UNDERSTANDING STUDENT ENGAGEMENT AMONG ONLINE CLINICAL STUDENTS DURING ACADEMIC RESIDENCY EXPERIENCE

Brenda Frye, Concordia University Saint Paul

ABSTRACT

Engaged learning communities are deemed to be important when scholars consider whether students are retaining the information being delivered in classrooms. The increase in online formats makes it even more challenging to ensure that students feel engaged and that classes are being taught in ways that meet learning outcomes and align with how students learn best. The present study shares findings using survey data collected during residency from online students on what helps them feel engaged in their own learning. The preliminary results suggest that the students' sense of engagement occurs during active learning exercises when they feel valued in the classroom, the content of the class is challenging, and there is time to connect with peers.

Keywords: Online Students, Engagement, Online Engagement, Learning Community

INTRODUCTION

Online and distance learning is becoming increasingly common at some of the most prestigious universities, including Harvard University, Stanford University, Arizona State University, and Duke University, to name just a few. Kahn, Everington, Kelm, Reid, & Watkins (2017) note that approximately one third of students in higher education in the United States have taken at least one online course. The positive effects on learning and other variables, such as satisfaction (Alavi & Dufner, 2005), active engagement of the learners (Dai & Turgeon2008), and the role that the learning community plays on a learner's positive perception of the program (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Seung-hee, 2007), are all being studied in the interest of determining the most effective methods for delivering online degree programs, yet this research is still in its infancy and has not necessarily led to empirical evidence that these factors contribute to or have a role in learner performance (Liu et al., 2007).

A recent study notes that student engagement increases student satisfaction, improves their motivation to learn, reduces a student's sense of isolation, and improves performance in the online format (Martin & Bolliger, 2018), and that engagement is crucial to learning and overall course satisfaction. Engagement is beginning to be seen as so crucial to the effectiveness of online courses that guidelines have been developed for designing these courses (Roblyer & Ekhaml, 2000). Furthermore, highly successful students in the online environment put forth considerable effort in their own cognitive development and ability to create knowledge that lends itself to a high level of success; these are the most engaged students (Banna, Lin, Stewart, & Fialkowski, 2015; Britt, 2015). In addition, residency experiences, which are required in many online degree programs, have yet to be determined whether they contribute to the success and/or retention of students and, if so, what are the specific factors or active ingredients linked to these variables?

In order to begin to uncover answers to some of these unknowns, it is important to base their discovery in relevant theory and be clear about the definitions. Learning communities may mean

different things to different people; therefore, in order to provide a consistent framework, the notion of a learning community is discussed next. In addition, the theoretical framework of this study will also be discussed.

Learning Community

A learning community was defined by Porter (2004, p. 2) as "a group of people who communicate with each other across the Internet to share information, learn more about a topic or work on a project or mutual interest." Saltiel & Russo (2001, p. 27) developed a broader definition of learning community as "enhanced interaction of students [fostered] by the intensity and exclusivity [of a] closed membership and impermeable boundary." Students seem to "know" that they are part of a learning community despite the scholarly definitions put forth, and the sense that they feel connected and belong to something may have an impact on their overall educational experience. Furthermore, feeling a sense of belonging to a learning community likely has different meanings for different students.

Developing a sense of a learning community in online degree programs has proven to be a challenge for educators despite the literature that suggests that when students feel part of their learning community they tend to do better in school on many variables. For example, some literature indicates that students who feel a sense that they are part of their learning community show improvements in critical thinking and communication skills (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; MacGregor, 1991; Pastors, 2006; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Schmuck, 1988). A sense of being part of a learning community is also understood to support learning outcomes and student satisfaction of their learning experiences (Black, Dawson, & Priem, 2008; Lear, Ansourge, & Steckelberg, 2010). Additional literature has shown that students who feel they are part of a learning community took more responsibility for their own learning, got higher grades, and demonstrated greater persistence or retention (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Stassen, 2003; Taylor, 2003; Tinto, Goodsell, A., & Russo, 1993).

