

Importance of Developing Community in Distance Education Courses

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Abstract

The separation of student and instructor is the core characteristic of distance education (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 28), contributing to one of the biggest challenges to distance education—attrition (Dueber & Misanchuk, 2001, p. 2). By the very nature of distance education, students are different locations from one another and their instructor. The instructor's challenge is figuring out how to make students feel connected and able to succeed in this new learning environment. The development of a sense of community is an effective and efficient way to help ensure the success of the distance education program and can directly address the challenge of distance education attrition. By developing a sense of community, an instructor can create an environment that is conducive to student success. This importance was demonstrated when the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill Department of Romance Languages and Literatures (ROML) transitioned their introductory Spanish course to a hybrid model.

Keywords: attrition, community, distance education, hybrid online environment, sense of community, student perceptions

The Importance of Developing Community

Online education is a double-edged sword. It provides an opportunity, unparalleled in the history of education, for students to learn at a distance and on their own schedules. That opportunity can come at a large price, however, with the feeling of isolation. If the online course design has been structured in such a way as to allow students asynchronous access to course material, then this can make students feel as if they are learning the material on their own without

the benefits of the shared experiences of their peers. For example, the first day of a traditional higher education course typically acts as an orientation, involving some type of icebreaker activity that allows for students and instructors to get to know one another. Instructors seek to find out more about students' personalities and their experiences in other courses. Students attempt to learn more about their classmates and discover common interests. The instructor goes over the course requirements and reviews the course syllabus. The intention is to let students know what it will take to be successful in the course. For many distance education programs this type of first day orientation is not possible. This example illustrates why it is important for instructors in an online environment to take a different approach to their teaching methods and seek new ways to develop a sense of community for their students.

The effort to develop a sense of community is important for any course, but more so in an online environment. A sense of community allows students to feel connected not only to their instructors and classmates but also to the content itself. Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) stated that a lack of peer connections will lead students to "... [feel] more isolated and stressed than those who are more active; exchanges with other students become vital for validating their experiences and for overcoming isolation" (Dueber & Misanchuk, 2001, p.4). In traditional classroom settings, students know exactly where and when they need to be in class. Instructors are able to build their syllabi around these schedules. Instructors also can observe visual cues from their students to determine whether or not they understand the content and can make appropriate adjustments quickly. In an online environment, the separation between the instructor and the students requires a different approach to the way material is pre-

sented to ensure that students understand the expectations of the instructor and accurately perceive their own progress in the course.

In an online learning environment, the separation of student and instructor can lead to feelings of isolation which can adversely impact the student's perceptions of learning and the actual learning itself. Some students enter distance education courses fearful that they will not be able to learn in the environment. In doing so, they create an internal barrier to learning and place themselves at an immediate disadvantage. These students will often say they cannot succeed in an online course because they identify with a specific type of learning method or style that they experience in a face-to-face environment, believing that it is not possible to utilize that learning style in the online learning environment. When these same students then struggle in the course, their struggle affirming their initial fear that they would not be successful in the course. Research shows that the more flexible students are in their learning styles, the more successful they will be in an online learning environment (Simonson et al., 2012, p. 73). In other words, students with minds open to the online learning environment will likely be more successful in the online course.

The Introductory Spanish Course Redesign Project

Background

The experience of ROML illustrates the necessity that instructors adapt to the unique challenges related to community that online instruction presents. The department faced demand for introductory Spanish courses that exceeded its available resources, in terms of both space and instructors. It investigated ways to meet this demand with its limited resources, and in the fall of 2006 began the process of transitioning its traditional introductory Spanish language course, Spanish 101—which consisted of four credit hours of face-to-face instruction—to a new teaching model that was a hybrid, or blended, model combining face-to-face instruction with online learning activities using an online textbook. This model would have the students meet face-to-face with their course instructor for one hour, spend an additional instructional hour in a small group of six to eight students—facilitated by an undergraduate peer group leader—and devote the remainder of the time to the online textbook. The peer instructors were carefully selected from students proficient in Spanish because of recent study abroad experiences or their experience growing up in Span-

ish-speaking homes. The pilot for the hybrid course would start in Fall 2007. The project team included both instructional designers, including the author, and core instructors. The team was further supported by the department chair, who himself was a proponent of using technology in language instruction.

This transition from four face-to-face contact hours to two face-to-face contact hours was met with heavy resistance from both students and instructors within the department. Behind the discontent was the sentiment that introductory language instruction could never be delivered successfully online. If it were not face-to-face, the argument went, students would not learn the basic language skills necessary to progress in the language program. The project team moved forward with the project despite the resistance. The first semester of this hybrid course was delivered on a pilot basis in the Fall 2007 semester, with five sections offered in the two-contact-hour format (hybrid) and an equal number of sections offered in the four-contact-hour format (traditional).

