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SUPPORTED YET ISOLATED: GRADUATE STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON BUILDING COMMUNITY THROUGH DISCUSSION FORUMS IN AN ONLINE ACCELERATED MLIS PROGRAM

Abstract

This paper explores graduate students' experiences and perceptions of using discussion forums to build a sense of community in an accelerated online Master of Library and Information Studies program. The Classroom Community Short Form survey was adapted to include short answer questions. The results suggest that while students feel supported and that they care about each other, they still feel isolated. Discussion forums that were informal, provide peer to peer interaction and participation by the instructor were more likely to create a sense of community.

Introduction

Online learning can be isolating, especially in asynchronous classes. This increases the importance of building a sense of community in such classes. Discussion forums within course management systems are often utilized as the main activity to facilitate community building in online courses. This paper explores graduate students' experiences and perceptions of using discussion forums to build a sense of community in an accelerated online Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program at a public university in the northeastern United States. All courses are asynchronous and designed and delivered through a learning management system. All courses utilize the same discussion tool in the learning management system; some require weekly posts, but other courses use discussion forums on an irregular basis.

This is part of a larger study that also looks at faculty experiences and perceptions, and ultimately, will compare the viewpoints of the two groups. This study uses the terms *sense of community* and *building community* interchangeably to describe "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 commitment to be together" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9).

Literature

Research suggests fostering a sense of community in online courses helps minimize feelings of isolation (Rovai, 2002a), build camaraderie (Conrad, 2005), improve student outcomes (Drouin, 2008), lead to deeper learning (Hulon, 2013) and increase retention (Shatila, 2023). This has been examined through various lenses, including a sense of belonging (Zamora et al., 2022),

connectedness (Shatila, 2023), community development (Cooke, 2016), and connectivism theory (Wylie, 2023). Findings indicate that graduate students feel more supported when instructors actively engage on discussion boards by posting summaries and comments (Scott & Turrise, 2021; Wylie, 2023); feel more connected when there are informal peer-to-peer interactions, such as using first names, humor, emoticons, and expressions of empathy (Cooke, 2016); and experience deeper learning when discussion forums incorporate students' experiences (Trekles & Sims, 2013).

In a class where 85% of community-building activities occurred asynchronously on discussion forums, Liu et al. (2007) found a positive relationship between students' sense of community and their perceived learning gains, engagement, and satisfaction. This sense of connection also reduced feelings of isolation and the likelihood of dropout. Shackleford and Maxwell (2012) found that graduate students valued online course activities of small group discussions, whole-class discussions, sharing personal experiences, and exchanging resources, with resource sharing ranked highest in importance for building community.

Despite these benefits, challenges exist. Phirangee and Hewitt (2024) noted that a lack of recognition for posts and the repetitive nature of responses can undermine the effectiveness of forums. Liu et al. (2007) observed that due to their busy schedules, many graduate students were skeptical about whether the benefits of a learning community justified the additional time required. Furthermore, without proper instructor guidance, asynchronous discussions risk becoming grade-driven rather than fostering collaborative knowledge-building (Ke, 2010).

Research Questions

Although research that has examined graduate student perspectives and experiences with discussion forums as community building activities, none have focused on student perspectives in an accelerated graduate program (e.g., 3-week, 5-week, 7-week) in a library and information studies master degree program. This study explores how discussion forums build community in a 7-week accelerated MLIS program. The findings from this study will add to the knowledge base by exploring the following research questions:

1. How do graduate students in an accelerated online MLIS program perceive their experiences in discussion forums in the context of community building?
2. What are the successes and challenges of these experiences?

Methods

As part of a multi-method study that included content analysis of course syllabi and focus groups with faculty, this study also utilized a survey to collect quantitative and qualitative data directly from graduate students. The survey instrument was adapted from the Classroom Community Scale Short-Form (CSS-SF) developed by Cho and Demmans Epp (2019), which was developed from Rovai's (2002b) Classroom Community Scale. The instrument included three closed-ended questions to gather demographic information, the 8-item 5-point Likert scale CSS-SF questions, and four open-ended questions focusing on the challenges and successes students encountered when using discussion forums. The survey was administered online to 127 graduate students in the program who had completed at least one course during the 2023 calendar year.

Although all courses in the program assign discussion forums, instructors have the academic freedom to structure the discussion rules as they see fit with regard to frequency of posts and replies, percentage of the grade, use of citations, and more. Some use the forums for assignment submission, peer feedback on submitted assignments, or other purposes, in addition to or in lieu of weekly discussion posts. Some courses require discussion forum posts only a few times per semester. Depending on the courses students took and their progress in the program, the experiences of respondents may have been different.

Survey responses were analyzed using Qualtrics data analysis tools. Frequencies were calculated for demographic data and responses to the CSS-SF Likert scale items. Qualitative responses were coded by two researchers for themes and patterns. Each researcher coded the responses independently, then they met to achieve consensus on the emergent themes. Some themes were quantified to determine frequency.

Results

Seventy graduate students took the survey for a response rate of 55%. Ages ranged from 22 to 61; the average age of respondents was 34.86. Respondents represented 11 states, although over half came from two states: the state where the university is located (n=28; 38.9%) and its nearest neighboring state (n=26; 36.1%).