Learning communities are often thought of as cohorts of students with the connections and relationships that they developed over the course of their program. However, when students are part of a cohort, this may or may not contribute to feeling a sense of learning community, and there are studies to suggest that being in a cohort is not conducive to learning (Jaffee, 2007; Saltiel & Russo, 2001; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006). With this in mind, Pike (2000) suggests that the learning community in and of itself is not what contributes to student success, enhanced learning experiences, or retention, and that the effects of learning communities are likely indirect. A considerable portion of the literature does, however, seem to illustrate that learning communities make a difference in a student's overall experience, though several variables are related to their learning. Since the learning community continues to be an important aspect of the student process, it would be worthwhile to begin to parse out the student's experience in terms of the way that they view being part of a learning community, what this means to them, and what contributes to success in their overall academic journey.

Learning communities can look very different from one college or university to the next, and a variety of strategies have been employed in an effort to create a sense of community for students, such as group work or projects, collaborative team efforts, and on-campus residencies for students who are online.

Residencies are not required for all online degree programs because they are costly, time consuming, and can present many challenges for both students and administration alike. In addition, students may choose a degree program that does not require a residency in an effort to save money and expedite their education. However, there are also many benefits to including a residency as part of the curriculum; for example, they can help students feel less isolated and part of a community and connected to the university. A challenge in online degree programs is that students often report feeling isolated from peers, the university, and the activities that on campus students have available to them, and this can lead to lower student satisfaction and increased attrition (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003).

The residency experience required in many of these programs is one effort to increase a sense of learning community; however, it is still unclear what specifically factors into a student's sense of being part of a community during the residency experience. In addition, for those programs that do not require residencies, the sense of being a part of a learning community may look different.

Furthermore, research is lacking on whether including a residency experience leads to higher satisfaction in the program, effectiveness in terms of the learning that takes place, and retention of students in the program. As mentioned before, feeling a sense of being a part of the learning community in and of itself does not lead to overall success in school for students, but it does seem to enhance the students' involvement or engagement, which in turn produces positive effects (Baghdadi, 2011). Liu et al., (2007) found a positive relationship between sense of community and perceived learning gains, engagement, and satisfaction in online courses. The notion of engagement and engaged learning is the next construct to be discussed given its relationship to positive learning outcomes and the way it is integrated into the current study.

Engaged Learning

The National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) (2000, p. 1) defines engagement as "the level of participation in a variety of activities that have been shown to relate to academic and personal development." Student engagement has been defined generally by Krause & Coates (2008) as the effort and commitment that students contribute to their learning. In a more recent study by Bonet & Walters (2016) on student engagement, they found that students who are engaged in their learning have better attendance, fewer absences, and higher grades.

Engagement is viewed differently by faculty than it is by students. Students feel engaged when faculty provide active learning opportunities, convey enthusiasm about their subject, and provide opportunities for interaction, while faculty feel that students who participate in discussions, conduct research projects, ask questions, and interact with their peers are engaged, (Heller, Beil, Dam, & Haerum, 2010).

Engagement is also related to student retention and persistence to graduation (Horstmanshof and Zimitat, 2007). As noted by Coates (2005), engagement is not only the responsibility of the student but also the institution, which should provide the conditions, environment, opportunities, and expectations for the engagement to occur. This is also important when considering online education, though it may be more challenging to provide.

Engagement may take on a different meaning in the online format, even though it is not any less important for the overall success of students. Hrastinkski, (2009) found that online learner participation is complex and relational. This includes engagement in their own learning, which can be supported by many types of activities. Students can be more successful in the online environment when both physical and psychological tools are utilized. Participation is a key element to successful online learning and seems to be related to sense of community and engagement, but there continues to be differing views and understandings of these constructs and the degree to which they are important. Engagement used to be viewed as just one's level of participation, but more recently it is understood as dimensional and includes behavioral engagement, cognitive engagement, and emotional engagement, (Appleton, Christenson, & Furlong, 2008; Fredricks, Blumfield, Friedel, & Paris, 2005). Theories that relate directly to how students learn, engage within the learning environment, and succeed can be optimized in school and are discussed next.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Social Learning Theory

According to the Social Learning Theory (SLT) proposed by Albert Bandura (1986), people learn within social contexts through modeling and observing behaviors. The three models he developed to support his theory can be applied to the residency experience for online learners, which shows the importance of modeling skills and behaviors (Greener, 2009; Hrastinkski, 2009; Salanova, Llorens & Schaufeli, 2011; Sinclair & Ferguson, 2009) and using verbal instruction and videos to discuss concepts throughout their experience (Vincenzes, Drew & Romero, 2015). Salvanova et al. (2011) also found that enthusiasm had a positive effect on activity engagement and self-efficacy, which can be translated into one's residency if it is experienced as positive, and can ultimately enhance the students' overall self-efficacy when learning in the online format. When students leave the residency following a positive learning experience, their view of the learning community, even at a distance, is more positive. The multidimensional way that engagement is viewed in the educational context fits well with SLT as it is behavioral, cognitive, and emotional, which aligns well with the Bandura model.

