Staying Apart but Staying Together: Establishing Learners' Community in Remote Teaching

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The cliché "Learning is a social act" highlights the critical role of social interaction in the process of learning. However, in the wake of COVID- 19 forced campus closures and the resultant remote teaching minimizes the opportunities for such interactions mainly because teachers and students are forced to stay in isolation in their homes and come together for a limited time on the computer screen only. To overcome this limitation, teaching and assessment interventions are needed to build a sense of community (SoC) and therefore optimize students learning. This paper focuses on one such intervention and its perceived benefits for students learning of the course contents in the context of anEnglish for academic purposes course delivered at an international university campus in Tajikistan. The paper shares how conditions were created to build a SoC among the students and how it was beneficial for them. The paper has implications for practitioners as it shares a practical example of using social interaction for enhanced learning in an online environment and therefore may stimulate some further ideas for using community building for the enhanced achievement of the learning outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

COVID-19 pandemic caused unprecedented disruption to education. The disruptive effects on learners and institutions were phenomenal. For safety and social distancing (which ensued as a measure to curb the spread of the virus), educational institutions were closed, and teaching and learning were shifted from the face-to-face mode to remote mode. Courses and lessons were delivered using available internet and communication technologies. This affected 1.6 billion learners across the globe by August 2020 (United Nations, 2020). The University of Central Asia Khorog campus in Tajikistan was no exception to the disruptive effects of the pandemic. Due to COVID-19 social distancing and lockdown regime imposed in the country, the campus was closed, and the entire operation of teaching and learning was shifted to remote mode starting the current academic year of 2021. This measure meant students learning in academic isolation from the confines of their homes with minimal contact with their campus community of peers and instructors. It was amid these circumstances that I started the fall semester of the year 2020.

During the semester, I remotely taught a course of academic writing and research skills to a group of 27 freshmen (majoring in Earth & Environmental Sciences, and Economics) for 14 weeks. The group of the students was repatriated from the campus to their home countries and the students were now located in Russia, Kenya, Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. My immediate and the most pressing concern, when I started the course, was to initially develop and subsequently sustain through the semester a sense of community among the group. This paper is to share how I created this sense of community (SoC) and how it was beneficial for the students during the semester.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1980) considers learning as a social act. Approached from this perspective, social context and social dynamics (interaction, participation, collaboration) are key to learning and these cannot be created without creating a SoC among those involved in teaching and learning process (Tam, 2000). SoC has been defined as "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, p.9). Strayhorn (2012) considers SoC as a prerequisite for successful learning in academic institutions. He stresses that students cannot succeed in learning unless their need for feeling belonged is met. According to Rovai (2001, p.33), the main objectives of fostering SoC in such an environment is to "increase the flow of information among all learners, the availability of support, commitment to group goals, cooperation among members, and satisfaction with the group efforts". He particularly links SoC to learners' wellbeing, a feeling of being connected with others and togetherness, and also to social development. These feelings emerge and develop naturally in geographically located communities where human to human contact is indispensable and unavoidable but in an online learning environment, where the contact is mainly between human and computer screen or interface, deliberate actions and measures are required to generate and foster them. Therefore, developing SoC is particularly essential in online or distance learning environment.

SoC IN REMOTE TEACHING

Remote teaching mode (which was widely adopted in the wake of COVID-19 educational institutions closures as a social distancing regime and which I also needed to adopt for my course) is akin to online teaching. It is also characterised by physical and geographical separation and the resultant absence of any territorial moorings which naturally help to develop a communal sense. Therefore, there was a need to develop a SoC within the cyber environment (as compared to the physical space) in which the remote delivery of the course was occurring. In a cyber environment, SoC needs to and is facilitated to evolve into psychological and relational feelings which the participants involved in a remote teaching and learning activities are led into developing and adopting by purposely designed actions (Gregory & Bannister-Tyrrell, 2017).

In my course, I decided to take certain actions to foster a SoC. Within the Constructivist framework, I weaved the notions of interaction and the elements of teaching, social and cognitive presences to develop and maintain a SoC as part of students' learning experience in the course (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Literature indicates interaction as one of the most important factors supporting the development of a SoC (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Rovai (2001) mentions that interaction reduces the element of *distance* in a remotely delivered course and increases learning. He also considers interaction as a key to establishing trust, support, and satisfaction among the learners' community. In my course, I decided to make interaction as a pivotal principle of the community building intervention. Moore (as cited in Swan, 2002) suggests three categories of interaction to build a SoC in remote courses: (i) Students-content (S-C) interaction (ii) Student-student (S-S) interaction (iii) Student-instructor (S-I) interaction.

