Promoting Sense of Belonging in Online Learning Communities of Inquiry in Accredited Courses

Susi Peacock
University of West England

John Cowan
Edinburgh Napier University

Abstract
A sense of belonging (SoB) is a valued concept in campus-based learning, being firmly linked with improved student attainment, increased learner satisfaction, and reduced attrition rates. Some researchers, echoing the work of Maslow (1962), even assert that learners cannot fulfill the goals of higher education without acquiring SoB. This study recognizes that SoB can help promote and consolidate online learning and seeks to suggest how tutors may nurture online learners' SoB. An adapted version of the Community of Inquiry framework (CoIF) is used to frame specific suggestions for action in accredited courses. This revision of the well-known framework focuses on the overlapping intersections of the three presences, which are also known as *influences*: *trusting*, *meaning-making*, and *deepening understandings*. Guidance illustrated with examples is provided for each influence, leading to particular suggestions that concentrate on the promotion of a sense of belonging as an important aspect of the online tutor's facilitative activities.

Keywords: sense of belonging, online learning, Community of Inquiry framework, influences

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Author Note
Dr. Susi Peacock is now working at the University of West of England as Head of Digital Education.

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Importance to Learners of Having Sense of Belonging

Many published definitions can be found on the concept of sense of belonging (SoB), in an educational context. One cited frequently, and to which we subscribe, is provided by Goodenow (1993a, p. 25), who considers SoB to comprise feelings of

> being accepted, valued, included, and encouraged by others (teachers and peers) in the academic classroom and of feeling oneself to be an important part of the life

> and activity of the class. More than simple perceived liking or warmth, it also involves support and respect for personal autonomy and for the student as an individual.

For learners, SoB comprises two key attributes. First, it involves feelings of being accepted, needed, and valued. Second, it includes feelings of fitting in and being connected to a group, class, subject, institution, or all of these (Goodenow 1993b; Tovar & Simon, 2010; Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015).

Educational researchers state that "the need for belonging is one of the most important needs for all students to function well *in all types of learning environment* [emphasis added]" (Jackson, Cashmore, & Scott, 2010). From as early as 1962, Maslow noted in his psychological hierarchy that the need to belong was more important that the requirement for knowledge and understanding (Maslow, 1962). "Love and belongingness needs" are in the middle of his motivational hierarchy and will not emerge until basic needs, such as food and safety, are satisfied. According to Maslow (1962), belonginess will take precedence over esteem and self-actualization. Thus, learners, whether face-to-face or online, will want to feel comfortable and safe in their learning environments and respected by both peers and tutors before they can attend to their studies.

Having, or not having, SoB clearly will make a significant impact on learners, who we hope can flourish in online educational spaces. Having a connection and significant relationships with tutors and peers while developing their confidence, self-efficacy and self-esteem will certainly encourage them to develop and fulfill their personal and professional goals. However, all too often such learners report feelings of loneliness and anxiety in what they perceive to be an alien online learning space and are underconfident about their skills and capabilities to cope when studying online (Baxter, 2012). For instance, many learners find the thought of posting on an online discussion forum to be daunting and view online group work as threatening (Baxter, 2012; Khan, Egbue, Palkie, & Madden, 2017; Whittaker, 2015). Such feelings, if dominant, certainly can inhibit a learner's SoB, which will then impact their ability to succeed.

Definitions of Key Terms Used Throughout the Paper

Two terms/concepts feature prominently in this paper. We are conscious that usage and practice may differ internationally, so we define below the terms that we have used in this study, as they are important to the argument that we are advancing.

Tutor A *tutor* is a staff member appointed to both support the creative planning of a course before learning activities commence, and in the facilitation of learning during the course (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). This student-centered facilitation may take the form of comments, suggestions, prompts, feedback, or feedforward; this approach to supporting learning is neither directive nor didactic but firmly rooted in the principles of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2009). Critically, the tutor helps learners to engage in the tasks that are required of them but does not direct the specific actions taken by the learners. The tutor's role is to support learners in developing the skills and abilities required to fulfill the task but not to lead or interfere with the execution of the task.

Feedforward is a concept and term in common use for over 20 years to describe the provision of constructive commentary to learners, derived from their recent activities or work. It complements or replaces feedback centered on judgments of past activity and concentrates on advice for future activity (Baker & Zuvela, 2013; Nicol, 2010; Walker & Hobson, 2014).