The learner's behavior, environment, and personal qualities are also important and underscored by Bandura (1986, p. 2) as "reciprocal determinism (which include the following four steps: 1) attention 2) retention—ability to remember details 3) reproduction—learner's ability to organize his or her responses to the new modeled behavior to reproduce it and 4) motivation—maybe the most important—without this the learner may not engage." Conceptualizing learning as a social and interactive activity provides a rationale for fostering a sense of community in online leaners to enhance learning, increase engagement and motivation, and improve a learner's overall positive experience. Another theory that relates well to this particular study and to active and engaged learning is discussed next.

Self-Determination Theory

Social-contextual conditions can facilitate or stall motivation and personal growth. There are innate psychological needs and conditions that foster growth, optimal functioning, social development, and personal well-being. These are: the need for competence (Harter, 1978), relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), and autonomy (Deci, 1975). In the context of learning communities, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) proposes that environments that support perceptions of social relatedness improve motivation and therefore positively influence learning behavior (Beachboard, Beachboard, Li, & Adkison, 2011). Beachboard et al. (2011) also found increased relatedness to peers and faculty and increased higher-order thinking assignments (a control variable included in the research model) to be substantial predictors of educational outcomes relevant to literacy, critical thinking, and, especially, job preparation. SDT is a theory of motivation, which Ryan & Deci (2000, p. 69) describe as the ''energy, direction, persistence . . . aspects of activation and intention'' that address the rationale or intention of human behavior. Motivation is vital: If students do not want to learn, little learning is likely to take place ''because learning is an active process requiring conscious and deliberate effort'' (p. 69). Motivation to learn may also be inspired by a student having meaningful experiences while in their program. A study by Piercy et al. (2016) on the most and least meaningful learning experiences in an MFT education program, found that the most meaningful experiences included: 1) theory being tied to practice; 2) the supervisor-supervisee relationship; 3) a collaborative environment; 4) seeing clients make progress; 5) becoming more self-aware; and 6) allowing oneself to become vulnerable. The least meaningful experiences included not experiencing the aforementioned as well as: 1) experiencing poor teaching and 2) a lack of diversity in perspectives. These meaningful experiences coincide with the findings from this qualitative study and likely contribute to a student's success, retention, and overall satisfaction with their educational journey.

Social Learning Theory and Self Determination Theory are relevant theories to this particular study in the way that students in an online learning environment experience their community, sense of engagement and challenge, motivation to learn, and overall experience of the learning environment. The objectives and value of this preliminary qualitative study are to:

1. learn about the students' specific experience of sense of engagement, connection, and academic rigor during their residency experience;
2. determine the categories of these experiences to pursue hunches and potential further analytic study;
3. determine whether there are "active ingredients" in the residency experience that lends itself to an overall sense of satisfaction, engagement, and improved self-efficacy in online learners; and to
4. ascertain whether there are components in the residency experience (active learning) that lead to improved learning outcomes and retention in online degree programming.

For the purposes of this study, the theoretical framework will guide the thinking and considerations that relate to the data obtained from the student surveys about active and engaged learning and the preliminary findings. Future work on comparing and analyzing the data to other sources as well as to outcome variables such as retention rates and graduation rates will also be discussed.

METHOD

Overview

Students in an online Clinical Master's Degree Program engage in an academic residency

experience during their first semester that lasts for four days. They participate in the academic residency and engage in activities such as interactive lectures, guided discussions, role plays, group work and projects, as well as nonacademic programming such as meetings with the Dean and Student Services Staff. At the end of each day a feedback form is given to students to learn more about their perceptions and experiences of what is helpful to them during this time. A student's sense of feeling engaged and their sense of satisfaction are both positively related to perceived learning gains (Liu et al., 2007). Learning what helps students in online degree programs feel a sense of satisfaction and engagement, and whether this really leads to overall success and retention, will be important for programs when considering methods to engage and retain their students. This qualitative study is based on findings from students over the course of eight different academic residency experiences and the anonymous feedback provided by 150 students.

