to learn from you, their tutor, and their peers. Participation has been shown to support improved student outcomes.[3]

This is an area within the delivery of your online course where teacher presence is crucial. According to research[4] "*instructors play a critical role in facilitating discourse among participants.*", especially because when students have collaborative dialogues with their course peers and teachers, their learning outcomes are improved.

It's important to set some rules about what is expected of students, particularly in terms of:

- how to provide constructive feedback on their peers' work
- the kind of comments that are helpful and those that are not
- appreciating that their role is *not* to as an expert but as a co-learner
- explain the benefits of taking part in collaborative discussions.

Research has shown that student confidence to answer assessed questions are positively impacted by participation in formal online discussion forums:

> "*Students who participate in Online Discussion Forums can easily formulate answers to assignment and examination questions because the platform affords them the opportunity to have huge access to several threads of discussions and suggestions on a given course content which tend to build their confidence to attempt or respond more accurately to questions that arise in the course.*"[5]

By aligning your discussion forum – questions and topics – to your course assessment you may increase student motivation to participate. Our research highlighted that the more easily students could see links between the collaborative learning activity and their final assessment, the more inclined they were to engage; we suggest outlining this very clearly at the start of the course and reinforcing it regularly.

Student Comments

*I think the other thing that is amazing with distance learning is just the **communication with both your lecturers and the other people on your course**, as you do quite often learn quite a lot from one of your peers.*

*I **liked how we could have discussion forums every week**, because when it came to the assessments, I looked through all the answers that were part of the discussion forum; it was basically an outline for my essay already so, that was much better.*

*It [the weekly discussion forum] was **definitely very much related to the assessment** itself in terms of it was sort of a process that mirrored the assessment. ...at the start to be honest I had no interest in it whatsoever but at the end of that **I really quite enjoyed it**.*

*I definitely found them [the weekly discussion forums] useful for when it came to the assessment. Because **you had already got some form of feedback on the thoughts and the direction you were going**.*

Tip 2 – Consider the size of your discussion forums

It's clear that formal discussion forums are a good learning tool to build into your course design for an online programme, however, they work most effectively when there are enough students actively taking part so that peer-to-peer learning and teacher-led interaction can actually happen in the space.

While you probably can't make participation in your discussion forums mandatory, you should seek to encourage it. It's best to avoid too many students opting out as this may leave those who *are* active participants feeling like they're doing all the work for their peers.

Getting the balance right is tricky.

In a whole cohort forum, of say 60+, while you have more chance of a higher amount of participation and it's easier for the tutor to interact without having to spread their time across multiple groups, it is likely to provide students with a less impactful learning experience. Also, in a larger group some students may be less inclined to express their opinions or critique the work of their peers.

The benefits of a smaller group discussion forum are that participants have an opportunity to form more personal connections and feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts and ideas openly and critiquing each other with less hesitation. It's important for you to participate in all the discussion forums and specifically to monitor the activity levels in smaller groups in case some of them have fewer active students – that clearly adds to the time you will need to spend, but ultimately it offers a worthwhile learning experience for your students.

Paul, *et al*.[6] (2010) identified some early indicators of the impact of discussion group size on COI framework presences, finding that;

- smaller groups had higher cognitive presence
- mid-size groups had higher teaching and social presences
- the largest groups showed lower levels of all three.

Student Comments

Last week's discussion forum for this current module **was meant to be a group task, and nobody wrote anything**. *So, it's not particularly helpful.*

For the weekly tasks we were put into groups of about 20, I think, which is a lot smaller. And **everyone contributes**.

[In the previous version of the programme] **there was no interaction between fellow students**. *It was very isolating, and you didn't have that camaraderie, or you didn't know what other students were thinking, so you're completely on your own. Whereas* **now, there's much more interactive use of the discussion boards in Blackboard**.

*I really benefited [from the discussion forum] …***other people's comments really helped me out because I was learning different writing styles**.

Tip 3 – Teacher presence is essential to success

Research shows that *"instructional settings characterized by frequent and meaningful instructor-student interaction have consistently been found to support student learning satisfaction (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wit, Wheeless & Allen, 2004)"*.[4]

Students have an expectation – even, or perhaps *especially,* in online, distance learning – to have regular touch points with a tutor. The more considered and consistent the tutor's connection with students, the better. You might be using webinars to offer face-to-face synchronous or asynchronous lectures but think about using them to host support and Q&A sessions. In our research the students valued the tutor-led webinars and hence the team at Northumbria University now run five synchronous touch points in each module, to check understanding and have discussions around the learning the students have undertaken.

The tutor 'voice' in discussion forums is crucial to help provoke and evolve students' thinking, to guide and support learning, and sometimes simply to correct any major misconceptions that arise.

The speed of response and utilising different tools to communicate your presence is key:

- Use your web cam in online sessions so it feels more personal.
- Be easily reachable by email and respond in a timely manner.
- Use more of your VLE's features such as notifications and messaging to further show your presence.
- Set your own guidelines on how regularly you'll check and participate in discussion forums.

All of these things combined help your students have the sense that there's someone behind the screen, humanising the learning experience. Our research observed a number of positive impacts on students from a consistent teaching presence, with them feeling more supported, building their confidence, and reducing the sense of isolation. Research in this specific area references benefits as follows:

"...positive relationship between COI teaching presence indicators (i.e. course design, facilitation, and direct instruction) and student perceptions of learning, motivation and satisfaction."[4]

However, it should be noted that synchronicity is not always required for these interactions to be effective:

"research suggests that online courses employing an effective asynchronous approach often achieve greater student achievement than those mandating frequent synchronous interactions (Bernard, et al.,2004)".[4]

Some students will *prefer* to take an asynchronous approach, catching up on webinars or Q&A sessions at a time that's convenient to them – make sure you offer flexible access so students can choose.