Evaluation of First Cohort of Hybrid Students

In this project the goal, in measuring success, was to determine whether students were disadvantaged in the hybrid version of the course versus the traditional version. To make this determination, there needed to be a control group and consistent criteria to apply to both of the groups. There was a slight difference in the course syllabus between the hybrid and traditional courses which resulted from the use of different textbooks. However, these two models did have common core assignments and assessments, and the pronunciation assignment and oral exam for both were conducted in front of the course professor and taped. An independent grader reviewed the oral pronunciation assignments as well as the oral exams and common sections on the final exam. The students were given the Sense of Community measure developed by John Schweitzer and others at Michigan State University (McKinney et al., 2006, p. 281). This instrument measures six variables which contribute to the sense of community—design, connection, participation, safety, support and empowerment (McKinney et al., 2006, pp. 282–83). McKinney et al. (2006) found that there was a relation between perception of learning and the sense of community (p. 283). This finding is consistent with the findings from the surveys given to the first hybrid course format cohort. Those students perceived that they were learning less (Figure 1) even though, when comparing performance on common assessments, they were on

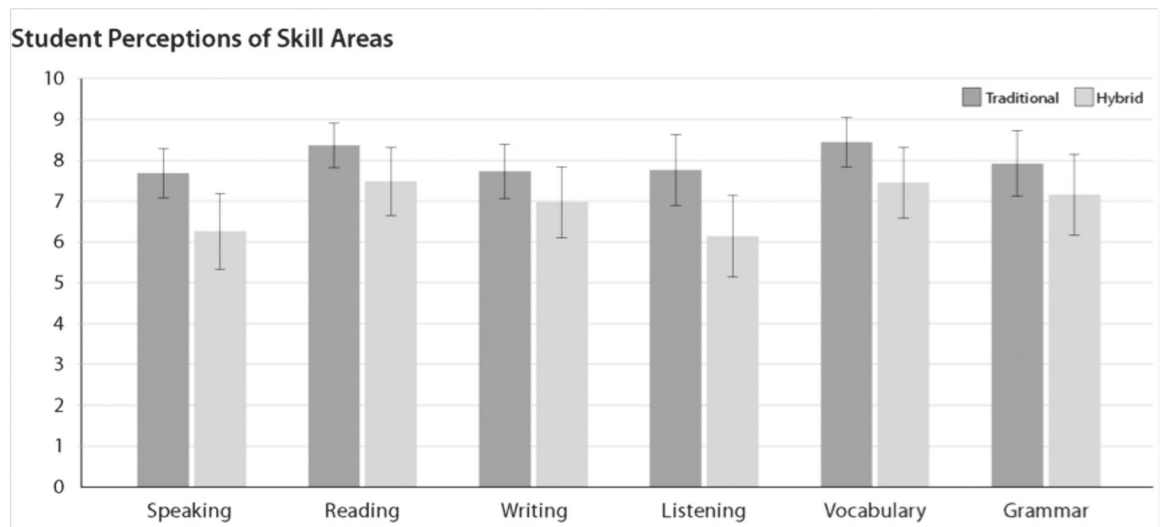


Figure 1: Graph shows the student perceptions of skill areas from Fall 2007 survey group. Data analysis completed by Bagley, E. (2008). Retrieved from the PowerPoint Presentation, "A New Model of Introductory Spanish" (2008).

average performing as well if not better than their peers in the traditional course (Figure 2).

Students in the hybrid classes performed slightly better on the writing exam than those in the control group, while students in the control group performed slightly better in pronunciation than those in the hybrid classes.

In this regard, the first year was certainly a success because the students in the hybrid classes were clearly not at a disadvantage. However, the survey identified a potential problem with

the course structure of the hybrid model, specifically with regard to student attitudes and sense of community. The hybrid students reported a lower degree of satisfaction with the course and a higher level of frustration (Figure 3) with the course than the students in the control group.

Students in the hybrid courses felt a significantly lower sense of community than their peers in the traditional course and a greater sense of community in their small groups (Figure 4).

This lower sense of community aligns with the high levels of frustration reported by the hybrid students. The instructors specifically designed the small groups to promote a greater sense of community among the students in the small groups, which contributed to the higher levels of sense of community in the small groups.