Participants

Included in this sample are students who were enrolled in the online Clinical Master's degree program in a small Midwestern, single-purpose college. One of their first courses includes an on-campus academic residency experience, and it was during this time that the survey was distributed daily. This course is offered each semester (three semesters per year) and included in this study are students from the following terms: Winter, 2015; Summer, 2015; Fall, 2015; Winter, 2016; Summer, 2016; Fall, 2016; Winter, 2017; & Summer, 2017). Students in the current study are from the United States and Canada. The age range in the participant pool is 24–65 years with a mean age of 41.8 years. The ethnic breakdown of the sample is as follows: 88% Caucasian, 6% Hispanic, 3% Black or African American, and 3% two or more races.

Materials and Procedures

Students participate in the residency experience on campus, and at the end of each day they are provided with an evaluation form and given 15–20 minutes to complete it. They are told that their honesty is appreciated and that the surveys are anonymous. The data collected are used solely for the purpose of improving the residency experience for students in terms of academic rigor, attention to learning outcomes, and their sense of engagement and connectedness. They are provided the same survey at the end of each day as there are different activities, tasks, and lectures daily. Participation in the survey is voluntary and the student's confidentiality is maintained through the anonymous nature of the data collection. Students are provided with an envelope at the back of the classroom and they place their surveys in the envelope as they leave for the day. No identifying information is asked of students on these surveys.

Measure

The survey completed by participants the end of each day during their residency was a modified version of the Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ), developed by Stephen Brookfield and retrieved from www.stephenbrookfield.com/ciq/. Brookfield's Critical Incident Questionnaire (1995) was developed by drawing from Tripp's discussion of critical incidents (1993) and Wood's discussion of critical events (1993) and referred to incidents that are understood to be important and that invite reflection. These reflections can reveal hidden assumptions that educators may have in relation to student learning and their own teaching (Phelan, 2012). The CIQ can provide insight into a student's view of the practice of teaching and it is also useful for a critical reflection of one of Brookfield's four lenses: the student's eyes lens, (1995). This is an adapted version of the CIQ and the questions are open ended and designed to engage students in a critical reflection of their learning experience for that day. The questions on the survey were as follows:

1. At what moment in class today did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. At what moment in class today did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class today did you find most affirming or helpful?
4. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class today did you find most puzzling or confusing?
5. What about the class today surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you).

Data Analysis

The analytic process used in this qualitative study was based on grounded theory methods, which consist of "systematic yet flexible guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories 'grounded' in the data themselves" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 285). This analytic process was based on an immersion of the qualitative data obtained from students during their residency experiences. Data were read, sorted, and open coded, as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990, p. 109) as that which "fractures the data and allows one to identify sub categories, their properties and dimensions." The language of participants guided the codes and subcategory labels, which were identified with short descriptors. Codes and subcategories were systematically compared and contrasted to yield inclusive results that fit into the categories reflective of the overall experience during residency. By being open to the experiences of students (what is happening in their learning process and described in their own words), ideas were constructed based on observations, interactions, and materials gathered in this process. Empirical study of these experiences and hunches will take place as well as potential analytic ideas about those experiences in a future study. Data were separated, sorted, and synthesized through qualitative coding for these concepts to be explored. Frequency distributions will be provided as well as discussion on methods to analyze the data for future study.

RESULTS

Frequency distributions of the coded data illuminate some very interesting findings that go along well with the aforementioned theories. Based on Brookfield's open-ended survey of the student experience during their time in residency, the overall findings suggest that they feel most engaged and a part of their learning community during times they are being challenged, during academic class time, during opportunities to get to know one another better, and also during projects that elicit self-evaluation, reflection, and work.