S-C interaction is defined as the "cognitive and/or perceptual contact between students and the materials of study that result in acquisition of meaning by students, such as reading text in print or digital formats, watching or listening to media, operating with equipment in labs, and finding information" (Liu & Kaye, 2016). S-S interaction can be understood simply as an interaction between individual students when they are working as small or large groups; while S-I interaction is explained as "the instructor techniques used to stimulate and maintain the learner's interest in the course content" (Oyarzun, Stefaniak, Bol, & Morrison, 2018, p.156). I used these

modes of interaction to establish the elements of teaching, social and cognitive presences in the course. These are the composite elements of the community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999). Teaching presence (TP) is defined as the process and techniques "that instructors use to create quality online instructional experiences that support and sustain productive communities of inquiry" (Bangert, 2008, p. 40). These elements are associated with an engaging, meaningful and deep learning experience. Garrison et al. (1999) conceptualise three dimensions of teaching presence: instructional design and organization, facilitating interaction and dialogue, and direct instruction. Social presence (SP) is defined as "the ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships" and it is mainly achieved through open and effective communication to achieve greater group cohesion (Garrison, 2019, p.63). Garrison defines the third element of cognitive presence (CP) as the exploration, construction, resolution, and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection (p.65).

APPLICATION: SoC THROUGH MODES OF INTERACTION AND PRESENCES

To foster a SoC among the participants of my course, I used the three kinds of interactions to establish the three modes of presences (see Tables 1, 2, and 3). The following were some of the contextual features within which this merger was achieved.

1) The cyber environment within which this remote delivery happened was built around the tools of Moodle (the official Learning Management System [LMS] for the course), WhatsApp and Microsoft Team and an official email site.

2) Both synchronous and asynchronous delivery modes were used. The group was scheduled to meet for 105 minutes once a week for synchronous lecture sessions. However, these synchronous sessions were reduced to 15 minutes only and used to connect and socialise.

3) The entire course contents were delivered asynchronously using the lesson and quiz activity modules in the LMS.

4) Both 1 and 2 meant a change in my role. I was no more a direct conduit of course contents. In my visible presence (in the synchronous lecture sessions), I assumed the role of a socialiser, a person who cares and supports. While in my invisible presence (in the asynchronous content delivery), I assumed the role of a facilitator through designing the entire asynchronous learning

Table 1: Student-Instructor Interactions Modality

Instances of Interaction	**Initiated by**	**Cyber Tools Used**	**Objective**	**Delivery Mode**	**Presence Established**
Emails (usually sent at the beginning of the week)	Instructor	Official email site	Formal course activities and assignments related information transfer	Asynchronous	TP
Instant Messages	Instructor	WhatsApp	Transfer of information of urgent nature like a sudden change in classes schedule or unavailability of the synchronous meeting due to internet or power outage	Asynchronous	TP
Instant Messages	Student	WhatsApp & Microsoft Team	Student's seeking support; informing instructor of any problems with LMS interface; asking urgent questions about course contents/tasks or seeking clarification on certain points/topics; informing instructor of family/personal issues and how it will affect their ability to complete a task or meet a deadline	Asynchronous	TP, SP, CP
Scheduled Weekly Lectures	Instructor	Video-conferencing feature of Microsoft Team	The lectures were reduced from 105 minutes to 15 minutes and the reduced time was used to connect and socialise and share any important information for the week (if any)	Synchronous	TP, SP
Short (one-to-two-minute-long) videos	Instructor	Moodle (LMS) activity modules	To give tasks related instructions to the students. These videos were embedded within the sequence of contents/lessons delivered through the LMS activity modules.	Asynchronous	TP, CP
Impersonal immediate feedback on tasks	Instructor	Embedded within the activity modules (like lesson and quiz) of Moodle	To respond to students' performance on tasks and to indicate the need for a task when required	Asynchronous	TP, CP
Short (one-to-two-minute-long) videos/audios	Students	Embedded within the activity modules of Moodle	To provide an alternative to task-related textual responses (students were asked to video or audio record themselves instead of typing into the text editor of the LMS).	Asynchronous	TP, CP