Overall, the students in the hybrid pilot seemed to enjoy the peer-led small-group sessions. In them, students were able to engage with a peer instructor in a small-group setting without instructor involvement, which likely contributed to their higher levels of comfort in this learning environment (Bagley & Henshaw, 2008, p. 3). While this component was well received, the project team was alarmed at the high levels of frustration with the course as a whole experienced by students in the hybrid model. While these results are consistent with what research shows for distance education courses, they were nonetheless disappointing for the project team. In a review of the results, it appeared that the students thought they were learning less because they had to do more learning on their own, leading to a sense of frustration. This frustration was creating an additional obstacle to their learning

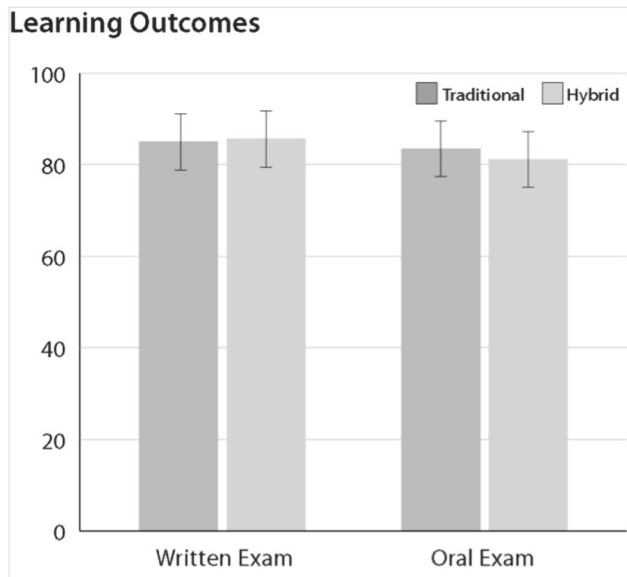


Figure 2: Graph shows the learning outcomes of students in the traditional and hybrid introductory courses from Fall 2007 survey group. Data analysis completed by Bagley, E. (2008). Retrieved from the PowerPoint Presentation, "A New Model of Introductory Spanish" (2008).

and thus impacting their perception of learning. The course put more responsibility on the student both to seek additional help and to manage his or her time to complete the assignments. Since many of the students were already feeling frustrated, they were not putting in the required time to complete the assignments and did not feel comfortable coming to the instructor with their questions or concerns. The instructors sought ways to lower levels of frustration and increase a sense of community while still maintaining a high level of academic performance.

Changing Perceptions

The first area that the project team wanted to address was the students' perception of the likelihood of successful learning, the seeming root of the vocal opposition to the hybrid course. The solution was to create two videos, to be shown to students prior to the start of the semester and then during the first day of instruction. The instructors from the pilot group identified two students who had done extremely well in the hybrid course and developed a set of questions to ask them. The students were interviewed on camera and asked to share their experiences with the course and provide tips for how to be successful in the course. The video began the process of creating community and broke down student resistance to the idea that it was possible to succeed in the course and that it could work if they put forth the necessary effort. Additionally, the experienced students helped to reinforce the time management tips that the instructors offered as part of their orientation to incoming students. The instructors also created their own introductory video that highlighted the reasons for the course structure and helped explain their expectations for the students in the course. These two videos were recorded and edited and posted on the course website.

Based on the feedback from the first cohort of students, the instructors determined that they were covering more material in the hybrid course than they were in the traditional course. This was a result of the need to use two different textbooks due to limitations in the existing technology. The instructors decided to cut the amount of material that was covered, adjust some of the online activities that had not worked as well as anticipated, and add more open-ended instructional activities through the online textbook. They also added a requirement for each student to attend two face-to-face office hour sessions with the instructor: a getting acquainted visit at the start of the semester and a follow-up after the first exam.