Students completed the same survey at the end of every day because each day was filled with different activities and experiences. Therefore, even though there are 144 students, since there were five questions on each survey and the survey was given at the end of each day, there was a total possible frequency of 576. Sometimes students would leave a statement blank and this was counted as missing data. If students responded "none" or something similar to that, it was recorded that way. The students' responses to the first question shed light on the activities that helped them feel engaged and had clear themes that coincided with the aforementioned theories and informed the idea of engagement and sense of learning community.

Figure 1 reveals that students in an online program felt most engaged when they were engaged in interactive lectures during class time. Any response to this statement that mentioned a specific lecture or time with a specific faculty during learning was coded as "lecture time." This coincides with Social Learning Theory in that students learned in social contexts and appreciated the class time lectures and their ability to learn from faculty in real time. This finding also relates to Self Determination Theory in that students felt motivated when being challenged and while learning new material in lecture times with various faculty members. There were seven to eight interactive lecture topics during the residency delivered by four different faculty members. The findings also show that role playing and discussion times coincide with Social Learning Theory in that students felt engaged with material when they were able to actively engage in the process (role playing skills they learned during lectures) and they had time to learn together in small groups. The increased motivation to challenge oneself and learn more was also evident during the discussion times, role plays, and self-awareness project (coded with the role plays), as evidenced by the response rates showing that this was when they felt most engaged. SDT suggests that students are more motivated to learn when the material is meaningful to them and when they are being challenged, and these activities linked the counseling theories they were learning to skills that they were able to practice in the residency. They also appreciated the time to learn from one another, and in these discussions and small groups they had several opportunities to do so and this was when students felt most engaged in what was happening in the class. This also relates to the finding by Piercy at al. (2016) that learning is optimized when students can engage in experiential activities that are meaningful.

Figure 2 supports both theories originally proposed: SLT and SDT fit well with the findings of a student's sense of engagement, learning, and overall feeling of being part of their community. For the most part, the students did not feel distanced unless they were engaged in nonacademic times or if a student in their class was dominating it. SDT proposes that environments that support perceptions of social relatedness improve motivation and ultimately positively influence learning behavior (Beachboard et al., 2011). This relates well with SLT, in that students learning in social contexts can improve on learning as well as engagement. Overall, students did not feel distanced, except for some students in specific classes that had dominating students in their cohort. The cohort experience has been found to be very influential in a student's overall academic experience and on their performance, which can range from very positive to very negative depending on the student's overall experience within the cohort, (Dyson, & Hanley, 2002; Jaffee, 2007; Seifert & Manduzuk, 2006; Shaprio & Levine, 1999; Tinto et al., 1993).

Figure 3 illustrates examples of when students felt affirmed during the residency experience. The results illustrate that students felt affirmed most often during times when they were engaged in discussion, practicing the clinical skills they are learning about, engaged in self-work strategies, or being provided with information during discussions or lectures that links clinically the theories and strategies to real world examples. Although not studied as frequently in higher education, the role of emotion and affect, and the interdependence of these constructs with learning, is a complex process and shapes the student's perception of the learning environment (Kort, Reilly, & Picard, 2001; Lehman, 2006; LeDoux, 1996). Bloom's taxonomy, which is heavily used in higher education, includes cognitive, affective, and psychomotor domains to categorize learning behaviors (Atherton, 2011). Bloom's taxonomy involves intellectual skills, such as recall and analysis, and the affective domain, which involves feeling and emotions such as attitudes, values, and interests (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak & Killion, 2012). The affective domains of student experiences likely lead to improved engagement, sense of community and overall positive perception of their program. The affective dimension of learning is of particular importance in human services professions (Hughes, 2007). The sense that students felt affirmed while engaged in skills work, lectures, and discussions, and when clinical theories are applied directly to real life circumstances, likely leads to a positive affective experience overall about their program sense of engagement.

Figure 4 illustrates examples of the students reporting their overall reaction at the end of their first residency experience. The students' overall experiences and reactions at the end of their residency experience support the aforementioned theories and concepts:

1. that learning takes place in social contexts through modeling and observation of behaviors (Social Learning Theory; Bandura, 1986);
2. motivation to learn is an active process and when students are interested, engaged, and challenged they are more satisfied with their educational experience (Self Determination Theory; Ryan, Kuhl, & Deci, 1997); and
3. meaningful and affective experiences during the learning process are linked to learning outcomes and overall engaged learning.

