RELATIONAL LEARNING IN ONLINE EDUCATION: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNERS WITH DIGITAL TOOLS, ONLINE ENGAGEMENT, AND AUTHENTIC CONVERSATIONS

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Abstract

Statistics show that online learning is clearly poised to be a major part of the landscape of higher education for the foreseeable future (Allen & Seaman, 2017; Legon & Garrett, 2017). In the United States, 31.6% of students now take at least one distance education course, but perhaps the most remarkable figure is that the number of students studying on a campus has dropped by over one million between 2012 and 2016 academic years (Legon & Garrett, 2017). Although the advantages of offering online programs has been well documented (Burns, 2013; Xu & Jaggers, 2013) it is not always clear whether these programs effectively engage students and whether student experiences in these programs are comparable to those of their face-to-face counterparts. Lasater et al. (2016) point out that there are conflicting reports regarding the effectiveness of online programs, with some studies such as those by the US Department of Education (2010) suggesting that they perform quite well whereas others indicate a significant gap in quality between online and face-to-face programs.

Additionally, students in online programs experience issues that are unique to the structure of such programs including experiencing a sense of isolation as well as limited opportunities to interact with their instructors and to get to know their peers. For example, Gardner and Gopaul (2012) found that professional doctoral students often struggled to balance the demands of full-time employment and family with graduate school. Additionally, their part time status as doctoral students led to further struggles with a sense of isolation and non-belonging with the programs in which they were affiliated. Interestingly however many students choose to continue in these programs despite their drawbacks, given the advantages of access and convenience that they afford. In this presentation the authors will describe the strategies they have implemented in order to raise program quality as well as build a sense of community among the approximately 100 students enrolled in an online professional doctoral program in a large public university in the United States.

The program described in this presentation is not unique in being delivered completely online: driven by demand, many programs choose to offer professional doctorates in either completely online or hybrid formats, to meet the needs of their students who typically are mid-career individuals with demanding full-time jobs, families and many other professional commitments. In addition, many of these programs are structured to allow students to pursue their doctorates as part-time students. The combination of an online delivery system and support for part-time enrolment enables many non-traditional students from across the globe to undertake the challenging task of pursuing a doctoral degree. However, this also creates a unique set of challenges and requirements for such programs, foremost of which is the need to maintain quality. In light of the above the program has adopted three major strategies to support their online learners, namely supplementing online instruction with carefully designed face-to-face meetings that promote both quality as well as community, the regular use of videoconferencing to deliver advising as well as program updates and the use of social networking software, specifically designed to build a sense of community and to facilitate the easy integration of current content in online courses.

Keywords: Online learning, high impact practices, community of learners, online doctoral program, online engagement.