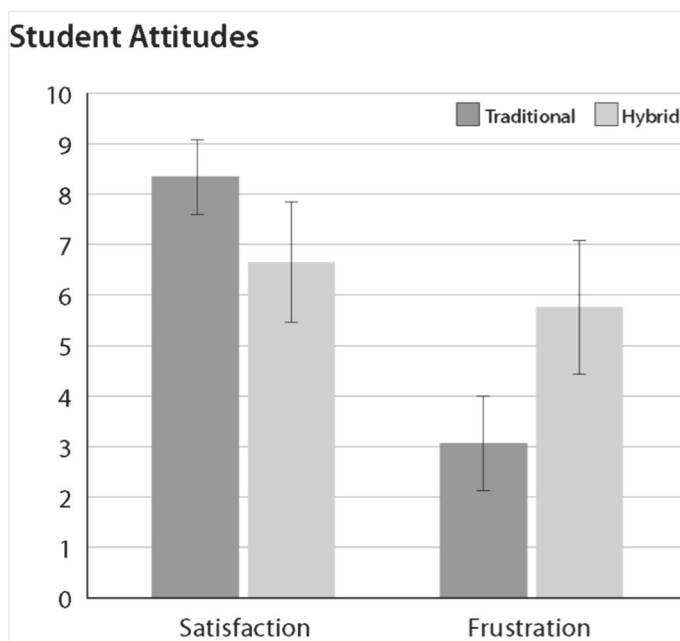


Figure 3: Graph shows the student attitudes from the traditional and hybrid courses from Fall 2007 survey group. Data analysis completed by Bagley, E. (2008). Retrieved from the PowerPoint Presentation, "A New Model of Introductory Spanish" (2008).

Finally, the instructors realized that they were not, as a group, in sync for the first class session. Some were using a traditional approach of having an orientation day; others were using the first day as an actual instruction day. They decided to create a consistent first day of class experience. All of the hybrid sections spent the first ten minutes watching the two videos and were given an opportunity to ask questions. Next, the instructor

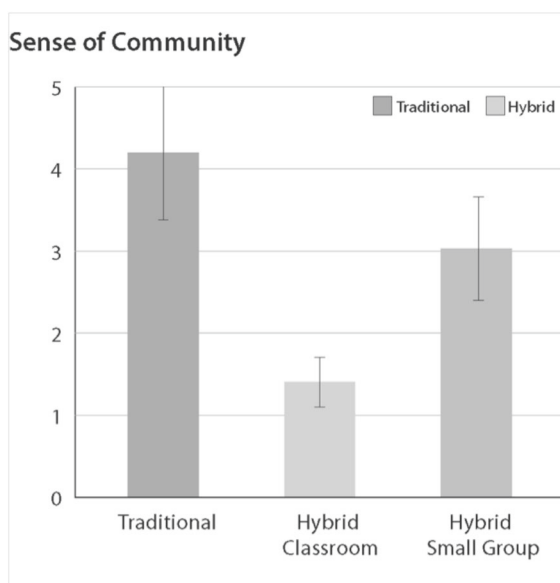


Figure 4: Graph shows the levels for sense of community compiled by using the Classroom Sense of Community Measure (McKinney et al., 2006) from fall 2007 survey group. Data analysis completed by Bagley, E. (2008). Retrieved from the PowerPoint Presentation, "A New Model of Introductory Spanish" (2008).

explained the syllabus and structure of the class and did an ice-breaker activity so the students could get to know one another better.

Fruits of Their Efforts

The same evaluation was given to the second cohort of hybrid students, with the results compared with a control group of traditional students. This second iteration showed that the sense of community was significantly higher than in the previous semester and that the student perceptions of learning were much better as well. The levels of frustration for the hybrid course were more aligned with the traditional course, while learning outcomes continued to show no statistical difference in performance between the two cohorts. The instructors believed that the use of the introductory videos and the emphasis on engaging the students from day one contributed greatly to the change in evaluation results. The project team also noticed a diminishment in vocal discontent both from peer instructors and students and that some previously oppositional colleagues were now advocates of using technology for introductory language courses. The success of the project demonstrated that it was in fact possible to deliver a successful introductory language course in a hybrid format and that students could in fact develop the necessary skills to advance to higher levels of language acquisition.

Conclusion

It is vitally important for course designers and instructors to work to recreate, as much as possible, in online courses, the sense of community that is created in a face-to-face classroom setting. Developing a sense of community requires additional work and a change in teaching approaches, but the benefits result in a greater level of satisfaction and achievement for students. There will, of course, never be a magic formula identified for how to create the perfect community for an online course, but instructors must experiment with ways to build a virtual cohort for their students. Introductory activities such as discussion forum ice-breakers, orientation videos, and testimonials from past successful students are all ways to help set the foundation for a classroom community. There are a number of problems with drawing direct conclusions from the Spanish language course example, including the fact that some variables could not be fully controlled. The case itself provides an initial study of the development of community in distance education courses, however. As online courses proliferate, course developers will have more data and opportuni-

ties to determine and compare what works and what does not in the online education setting. It is important that instructors understand that teaching in an online environment is a dynamic and fluid process that will likely take many iterations, even within a given term. The online environment can be flexible and presents an opportunity to completely shift the way instruction is approached. It is important for students to feel comfortable, and the more familiar students can feel in the virtual learning space, the more successful they can be. Creating community is the critical first step to being successful in an online learning environment and is a tool that many instructors overlook.

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