Findings

Respondents could choose to strongly agree, agree, neither agree nor disagree, disagree, or strongly disagree with each of the eight Likert scale questions. For simplicity, the results are reported in Table 1 with strongly agree and agree aggregated into "Agree" and with disagree and strongly disagree aggregated into "Disagree".

Table 1. Student agreement with Likert scale questions.

Questions	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
I feel that students in this program care about each other	64.3%	25.7%	10.0%
I feel connected to others in this program	28.6%	27.1%	44.3%
I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question	28.6%	20.0%	51.4%
I feel uneasy exposing gaps in my understanding	32.9%	14.3%	52.9%
I feel reluctant to speak openly	25.7%	21.4%	52.9%
I feel that I can rely on others in this program	36.2%	29.0%	34.8%
I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn	78.6%	14.3%	7.1%
I feel confident that others will support me.	55.7%	32.9%	11.4%

Positive aspects of discussion forums are that students feel they are given ample opportunities to learn (78.6% agree), that students in the program care about each other (64.3%), and they are confident others will support them (55.7%). A majority disagreed with the negatively worded statements, meaning that they do *not* feel reluctant to speak openly (52.9%), uneasy exposing

gaps in their understanding (52.9%), or that it is hard to get help when they have a question (51.4%). However, only 36.2% feel they can rely on others in the program and 28.6% feel connected to others in the program. This indicates that while students feel supported and that they care about each other, they still feel isolated.

In responding to the open-ended questions, students felt that discussion forum activities that built a sense of community were introductory posts (n=18), being in a group (n=13), and posts based on opinion, personal experiences, and emotional topics (n=13). Other respondents cited peer-to-peer interaction as building a sense of community, including Q&A forums, sharing tips, student-led topics, and required responses to peers. They also reported that informal tone, receiving positive feedback, and sharing something good or challenging all built a sense of community. Suggestions to build community through discussions included: limiting the discussion to 1-2 topics per week, encouraging personal experiences and reflection more than relying on reading responses, offering open ended questions or open topics, assigning students to respond to classmates' responses, and reflecting on successes and challenges. There was a general feeling of wanting fewer required posts and replies but more informal conversation in some format: a Q&A forum, optional virtual meetings, or outside of class discussions. Notably, instructor participation is appreciated as a way to both guide everyone in a unified topic but also to show engagement.

However, some of the data was contradictory. Peer-to-peer interaction was preferred by some but disliked by others. Peer reviews were helpful to one, but another said peer review reads as criticism more than sense of community. More respondents hold the view that requiring posts on multiple days do not build a sense of community and are difficult for many students to achieve (n=15), although one of those 15 acknowledged this approach "increases likelihood of engagement" and two more said that multiple days push engagement or were preferred. Some respondents hated the platform and seemed frustrated by it, whereas others enjoyed getting to know their peers this way. Some of the suggestions for building community were ideas that were disliked by other respondents. Respondents seemed aware of the contradictory needs of different students, noting that effectiveness and enjoyment of discussion could be impacted by learning style, communication skills and techniques, class size, and instructor participation (or lack thereof).

Multiple respondents acknowledged the need for an utility of the discussion for participation and to show comprehension but did not see it as a community-building activity; some did not see it as effective for anything. When specifically asked to provide an example of a discussion forum activity that they felt built a sense of community, 11 respondents said something to the effect of there is no sense of community in discussion forums. Respondents did not enjoy forced posting or replies, and some saw discussion forums as an obligation or busy work regardless of the requirements. Both the reading response format and the requirement to cite readings in posts and replies were viewed by some as obligatory and disingenuous, as opposed to thought-provoking prompts that keep everyone on the same topic, especially if there's room to share personal experiences and reply in a conversational manner.

Discussion and Next Steps

This research addresses the question of how discussion forums are experienced by graduate students in an online accelerated MLIS program to build a sense of community. The qualitative

data show that students hold contradictory views on the utility of discussion forums for building a sense of community, which mirrors the quantitative analysis showing that students feel supported yet isolated. Despite this, three strategies emerged as fruitful areas for building a sense of community via discussion forums:

- Informality, including introductory posts, Q&A forums or sharing tips, sharing personal views, and not requiring citations to readings;
- Peer-to-peer interaction, including group work, a jigsaw approach to reading responses, post-and-reply, and providing constructive feedback to peers; and
- Instructor support, including leading prompts and participating in discussions.

Strict requirements like requiring many posts and citing sources seem to detract from building a sense of community. Despite the emergence of strategies for building a sense of community via online discussion forums, the truth is, some respondents just did not like discussions and saw it as busy work, participation only, or not anything that could build community. Ultimately, there is no one-size-fits-all approach as learning styles vary, commitment levels to a course can vary, student availability to participate varies, and people just do not all like the same things.

This research is significant as it contributes actionable insights that can improve the learning experience for students in online accelerated graduate programs, benefiting instructors, educational institutions, and curriculum designers. The findings reported here will be combined with findings from faculty focus groups and content analysis of course syllabi to provide recommendations for enhancing online learning environments and optimizing the use of discussion forums.

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