Instances of Interaction	Initiated by	Cyber Tools Used	Objective	Delivery Mode	Presence Established
Student interacting with instructor-created HTML text	Instructor	Moodle activity modules of lesson and quiz	To engage with the course contents and learn them, construct meanings and build knowledge of the course concepts and thereby related competencies and skills	Asynchronous	CP, TP
Student interacting with task instruction (one-to-two-minute-long) videos/audios	Instructor	Moodle activity modules of lesson and quiz	--do--	Asynchronous	CP, TP
Students interacting and thereby completing various exercises/assignments	Instructor	Moodle activity modules quiz and assignment	--do--	--do--	CP, TP
Students acting on immediate (during activity/task) and delayed (post-activity/task) feedback by the instructor	Instructor/Students	Moodle	--do--	--do--	CP, TP

Table 3: Student-student Interactions Modality

Students interacting with peers in collaborative tasks	Students	Microsoft Team and WhatsApp	To engage with the course contents and learn them, construct meanings, and build knowledge of the course concepts and thereby related competencies and skills	Synchronous	CP, SP
Students participating in forum discussions	Instructor/Students	Moodle Forum module	--do--	Asynchronous	CP, SP
Students chatting	Students	WhatsApp group	Students exchanging information, seeking help with technology issues and assignments related to other courses, suggesting solutions, and exchanging pleasantries	Asynchronous/ Synchronous	SP

experience. I facilitated learning of the contents through students' interaction with the contents, through collaborative tasks and through providing immediate and delayed feedback. The feedback was both quantitative and qualitative.

5) Flexibility and choice were used as basic principles. The submission deadlines were flexible. Further, students were given the option of medium for their responses on tasks. They had the alternatives to provide their responses to tasks in text or audio/video mode. The students also had the option to reattempt an assignment after my feedback to improve their grades. Around 30% of the students opted for this choice.

6) For collaborative tasks/assignments, they were provided with a teamwork structure. This structure required students meeting regularly till the completion of the task/assignment. They were also required to submit a journal detailing the process of their participation and involvement in the tasks.

7) WhatsApp was used as a backchannel for communication. The students used WhatsApp for sending messages of urgent nature to each other and me. I did not impose any time boundaries on the messages. The students could send a message any time they needed, and I responded immediately. The immediate response was necessary as the students were doing most of the task asynchronously at their convenient time so immediate responses facilitated their progress with the task if they were stuck or could not make progress.

RESEARCH METHOD

After taking deliberate actions to create a SoC for a better learning experience during the 14 weeks of remote course delivery, it was important to know how building a SoC was beneficial for the students. For this purpose, a qualitative method was adopted for data collection and analysis.

Data Collection and Analysis

At the end of the course, the students completed a seven-item open-ended feedback survey. The items in the survey were focused on the students' experience and satisfaction. The survey was created in google forms and the link was hosted on the LMS for students' access. All responses were collected anonymously. Students were sent an email about the purpose of the survey. They were also provided assurances about the purpose of the survey, the anonymity and confidentiality issues, and about the fact that the responses would not have any bearing on their course grades.

The responses to the survey were thematically analysed. The focus of thematic analysis is to identify themes in data. Thematic analysis is useful for both deductive and inductive data analysis. As the aim in the case of my course was exploratory, therefore, thematic analysis was appropriate. The data were analysed through a six steps process as suggested by Creswell (2009). The first step in Creswell is organising and preparing data for analysis. This also includes the process of transcribing data. In the case of this paper, as the data was already collected in a text form, thus transcribing was not needed. However, data was extracted from google forms site and organised in 27 individual files in a folder on my laptop representing the sets of responses by the 27 course participants. In the second step of the analysis, data sets were read to gain a general sense of the contents and to form a general idea of its meaning. Coding was the next step. The responses were categorised, and each category was assigned a label. Next, these categories were collapsed into themes. As a penultimate step, the themes and description were interrelated and in

the final step, the meanings of the themes were interpreted. The entire process of data analysis was done manually.

FINDINGS & DISCUSSION

The data analysis revealed that the action taken to foster a SoC benefited the students in mainly five ways. The following are the details of students' perceptions.

Overcoming Isolation

Isolation is considered a negative factor of learning in the cyber environment. It leads to other issues like a distraction, student burnout and therefore lack of student persistence and even dropout from a course (Rovai, 2001) and also to a feeling of alienation (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Isolation is also blamed for lower student satisfaction (Contreras-Castillo, Favela, Pérez- Fragoso, & Santamaría-del-Angel, 2004). The SoC, that I strived to foster in my remote course, was instrumental in helping students to overcome their sense of isolation and loneliness. After leaving the campus, they lost physical contact with their peers. However, the opportunities of interactions for social and cognitive purposes helped to reconnect them with their peers again and reduced their sense of isolation resulting from lockdown and social distancing regimes.