Sense of Belonging in Online Learning

Garrison (2017), writing as an established authority on online communities of inquiry, explicitly defines such learning as "a collaborative experience, which includes a sense of belonging and acceptance in a group with common interests" (p. 35). For tertiary learners, the importance of having a strong SoB to their institutions, courses, teachers, and peer groups has been rated as a "key to academic success and persistence" (Vaccaro et al., 2015, p. 670). The link between SoB and improved academic engagement and achievement, heightened self-confidence, and self-efficacy has been reported frequently (Freeman, Anderman, & Jensen, 2007; Ostermann, 2000; Thomas, 2012). Some researchers, resonating with the work of Maslow (1962), have even asserted that SoB is essential if higher order outcomes, such as understanding and self-actualization, are to be fulfilled (Strayhorn, 2012).

A limited amount of research has had a particular focus on online learning and SoB. Most notable have been Thomas et al. (2014) who helpfully provide an informed overview of tutor and learner perspectives of online learning and SoB. This work emphasizes the importance of SoB for all learners, which could lead to greater learner satisfaction. The authors stress the importance of peer collaboration and active engagement while acknowledging that lack of community building may limit SoB and even increase attrition rates. Tutors report difficulty in creating and maintaining a community, especially through online discussions. Critical was curriculum design to promote SoB, including embedding collaboration into assessment, which led to social interactions and SoB.

As Laurillard (2012) reminds her readers, the imperative for learning in this digital era is still to develop students' personal knowledge and capabilities. She forcefully points out that our understanding of basic learning as an iterative and interactive process "still references the work of Dewey, Piaget and Vygotsky, nearly a century later *and remains unchanged!* [emphasis added]" (Laurillard, 2012, p. 1). Nevertheless, she notes, in an equally forceful way, that what *has* changed with online teaching is how formal learning is enabled and how students are motivated. That change is particularly apparent in tutor–learner relationships, which are considered in this paper to promote online learners' SoB.

Thus, we respond here to the current sectoral interest in SoB by seeking to identify specifically how tutors can act to promote SoB on the part of their online learners. We also write with a keen awareness that obtaining evaluative data identifying the causes and impacts of SoB online has yet to be attempted in extant research. Therefore, the intended audience for this paper is scholars, practitioners, researchers, administrators, and policy makers involved with online education—that is, those who value generating SoB in learners.

Influences on Online Learning Experience in a Community of Inquiry

Our suggestions here, framed around the approach to collaborative online learning, were published in 2016 as an adaptation of the well-known Community of Inquiry framework (CoIF; see Figure 1). This revision purely affects nomenclature—that is, the framework still comprises the three original overlapping areas, or presences, termed social, cognitive, and tutoring (see Table 1). The last title replaces Garrison's *teaching* to encompass learner-directed learning. As discussed in previous work (Peacock & Cowan, 2016), we have departed from *teaching presence* to *tutoring presence*, which is more compatible with student-centered learning, to which much of our work is committed. We also believe that this term aligns more closely with Lipman's ideas about the "teacher" in a community of inquiry; Lipman's work was heavily influential in the original conceptualization of the CoIF (Dron & Anderson, 2004). We accept that this term is more attuned

with our background in the European higher education sector, which has moved toward the well-established concepts and practices referred to as *tutoring* and *facilitation* and away from more authoritarian, instructional approaches to teaching.

In our presentation of the adapted version (Peacock & Cowan, 2016), we focused on amplifying how the intersections between the presences can make important contributions to learners' educational experiences in an online community of learning. We suggest that pedagogical emphasis on activity in these three aspects of the established model strengthens their potential to be effective for learning. We call these overlapping areas *influences*, crediting them with having a major impact on eventual educational experiences at the heart of the model. We name these influences *trusting*, *meaning-making*, and *deepening understandings*, and we explain the rationale for each in our paper. Each influence in learner-directed learning depends significantly on the exercise of the tutor's facilitative role; and each contributes to the development of SoB. This contribution is explored here through illustrative examples that lead to specific suggestions, concentrating for our present purpose on the promotion of SoB as an important aspect of the tutor's activities.