The students' responses to the open-ended surveys illustrate several themes: 1) the class time and learning opportunities were positive; 2) the sense of cohesiveness contributed to a positive and engaged learning experience; 3) this experience was exciting but there is still a lot to learn; 4) that students were part of something great; and 5) that using class time for nonacademic activities leads to frustration and lack of engagement.

This preliminary study sheds some light on this topic by quantifying the data gathered from students during their academic residency experience in an online clinical degree program and linking these variables to student success and retention. In particular, the student responses illuminate some of the factors that may help them feel they are part of a learning community and engaged even when returning to the online format.

DISCUSSION

This study used Brookfield's framework for developing critical reflection on teaching practice to explore the open-ended reflections of online students during their first on-campus residency.

The use of open-ended questions on the Critical Incident Questionnaire (Brookfield, 1995) has been helpful in assessing the students' perspectives on engagement and learning in their first online class during their first residency experience in this program. Employing this open-ended technique increased the understanding of the overall student experience and the values they hold as it pertains to what is helpful in their own learning process. The program is a counselor education degree and, therefore, engagement, affective insights, self-work, and clinical expertise are extremely important regardless of the format by which they are taught.

Students reported that feeling that they are part of a learning community, being engaged in their own learning, being challenged to excel, and using time wisely are all important aspects of having a positive experience in the online course. Furthermore, students reported that their sense of cohesiveness with their cohort, discussions where theory is applied to real world clinical examples, activities where students were challenged to become more self-aware, and a recognition that there is still a lot to learn, all contributed to increased enthusiasm about the program. Previous research shows that meaningful experiences in an educational environment are important factors in a student's overall learning. Those factors found to be most meaningful to learning include: 1) translating theory to practice, 2) the relationship between student and faculty, 3) a collaborative environment, 4) becoming more self-aware (self as therapist experiences), and 5) being pushed outside of one's own comfort zone (being vulnerable) (Piercy et al., 2016). The open-ended format gleaned very similar results in that students reported being most engaged in their learning when they were challenged and learning about theories, engaged in activities outside of their comfort to increase self-awareness, and collaborated with the faculty as well as one another.

There are many variables that contribute to a student's positive or negative experience in the classroom and the cohort format, for example, can go either way (Dyson, & Hanley, 2002; Jaffee, 2007; Seifert & Mandzuk, 2006; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Tinto et al., 1993). Variables that contribute to a positive sense of community and engaged learning include: 1) having a positive affective experience, (Reilly et al., 2012); 2) being involved in group work (Williams, Duray, & Reddy, 2006); 3) being challenged and moved out of one's comfort zone, and 4) the sense that the environment is collaborative (Piercy et al, 2016). The results from this study show additional support for these variables in that students felt connected to their community through the residency experience, that they were being challenged academically as well as personally, and that they had an overall positive experience. The motivation to learn improved as a result of feeling part of their learning community by getting to know their classmates and their faculty during the residency experience. The residency experience for online students and the results from the open-ended questionnaires also support the Self-Determination Theory (SDT). An individual's growth tendency and innate psychological needs are the basis for their self-motivation and personality integration. These conditions make it either possible for this growth or impossible, and they include: 1) the need for competence (Harter, 1978; White, 1963); 2) relatedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Reis, 1994) and 3) autonomy (de Charms, 1968; Deci, 1975). These have been shown to be essential for facilitating optimal functioning toward the natural process of growth and integration. The residency experience in this online course support these conditions for the students, which increased their motivation to learn, integrate knowledge with self as a counselor in training, and challenge oneself for competence in the work they do.

The results also support Social Learning Theory (SLT) in an educational environment because people learn within social contexts through modeling and observing. In their education and during this residency experience, the students engaged in verbal instruction, discussion of concepts and theories, video examples with discussion, and simulated practice through role plays and a self-awareness group project. The students rated these activities to be among the best to assist their overall sense of engagement, increased learning, and overall positive experience. Salanova et al., (2011) found that enthusiasm had the strongest effect on a student's activity engagement and that efficacy beliefs increased over time due to engagement and positive affect. Bandura (1986) noted that enthusiasm is an essential component in motivation and lends itself to increased levels of self-efficacy.

