

Community and collaborative learning in online schools: Students' and teachers' perspectives

Conference Abstract

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Abstract

Online schools have become a significant part of the education marketplace since their inception in the mid-1990s, and this growth is expected to continue. Several factors contribute to the rise of online schooling; they enable education for some who cannot access local learning, offer opportunities for personalised learning, enable students to catch up on missed classes, and potentially re-engage students who have been out of school for a variety of reasons.

Online schools tend to use technology that supports Video Mediated Interaction (VMI). This form of interaction employs synchronous communication via video links. A key advantage of VMI is its ability to decouple education from physical location. This enables interaction across different jurisdictions and time zones and enhances access to education for students who face barriers such as disability or distance. At the same time, there are some concerns that the expansion of VMI has influenced the ways that students and teachers interact around learning and that students and teachers can lose a sense of common endeavour.

In this exploratory project we wanted to capture students' and teachers' perceptions of community and collaboration in online classes, since our sociocultural perspective suggests that the forms of interaction that take place in an environment will affect the nature of learning that occurs there.

Method

Reflecting the exploratory nature of our enquiry, we wanted to include schools in our study who represented a variety of national contexts. It would enhance our confidence in our conclusions if themes were consistent across these diverse contexts.

To explore students' and teachers' perceptions of community and collaboration in online classrooms we collected qualitative interview data from six teachers and 14 students (10 female and four male) from five online schools. Two schools were based in the UK, and the others were based in Namibia, South Africa, and India. The schools were selected because they offered International GCSE (IGCSE) qualifications that we anticipated would, to some extent, require students to work and learn collaboratively. Each school nominated at least one class for the project. We focused on four IGCSE English classes, one IGCSE Accounting class, and one IGCSE Science class.

The students were aged between 15 and 16 years old and attended the online schools for a variety of reasons. Some chose online school because it fitted around other commitments or lifestyle choices, e.g., they were pursuing elite sports, or their parents were highly mobile due to work commitments. Some students chose online learning because they lived far away from their school of choice, or a disability barred them from accessing in-person school. A final group of students preferred to attend online school because they suffered from social anxiety or had unpleasant experiences at their previous (in-person) school.

Data Collection and Analysis

The interview data was captured through 16 individual 1:1 online meetings with students and teachers and one group online interview involving four students. Each interview lasted 45-

minutes (leaving us with around 765 minutes of recorded data), and the questions probed perceptions of community (affiliation, connectivity, participation, spirit, and trust) and collaboration (knowledge sharing). Each interview was audio recorded and then transcribed. Two researchers analysed the data using MAXQDA24 software using a low-inference coding framework.

Results

Community: Affiliation and Connectivity

Teachers and students recognised the conditions that encouraged good relationship building. Making good relationships in online classes included practical, psychological and technical challenges.

Community: Participation

A number of student level and general factors facilitated students' active contribution to class learning discussions, which could help to open up spaces where ideas could be collectively explored. Participating in class learning discussions could include psychological, environmental, technical-logistic, and behavioural barriers.

Community: Spirit and Trust

We found that students generally perceived that they were members of a learning community. Besides the reassurance that they gained from this, it gave them access to distributed and varied perspectives. Being in a learning community with good relationships led some learners to engage in more challenging and open discussions.

Collaboration: Knowledge Sharing

Analysis showed that students engaged in productive talk (knowledge sharing through justifying thinking, displaying reasoning, challenging each other, question use, and opinion sharing). Group work was an important space for productive talk, and students suggested that, in general, they worked well when they were set to work in collaborative groups. We were able to identify a number of conditions that supported positive group interaction.

Discussion

Our study reinforces the suggestion that classroom interaction serves at least two purposes; supporting individual learning and community building. Our study also highlights how the relationship between these two purposes is iterative, with each being mutually supportive of the other. Individual learning can be supported through a student being a member of a learning community, with affiliation and trust encouraging more open communication and knowledge sharing. We found that these relationships were possible to create in online learning environments through students' and teachers' active participation, and we would describe these classes as having a positive interaction culture. It appears that this culture is enabled where students and teachers subscribe to a social learning model.

Keywords

Online learning; Sociocultural theory; Collaboration; Community