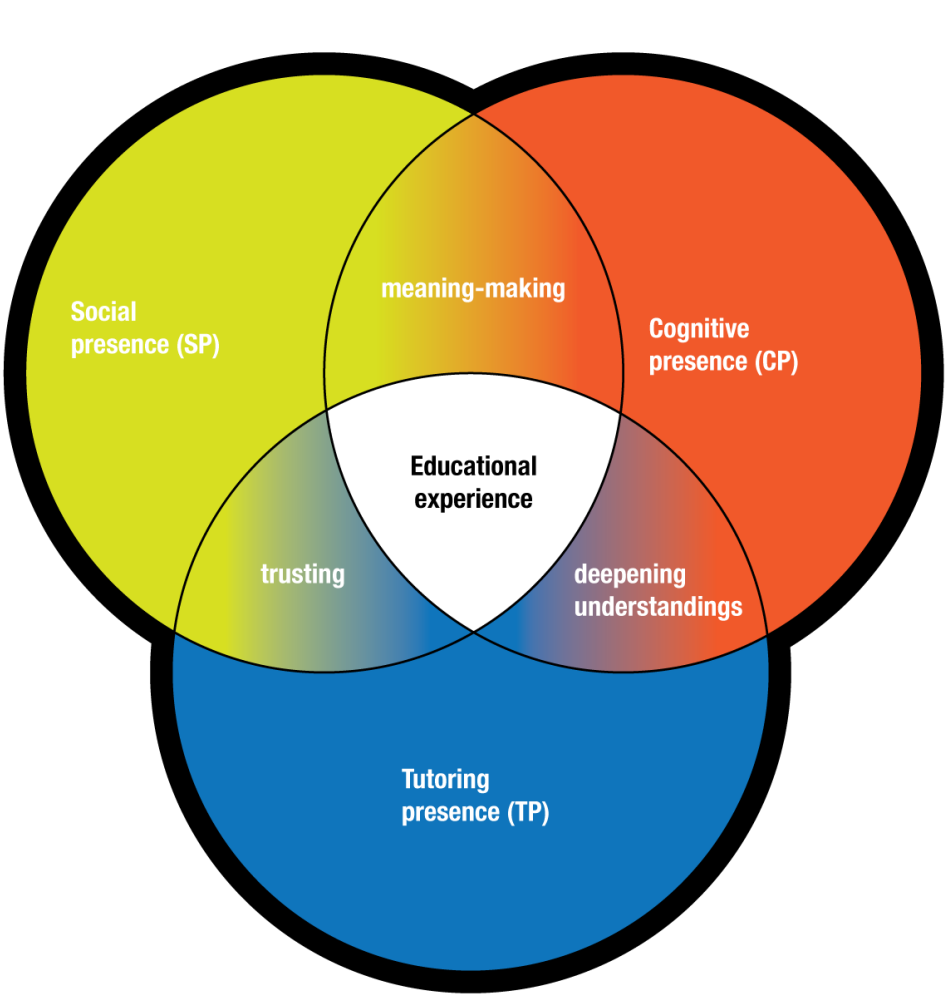

Figure 1. An adapted version of the Community of Inquiry framework by Peacock and Cowan (2016). Reproduced with permission from the *International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning*. This version was developed from Garrison (2011) and reproduced with permission from Routledge.

Table 1

Summary of the Three Presences in the Community of Inquiry Framework

Social presence	Social presence focuses on developing open, meaningful communications between learners and with tutors, so that they gain a sense of being connected to and engaging with other sentient beings who have a history and a genuine concern for the community (Kehrwald, 2008; Oztok & Brett, 2011). Collaborative online learners need to feel that they relate, as real people, to those with whom they interact online to develop feelings of trust, being valued, and mattering (Garrison, 2017; Palloff & Pratt, 2010; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010).
Cognitive presence	Cognitive presence encompasses the activities through which participants in communities of inquiry can make meanings and deepen their understandings through constructive individual and group dialogues, including peer and tutor feedback, individual and group reflections, and the use of resources (Garrison, 2017).
Tutoring presence	Tutoring presence refers to the ever-present facilitative role provided by a caring, trusting, and engaged tutor. Tutors will be involved in the design and planning of program activities to help learners achieve learning objectives. The tutor will also facilitate learning during the course, leading to individual and group meaning making and deepening of understandings (Garrison, 2017). Hence, a tutor in the CoIF should strive to establish "interpersonal relationships and a sense of belonging which are important to an academic endeavor" (Garrison 2017, p. 37) through the design and facilitation of both social and cognitive presences (Akyol & Garrison, 2011).