In this online degree program, students noted anecdotally that the positive residency experience led to increased engagement and motivation to excel in the online environment. The findings in this study provide a framework for further study on the specific variables that contribute to a student's sense of being engaged, motivated and part of the learning community.

Limitations

Many online programs do not include an on-campus residency, and these results were based on the responses from an online course during the student's on campus residency experience. Programs are beginning to move away from any form of synchronous contact with their instructor; therefore, the strategies used in this program may not be generalizable to other programs without any face-to-face contact throughout the student's educational experience. However, the information gleaned from these surveys may assist educators in translating this to the online environment. Furthermore, the questions were open ended and responses were coded into meaningful categories to capture the overall experience that students reported on; however, this methodology may inadvertently leave out important perceptions or ideas of students.

In summary, the findings from this preliminary study shed light and provide themes for further quantitative study on the experiences of students in online degree programs. The increased number of online degree programs demonstrates the need to provide high quality education and to understand the specific ways that students are successful so they will reap the benefits of an education in this format. Degree programs offered in the online format can benefit from understanding student experiences and educational needs in order to provide the high quality and relevant programming for success.

REFERENCES

Alavi, M., & Dufner, D. (2005). Technology-mediated collaborative learning: A research prospective. In S. R. Hiltz & R. Goldman (Eds.), Learning together online: Research asynchronous learning networks (pp. 191–213). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.

Appleton, J., Christianson, S., & Furlong, M. (2008). Student engagement with school: Critical conceptual and methodological issues of this construct. Psychology in the School, 45(5), 369–386. doi:10.1002/pits.20303

Atherton, J. (2011). Learning and teaching: Bloom's taxonomy. Retrieved from http://www.learningandteaching.info/learning/bloomtax.htm

Baghdadi, Z. (2011). Best practices in online education: Online courses, instructors and administrators. Turkish Online Journal of Distance Education, 12(3), 109–117.

Bandura, A. (1986). Social foundations of thought and action: A social cognitive theory. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hill.

Banna, J., Lin, M.-F., Stewart, M., & Fialkowski, M. (2015). Interaction matters: Strategies to promote engaged learning in an online introductory nutrition course. Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 11(2), 249–261.

Baumeister, R., & Leary, M. (1995). The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation. Psychological Bulletin, 117(3), 497–529.

Beachboard, M., Beachboard, J., Li, W., & Adkison, S. (2011). Cohorts and relatedness: Self-Determination Theory as an explanation of how learning communities affect educational outcomes. Research in Higher Education, 52(8), 853–874. doi:10.1007/s11162-011-9221-8

Black, E., Dawson, K., & Priem, J. (2008). Data for free: Using LMS activity logs to measure community in online courses. The Internet and Higher Education, 11(2), 65–70. doi:10.1016/j.iheduc.2008.03.002

Bonet, G., & Walters, B. (2016). High impact practices: Student engagement and retention. College Student, 15(2), 224–235.

Britt, M. (2015). How to better engage online students with online strategies. College Student Journal, 49(3), 399–404.

Brookfield, S. (1995). Becoming a critically reflective teacher. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Charmaz, K. (2006). Constructing grounded theory: A practical guide through qualitative analysis. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Coates, H. (2005). The value of student engagement for higher education quality assurance. Quality in Higher Education, 11(1): 25–36. doi:10.1080/13538320500074915

Dai, J., & Turgeon, A. (2008). Loop-imbedded (non-linear) instruction modules: A novel delivery method for online learning. Journal of Natural Resources and Life Sciences Education, 37, 63–68.

De Charms, R. (1968). Personal causation. New York, NY: Academic Press.

Deci, E. (1975) Intrinsic motivation and self-determination in human behavior. New York, NY: Plenum Press.

Dyson, L., & Hanley, B. (2002). Testing the effect of a cohort grouping model as a form of instructional grouping in teacher education. The Canadian Journal of Higher Education, 32(2), 27–46.

Fredricks, J., Blumenfeld, P., Friedel, J., & Paris, A. (2005). School engagement. In K. A. Moore & L. Lippman (Eds.), What do children need to flourish?: Conceptualizing and measuring indicators of positive development (pp. 133–146). New York, NY: Springer Science and Business Media.

Greener, S. (2009). E-Modeling—Helping learners to develop sound e-learning behaviours. Electronic Journal of e-Learning, 7(3), 265–271.