> *When I left campus and came home, I suddenly felt lost. I could not go out and had no friends in my home place. On campus, I would get help from my classmates but there was no one at home to help me. I did not know what to do. But then the way Mr Hamid connected us to each other and kept us remain in constant connection with each other. We could ask each other and our teacher through WhatsApp or Team any time we wanted. So, after a few days I did not even feel that I was away from campus.* (Student 12)

Motivation

Hartnett and Hartnett (2016) considers motivation as a pivotal factor in maintaining learning and achievement in cyber environment. Motivation is related to "what we learn, how we learn, and when we choose to learn" (Hartnett, 2012, p.29). Sense of belonging and community plays an important role in sustaining students motivation (Bennett & Monds, 2008). My greatest concern at the start of remote teaching was students' monotony and the consequent loss of motivation. However, through maintaining a SoC, I was able to keep students motivated throughout the semester.

> *After our first meeting with the course teacher, I suddenly felt this course is going to be good. Then I wanted to complete every task of this course as soon as possible. If I scored low, I wanted to redo the task. They did not tire me. It was very interesting to complete work alone in Moodle and then work together with my friends on joint tasks. I did not feel even if I spent three hours completing some tasks.* (Student 22)

Sense of Achievement and Learning

Research indicates a significant correlation between SoC and students' achievement and learning in an online environment (Trespalacios & Perkins, 2016). Similarly, in the context of my course, SoC resulted in a heightened sense of achievement among students. Data analysis indicated that students felt that they learnt more during the 14 weeks of remote teaching.

> *I was learnt better. The tasks we did were really good. I learnt so much from them. When I started the course, I thought then what, another course and that too online. I did not want to sort of attend at the beginning. But then when I completed my first week, I realised that it was not the same other thing. There was a lot of new information and this was all in Moodle. Our teacher was not even teaching us online like other teachers. We were doing everything ourselves on Moodle and in group work. Even after first week, I could do some other assignments for other courses because of the information I leant in this course.* (Student 8)

Collaborative Skills

Previous research suggests a positive correlation between sense of community and collaboration, meaning thereby that an increased SoC develops to a positive attitude towards collaboration (Chatterjee & Correia, 2020). The data analysis for this study indicated development. The SoC experience led to improved collaborative skills. The students learnt how to manage collaboration and cooperation with their peers better and more effectively.

> *The best thing for me was working with each other. On campus, teachers put us in groups and teams and then tell us how to work together and what to do next. But in this course, teacher just put us in groups and left us to work our other things and we have to do it because then we needed to report all these arrangement in out journal. We learnt how to work together while not together in one place. How to set up out meetings; how to distribute work among us; how to follow each other and give comments and feedback. It was a great experience and better than what we did in classroom. I hated group work there but now I really like it.* (Student 3)

Engagement

Research reveals an interrelatedness in SoC, engagement and satisfaction. Students with a higher sense of community show better engagement with learning (Young & Bruce, 2011). The data for this study also revealed greater intellectual and emotional engagement. The course participants spent more than expected time on the course activities and collaborative tasks. There were very fewer instances of missing deadlines or not completing work. The quality of responses to the tasks was also indicative of students' engagement. It was also visible from students' feedback.

> *When I knew that we'll be attending this course online, I was really disappointed. I said online, what, I'll sit like a zombie and listen to teacher on screen. But after the first week I felt I cannot leave the*

> *screen. I was always on Moodle trying to complete tasks and do more. In group tasks, I wanted to discuss more and more with my group fellows about the task and trying to come up with the best group assignment. Our teacher took us along in the course in a manner that we wanted to learn more and more.* (Student 20)

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to show how a SoC was developed in a remotely delivered course and how it was beneficial for the course participants. The findings show that the effort to create a SoC in my remotely taught course yielded positive effects for students. It not only helped them overcome their initial negative feelings towards remote online teaching but supported them emotionally and cognitively. They had an enhanced learning experience and greater satisfaction as can be deduced from some of the excerpts from the students' feedback quoted above. Further, there was a greater cohesion as a group throughout the semester as is evident from the parts of the excerpts related to students' collaborative work. It shows the importance of SoC in all remote teaching and learning contexts as was necessitated by the COVID-19 related lockdowns and closures. It is therefore imperative that instructors take deliberate and purposive measures to foster a SoC in their courses to keep students engaged, motivated, and satisfied with their learning and achievement.

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