In this framework and context, SoB contributes to a sense of community, and, consequently, features significantly within social presence.

Our Perspectives in This Paper

This paper originates from our belief that it is highly desirable in any online learning program to nurture SoB on the part of learners to promote and consolidate their learning experiences. We claim here that the impact of collegially supportive and facilitative tutor–learner relationships can make a powerful contribution to achieving this desirable outcome (Laurillard, 2012; Rudestam & Schoenholtz-Read, 2010; Cowan, 2014; Sutton & Basiel, 2014). Much of the recent research into SoB stresses the importance that learners place on their relationships with a caring tutor who knows them and is enthusiastic, friendly, encouraging, helpful, and, most importantly, can be trusted (Freeman et al., 2007; Hoffman, Richmond, Morrow, & Salomone, 2002–2003; Hurtado, Alvarado, & Guillermo-Wann, 2012; Strayhorn, 2012; Whitten, James, & Roberts, 2017). Such facilitation will concentrate on nudging learners toward exercising and developing potential as yet unleashed, thereby advancing them into their zones of proximal

development (Vygotsky, 1978). For example, Cowan recalls the case of a tutor/counsellor in the UK's Open University who sustained online learners with an exceptionally high retention rate, first in the sparsely populated Western Isles of Scotland and then later in the busier south of Scotland. On concluding their studies, many of this tutor's students wrote appreciatively to management, emphasizing that her meaningful, caring contacts, especially occurring around critical dates in the academic calendar, exerted a powerful impact on their progress. She cared about their difficulties, and they trusted her to advise and encourage them to be the best that she knew they could be. She encapsulated for them their powerful SoB in the online courses of which they were members, using a style that we hope readers will emulate.

Setting for Our Illustrative Examples

We have collaborated in this paper by integrating two distinct, and we hope useful and complementary, experiences. Peacock contributes, as a senior academic in an educational development unit in a niche university in Scotland, wherein she also tutors online in accredited courses. Consequently, her standpoint is informed by awareness of the potential, challenges and constraints of current efforts to develop effective online learning. Cowan has been tutoring online for 30 years in accredited courses, during which he has been also been enrolled somewhere annually as a genuine online learner to further his own professional development, occasionally on a MOOC. He contributes here both as a facilitative online tutor in accredited courses and, for our final example, as an active online learner, nowadays on massive open online courses (MOOCs). Together, we address the tutor's role in relation to each influence in turn.

Promoting Learners' Sense of Belonging Through the Trusting Influence

We have labeled the overlap between social presence and tutoring presence as the *trusting influence*, as "communities of inquiry are highly dependent upon establishing trust" (Garrison, 2017, p. 22). Trust originates in, and then is sustained by, SoB, echoing the work of Maslow (1962). We have found that trust among peers and with their tutors is the acknowledged foundation for effective online learning communities (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). In such settings, Garrison maintains that his teaching presence (our tutoring presence) should first and foremost set out to establish a "sense of belonging and security" (Garrison, 2017, p. 114). He emphasizes planning for the creation of open communications and trust, asserting that "students must feel they belong if they are to form a cohesive community of inquiry" (Garrison, 2017, p. 115). The nature, type, and tones of tutor communications with a community can greatly help to create a trusting, caring, and encouraging environment.

Illustrative Examples in Accredited Online Courses

Cowan tries, as an online tutor, to be the first to visit any shared online learning space. He informally leaves a short, welcoming greeting and quickly departs. This corresponds with and amplifies Wildflower's advice (2010, p. 393) to check in on online realms frequently, if only briefly. In recent program reviews, learners have acknowledged appreciation of his slight, but clearly significant, efforts, such as in this comment: "You cared enough to come to meet us (online) before we arrived. That set the tone for my course experience." A Chinese student newly studying in Europe noted, "I was scared about how the course expected me to plan my skills development. Your very first email convinced me I could trust you to help, if I confessed my very basic needs." Thus, SoB is a natural precursor to developing trusting relationships.