Student Comments

*There's a lot **more involvement and discussion on the discussion forums** and things.*

*I did like the **webinar** because I thought it was a **chance to ask questions**. ... some people were asking questions that I hadn't thought of.*

*I **prefer asking questions live** ...if they [the tutor] don't understand, then you can repeat the question.*

*I found the **webinars really useful** as well. Especially when you're about to hand in an assignment and you've got some questions, **you get the answer straight from the horse's mouth**.*

*I didn't dial into it [the webinar], I actually **watched it back two days later and that answered all my questions**.*

*You felt more like you **knew the people behind the computer screen**, in a way.*

***Continuation of communication**... so we know what's going on, when things are happening. ...like, 'welcome to Week X' just in **a little notification will be a good thing**.*

*...seminars which were **interactive...we could ask her a question in real time**... That plugged the gap between feeling isolated and feeling you are in a distance learning course and actually feeling like **an experience that is more towards being on campus**.*

Tip 4 – Not all students will be able to actively participate in your community

Your formal community spaces created for distance learning – such as live webinars and online discussion forums – need to be optional and flexible. You can and should set an expectation for participation, explaining the benefits of this, but also be prepared that some students simply won't take part in the community spaces.

Not every student sees the value or is able logistically to participate – in fact some have chosen remote learning because they don't want to interact with others, they just want to study in their own time, at their own pace, working their way through the course quite independently.

Consider how to make your discussion forums useful to those who want to actively participate, those who will take part when they can and those who want to be less involved observers. Look at your design and ensure that someone wouldn't miss out on anything crucial in relation to the course content if they didn't ever look at your formal community spaces.

In our next tip we'll look in more detail at the informal communities that course participants may create themselves. It's worth noting here though that some students will *only* take part in your formal community spaces considering them more focussed: in this way they will still benefit from that sense of belonging gained from interaction with the tutor and with their peers. Student comments from our research showed the different preferences and time availability within the cohort and a sense of what was and wasn't appropriate for the formal community space.

Student Comments

*I think it's good to **focus on the discussion board** on the Blackboard **rather than on social media**.*

***A community of learners is not my expectation**. I'm a social person, but that's not my expectations [for this course].*

*With my kind of working situation and how busy I've been, **I've not been able to participate as well as what I really would have liked**.*

***Posting what you've done at the weekend... You wouldn't want that on the discussion board** that's on the university platform.*

Tip 5 – Help students manage their informal communities

Students are highly likely to form informal communities with their course peers. Whether they create WhatsApp or Facebook groups, they will choose to 'meet' somewhere private allowing them to 'talk' informally away from their tutors. Informal groups are a great way for your students to get to know each other, understand each other's personal situations and support each other throughout the course, both emotionally and practically.

While you won't be part of their informal communities, we suggest there are ways that you can support students in setting up and managing them:

- You *could* choose a preferred platform, in line with institutional accessibility, usability, legal, security guidelines.
- Make it clear you appreciate what makes this space most valuable is peer support and its informal nature.
- You *could* suggest students set up **two** informal communities – one for peer-to-peer course support and one for entirely social activity where students to get to know each other personally and perhaps professionally. Our research showed that, depending on personality types, some students may prefer to be part of one group or the other group. (When researching *formal* online discussions forums Onyema, *et al*.[5] also found that posting of irrelevancies or frivolities that are not connected to the course could discourage people from participating or even force them to withdraw altogether.)

In our research the students acknowledged that the informal community, while generally positive, could also be a very 'dangerous space' providing a conduit for negativity. They referenced feelings of anxiety and overload in relation to their informal WhatsApp group, highlighting how it can become an echo chamber with stressed students sharing the same information (often incorrect) and worries over and over again, without a satisfactory resolution. It was apparent that a few students were more vocal, and also more negative in their outlook, in the group: this in effect forced others out or meant they felt less comfortable voicing their opinion.

In light of this students themselves thought that rules would be useful. Here are some suggested rules designed to help students effectively monitor and manage their own informal spaces:

- If a course or assessment-related query can't be resolved within the group, one person is nominated to contact the tutor 'offline' and then report back the response.
- Define a route to escalate to faculty if an individual student is causing excessive distress for others.
- Outline that serious breaches of the 'rules of engagement' will be dealt with through a formal complaints process.

Student Comments

*There's been a **real sense of community** where people will say, 'Hey, I found this journal article. It talks about this, it's fantastic.' and everyone is like, 'oh, that's amazing. Thanks so much.'*

*It's very, very useful when we've been given an assessment or we're having trouble on a certain subject. **People are very forthcoming on providing help, which is a big part of feeling that you're part of something.***

*It just takes one or two individuals to act like children and **it can be quickly ruined. So now no one is talking on WhatsApp**.*

*...there are definitely drawbacks to it and **there's times when it's definitely not productive**. I'll go to work and, four hours later, I'll look at my phone and I'll have 150 messages on my WhatsApp.*

***Anxiety can be transmitted in that situation**. And also, I think there's a tendency for people to complain and I don't know if that's massively positive.*

*It just **becomes an echo chamber** and **no issue is resolved**, and **everybody feels dissatisfied**.*

*I almost think **the university needs to write a set of rules of engagement** for WhatsApp groups.*

References

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