As a module leader of postgraduate studies by over 40 students, Peacock provides a short introductory video outlining her course and ensuring that learners know who she is, what she looks like, and how she can be contacted. Her language is informal and friendly; she concentrates on establishing a welcoming tone from the outset. She then launches an icebreaker activity within the online discussions area, wherein learners frankly share their current learning experiences pertaining to the subject and their apprehensions in relation to forthcoming tasks. Soon, they can build their confidence in online discussions, establish meaningful connections with peers, and develop personal relationships. As Garrison (2017) states, "The more we know about other members of the community, the more trustful and responsive we become in terms of academic discourse" (p. 45). Subsequently, Peacock contributes short, friendly video or audio responses to confirm that posts by learners, who are identified by name, have been read, and she genuinely offers reasoned praise when peers have responded to each other constructively and have moved discussions forward. From time to time, she gently challenges learners, asking them to revisit their ideas, role modelling the type of responses to each other that should be hoped for within a constructively interactive community. Ultimately, it is her objective that her learners should grow to feel a strong SoB to and identification with a collaborative educational community that is respectful, in which dialogic debates can occur free of intimidation (Garrison, 2013, p. 3). Analysis of her learners' discussion posts reveals that they feel that they do, indeed, matter and that they feel accepted, respected, and valued in a group whose opening activities have been planned and facilitated with that objective in mind.

Cowan facilitatively tutored 35–40 Taiwanese undergraduate students each year online on English as a foreign language, the objective of which was to enhance their critical thinking skills (Chiu & Cowan, 2012). Initially, he simply identified and praised examples of sound reasoning among the discussion board posts, explaining which features were commendable. His impact on the quality of discussions and the reasoning contained therein was discernible but slight. He changed tactics and devoted most of his allotted time to individual emails, as noted by Palloff and Pratt (2010, p. 372). When he sensed that a student writer might have sound reasoning to contribute to the discussions, he would send a short email message expressing genuine confidence in that learner's ability. He empathized with the learner's apprehension and lack of confidence and set out to bolster the learner's self-confidence in his or her thinking and ability to share thoughts effectively. Using an assortment of prompting styles and soft scaffolding (An, 2014, pp. 42–44), he actively but gently nudged learners to venture into their zones of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). The discussion board activity then changed radically. Posts containing deeply reasoned thinking appeared, and polite but firmly reasoned disagreements led to genuine debate. Two students joined Cowan in writing up this transformation, using comparative data drawn from discussion board posts (Chen, Chou & Cowan, 2014). They were individually clear that the burgeoning of creative thinking and active discussion had arisen as a consequence of tutor–learner relationships in which the learners' affective needs were given explicit priority, with emphasis placed on promoting self-efficacy through personal feedforward (Cowan, 2015). They concluded that the progression of learning in a collaborative and interactive online community can be established and maintained, while boosting performance (Laurillard, 2012, pp. 31–33), by sustaining a keen SoB associated with personally valued and valid self-efficacy beliefs.

General Suggestions for Promotion of SoB in the Trusting Influence

The facilitative tutor's role in promoting trusting, open, and meaningful interactions, together with a steadily developing SoB into a community of inquiry, contributes markedly to the

emerging learning experience. Learners need to develop strong feelings of being welcomed, accepted, needed, and valued. For example, this can be elicited by the tutor initiating contacts in the early stages of the community's formation, and by anticipating and then engaging with affective needs before they emerge or are declared. The tutor also may commend valuable individual contributions in detail and by name, and subsequently promote their qualities by modeling and establishing frank and helpful interactions as a norm within the community (Garrison, 2017).

Promoting Learners' Sense of Belonging Through the Meaning-Making Influence

The overlap of social presence and cognitive presence is principally concerned with the meaning making on which the efforts of communities of inquiry should be concentrated. Such communities are based upon the premise that "learning in an educational context is a social enterprise" that is socially worthwhile and personally meaningful (Garrison, 2013, p. 2). Contributing collaboratively to the meaning-making process promotes learners' sense of self-worth, encourages feelings of mattering and connection with the community, and promotes SoB. In this context, meaning making is a joint responsibility that is dependent on learners working interdependently. It will be stimulated by opportunities for relevant and collaborative interactions and the use of effective loops that enable constructive peer feedforward.

As indicated by Table 1, the tutor's presence is not directly involved in this influence, other than to advise, suggest, and facilitate relevant skills. Therefore, this section mainly is concerned with the tutor's role in aiding the community throughout this influence by facilitating the development and exercise of higher level capabilities involved in engaging with demand for meaning making.

Illustrative Examples in Accredited Online Courses

Peacock asks postgraduate learners in one course of 25 students studying an introduction to learning technologies to work in groups to develop an artifact pertaining to the subject of specialism—which is learning and technologies. Learners work collaboratively over a period of 10 weeks, exploring topics such as blended learning, MOOCs, the flipped classroom, and online learning. The activity is structured to nurture and harness SoB. Learners are provided with only minimum guidance, such as the maximum length of the artifact and the date for submission, together with some signposting to resource materials. The group may request support from the tutor.

Learners engage in shared, open, and constructive discussions, within which their SoB develops as they collaboratively plan to select and use a variety of technologies. Building on their social presence created through the icebreaker activities, they offer honest and constructive feedback to each other, informing and shaping the development of the artifact. The outcome of the collaborative endeavor is mutual meaning making—a guide for academics presented in a range of technologies, including Prezi, Pinterest, PiktoChart, and Pixton. Analysis of individual reflective assessments has indicated that learners believe that, during this activity, they have developed higher level cognitive understandings; interpersonal capabilities, such as teamwork; self-confidence as online learners; and feelings of self-worth, connectedness, and SoB.

General Suggestions for Promotion of SoB in the Meaning-Making Influence

Meaning-making in learner-directed collaborations depends upon the exercise of higher level cognitive and interpersonal capabilities. Generally, considerable scope exists for further

development of these abilities among most learners, whether undergraduate or postgraduate. Learner engagement in group activities can support this development and meaning making for both the individual and the group, leading to a sense of worth and mattering, and further promoting the SoB. Making that development purposeful and significant depends, to a great extent, on constructive and timely feedforward, as well as effective group work, nurturing a meaningful SoB in a community supported by a facilitating tutor. This is where feelings of fitting in and being connected to the group, subject, and even the institution effectively contribute to collaborative learning.

Promoting Learners' SoB Through the Deepening Understandings Influence

This final influence, combining tutoring and cognitive presences, embodies the tutors' design for and facilitation of individual and group dialogues, their provision of opportunities for tutor and peer feedback and, thus, encouragement of reflections to deepen understandings. Such engagements can strengthen the attendant SoB to the community responsible for accruing emergent understandings and echoing Garrison's belief (cited above, 2013, p. 2) that collaborative learning is both socially and individually worthwhile. In this section, we address three features that could help deepen learner understandings and SoB in communities of inquiry.

First, tutors should ensure that learners can source and engage with appropriate resources. Course teams may wish to develop well-designed cognitive maps, informing self-directed navigation of materials and provisions. Thus, from the outset, they can render the online learning spaces a friendly place with which learners can develop a connection without feeling marginalized or ineffective. Effective maps help learners find out what they need to know about their programs. They certainly will make straightforward queries initially (e.g., "What do I have to do to pass?" or "What am I expected to read?") and will do so at their convenience rather than follow a tutor's direction. They soon will progress to considering such questions as "What is the current thinking on topic *x*?" or "What reservations have been expressed about *y*?" and will look for data to answer such questions. The maps should be constructed carefully so that, during interactions with them, learners will feel SoB within the mapped area of activities. An important element of such a map for online learners will be an induction space in which they can register any concerns they may have regarding online learning, especially concerning their abilities to study successfully in what they may view as an alien environment, generating emotional issues with which they must cope (Cleveland-Innes & Campbell, 2012).

Second, it also will be necessary for tutors to plan reflective activities that will prompt learners to engage metacognitively in consolidating their meaning making and deepening understandings. Reflections at this level should go beyond the simple recall of experiences and the formulation of subjective judgements of learning progress that are adequate at lower levels. They should entail discursive debate among the group, in which members consequently will feel a growing SoB, seeking answers to questions about processes and supported wherever possible by relevant data relating to the shared learning experience. Such curiosity probably will entail the need for conceptualization following from reflection to be tested out and confirmed or revised through active experimentation (Dewey, 1933). All of this should stem from and be related to learners' engagements with the activities under cognitive presence, as facilitated by tutors.

Third, regular tutor-generated feedforward that helps learners improve their performance and understandings should be clear, meaningful, and timely. Garrison (2017), writing of communities in which his tutors are directive, advises that formative assessment "motivates and

guides learners in an effective and efficient manner" by providing feedback about their "progress toward attaining educational intended objectives" (p. 131).

Illustrative Examples in Accredited Online Courses

Peacock, tutoring an online class of 40 postgraduate students, uses video and audio to provide feedforward in the form of guidance regarding where and how learners can improve their ongoing work. For example, following a group activity to create posters about different types of assessments, she interspersed short informal video feedback with screenshots of each of the posters and shared these with the community. This reassured learners of their progress to date and indicated that tutors and the community valued these contributions, strengthening learners' SoB. The feedback videos also provided gentle pointers about where posters could have been strengthened. Such feedforward activity deepens individual learners' and the community's understanding of the different types of assessment, as well as criteria for judging such presentations. The videos contained short but pointed questions about the displayed work, prompting learners to return to their posters and those of others. Learners later reported that the video feedback encouraged them to revisit both the thoughts expressed in their own work and that in the associated online discussion posts, as well as in posters generated by the other groups.

In Peacock's course, online learners are asked to reflect on their learning framed according to Cowan's reflective model (Cowan & Peacock, 2017). Learners structure this submission by building upon their initial posts, in which they outlined their personal objectives for the module, which have been shared with the community for collegial feedback. In this initial "reflection-for-action" posting, they discussed not only their desires for increased understanding—for example, how to promote social presence in online environments—but also considered the development of capabilities, such as improved interpersonal skills in working in online groups—skills that they would need for success. Learners also record reflections during the course (reflection-in-action) and can call upon them as evidence to support their review of their learning (reflection-on-action). In most cases, their submissions discuss the importance of their group work in wrestling with key issues, and how this engagement has promoted feelings of a sense of connection, of mattering. Finally, they offer plans for their future practice, often entailing how they will support their own learners to feel SoB, whether in online or blended learning environments.

We continue to seek a readily available digitized system that will map resources related to particular courses in an institution's online educational realm. Lacking this, Peacock has extended her online induction by offering short videos recorded by learners who are further along on their online learning journeys. These students report and discuss coping mechanisms for working within online realms. They offer hints and tips about how to navigate and source suitable materials, and describe help-seeking mechanisms that they have developed. They offer advice from their experiences about the type, amount, and level of support available for learners, as well as provide essential contact details for such support services as information technology and the library. They signpost short video clips developed by support services, such as "how to use electronic databases" and "how to reference." The emphasis throughout is on supporting and encouraging hesitant learners to believe that they matter to the institution and to make them aware of the support mechanisms available to them.

General Suggestions for the Promotion of SoB in the Deepening Understanding Influence

SoB has been credited with being key to academic success, in which deepening understandings is featured naturally (Vaccaro et al., 2015). In this third influence, the tutor's

facilitative role is crucial in helping learners deepen their understanding significantly and in increasing SoB in supporting learner development. Resources that may be of possible value to learners should be mapped carefully with clear signposting to avoid students becoming lost, disoriented, alienated, or swamped by the availability of overmuch provision. Induction can help prepare learners to study in their online learning environments and offer mechanisms for help seeking, ensuring they know that they matter to the course and the institution. Careful program design for meaningful, open communication is critical, as is informed tutor feedback that shows genuine interest and concern, offers constructive comments, and will again reinforce the connection between the learner and the tutor. Such engagements can strengthen an attendant SoB to the community that is responsible for accruing the emergent understandings.

Evaluation of Causes and Impact of SoB

A SoB essentially is a personal matter; thus, it is difficult to identify its origins and even more difficult to identify its impact on the learning experience and the learning. We are encouraged by our students' strong endorsement of their SoB in routine questionnaires or even focus groups; but we also are persuaded more strongly by particular examples that often emerge naturally in reflective reviews or in volunteered and appreciative feedback. Therefore, we currently are engaged in developing a practicable research methodology through two projects that will involve interviewing student volunteers to enable them to assist in action-research analyses of positive and negative examples of impact from SoB on their learning and learning experience.

Combining the Three Influences to Promote Learners' Sense of Belonging

The previous sections have addressed tutoring presence in promoting social and cognitive presences in pairs to generate SoB, but in most cases the presences should be viewed as interlocking in a trio or necklace of influences that together generate the full, central educational experience through their combination (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). As Xin (2012) reminds us, the presences are an analytic abstraction of the parts of the real "thing," similar to a rainbow:

> The frequencies of the light in a rainbow are on a continuum; any attempt to name specific colors of the light misrepresents … the thing. That being said, the colors have their function. They provide a way of describing the rainbow and locating different areas within it. In online forums, the social, teaching and cognitive aspects are mingled together in a continuous flow (Xin, 2012).

Final Illustrative Example From a Nonaccredited Course in a MOOC

The following example features a research lecturer facilitating both social and cognitive presences through his tutoring, while empowering his learners' SoB.

Recently, Cowan studied a MOOC that covered the period when Islam was dominant in Spain. The lecturer was an enthusiast who loved the subject and conveyed that passion effectively in short, chatty inputs that introduced each week of study. These remarks clearly showed that he had informed himself of highlights and issues in the extensive class-discussion posts from the previous week. His interest in his learners' learning was strikingly apparent. Around Week 5, he reported that he had gained confidential access to some precious historical documents from the period and had been permitted to photocopy them and allow his students to work with them by converting the documents' calligraphy into digital text. Whether the students were Spanish speakers or not, he taught them to decipher the photocopied words and, thus, to engage in meaning

making by producing short excerpts of allocated selections as digital text, which his software then would link together and analyze.

A few weeks later, the lecturer enthusiastically informed his students that he had described their involvement to admiring colleagues at an academic conference. This did not feel to Cowan like a lecturer's report to his entire class. It felt to him as if this now familiar figure, sitting at ease in his study, were reporting back individually and personally to Cowan describing the reaction of erudite colleagues to what this lecturer and his students were doing together, and deepening Cowan's understandings of what was going on, of which he was a valued part. The lecturer's enthusiasm was utterly infectious. Cowan, like his collaborating peers, pressed on enthusiastically with that week's humdrum task of identifying words that often held little immediate meaning for him, knowing that he and the lecturer were doing something valuable together.

This lecturer demonstrated the powerful impact on learners' SoB that can be derived from an enthusiastic online teacher who devotes effort to addressing what every member of a class of many thousands views as personal remarks. This led to an immense and trusting response in terms of learners' proclaimed enthusiasm and motivation for the program, to which they had a keen SoB. Truly, "motivation is enhanced when social presence is addressed through trust, open communication, and a sense of belonging" (Garrison, 2017, p. 65).

Closing Suggestion for Facilitative Tutors

Throughout the authors' experience with online learning, we have found that to promote learners' SoB, it is essential to enthuse and, consequently, to infect learners with enthusiasm to learn. Tutors should converse enthusiastically with learners, as with individuals, about what they are doing, and in doing so, they will emerge as people with whom learners can identify and trust, and in whose programs they can feel a powerful SoB.

Conclusion and Limitations

Of course, limitations exist as to the feasibility of the approaches we have suggested. The following are particularly important:

- All our examples entailed learners who were interested and motivated to learn.
- Our examples depended on tutors who were committed in their practice to Rogers' three central principles—empathy, congruence, and unconditional positive regard.
- Our examples were set in courses in which the development of higher level cognitive and interpersonal abilities was a priority and need accepted by both tutors and learners.

Beyond these conditions, we imagine that promotion of SoB would be much more demanding and uncertain.

Self-confidence, self-efficacy, and self-esteem increase when learners have significant trusting relationships with tutors and their peers. Educational research suggests that students who feel accepted and valued, that they are important to the life and activity of the class, develop a strong SoB, which is important for all since, as Garrison (2017) asserts, "there is a general need to belong and collaborate that has been the central feature of human achievement" (p. 12). In this paper, we developed the influences to inform the tutor's facilitative role in promoting an online learner's SoB in accredited courses. We hope we have prompted other facilitative tutors to explore how they can nurture SoB within their communities of inquiry, while addressing many of the well-documented challenges that our learners' experience.

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