Harter, S. (1978). Effectance motivation reconsidered: Toward a developmental model. Human Development, 21, 34–64. doi:10.1159/000271574

Heller, R., Beil, C., Dam, K., & Haerum, B. (2010). Student and faculty perceptions of engagement in engineering. Journal of Engineering Education, 99(3), 253–261. doi:10.1002/j.2168-9830.2010.tb01060.x

Horstmanshof, L., & Zimitat, (2007). Future time orientation predicts academic engagement among first year university students. British Journal of Educational Psychology, 77(pt. 3), 703–718. doi:10.1348/000709906X160778

Hrastinkski, S. (2009). A theory of online learning as online participation. Computers & Education, 52(1), 78–82. doi:10.1016/j.compedu.2008.06.009

Hughes, C. (2007). The equality of social envies. Sociology, 41(2), 347–363. doi:10.1177/0038038507074979

Inkelas, K., & Weisman, J. (2003). Different by design: An examination of student outcomes among participants in three types of living-learning programs. Journal of College Student Development, 44(3), 335–368. doi:10.1353/csd.2003.0027

Jaffee, D. (2007). Peer cohorts and the unintended consequences of freshman learning communities. College Teaching, 55(2), 65–71.

Kahn, P., Everington, L., Kelm, K., Reid, I., & Watkins, F. (2017). Understanding student engagement in online learning environments: The role of reflexivity. Education Tech Research Development, 65(1), 203–218. doi:10.1007/s11423-016-9484-z

Kort, B., Reilly, R., & Picard, R. (2001). External representation of learning process and domain knowledge: Affective state as a determinate of its structure and function. In Proceedings of Artificial Intelligence in Education Workshops, (AI-ED), May 2001, San Antonio, TX. Retrieved from https://dam-prod.media.mit.edu/x/files/pub/tech-reports/TR-546.pdf

Krause, K., & Coates, H. (2008). Students' engagement in first-year university. Assessment and Evaluation, in Higher Education, 33(5), 493–505. doi:10.1080/02602930701698892

Lear, J., Ansourge, C., & Steckelberg, A. (2010). Interactive/community process model for the online education environment. Journal of Online Learning and Teaching, 6(1), 71–77. Retrieved from http://jolt.merlot.org/vol6no1/lear_0310.htm

LeDoux, J. E. (1996). The emotional brain: The mysterious underpinnings of emotional life. New York, NY: Simon and Schuster.

Lehman, R. (2006). The role of emotion in creating instructor and learner presence in the distance education experience. Journal of Cognitive Affective Learning, 2(2), 12–26.

Ludwig-Hardman, S., & Dunlap, J. (2003). Leaner support services for online students: Scaffolding for success. The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 4(1), 1–15.

Liu, X., Magjuka, R., Bonk, C., & Seung-hee, L. (2007). Does sense of community matter? Quarterly Review on Online Education, 8(1), 9–24.

MacGregor, J. (1991). What differences do learning communities make? Washington Center News, 6, 4–9.

Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. (2018). Engagment matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. Online Learning Journal, 22(1), 205–222. doi:10.24059/olj.v22i1.1092

Pastors, C. (2006). Assessing a learning community program through a student survey. Assessment Update, 18(3), 1–8.

Phelan, L. (2012). Politics, practices and possibilities of open educational resources. Distance Education, 33(2), 279–282. doi:10.1080/01587919.2012.692070

Piercy, F., Earl, R., Aldrich, R., Nguyen, J., Steelman, S., Haugen, E., Riger, D., Tsokodayi, R., West, J., Keskin, Y., & Gary, E. (2016). Most and least meaningful learning experiences in marriage and family therapy education. Journal of Marital and Family Therapy, 42(4), 584–598. doi:10.1111/jmft.12176

Pike, G. (2000). Assessment measures: Methodological issues in the assessment of learning communities. Assessment Update, 12(2), 14–15.

Porter, L. R. (2004). Developing an online curriculum: Technologies and techniques. Hershey, PA: Idea Group, Inc.

Reilly, J., Gallagher-Lepak, S., & Killion, C. (2012). "Me and my computer": Emotional factors in online learning. Nursing Education Perspectives, 33(2), 100–106. doi:10.5480/1536-5026-33.2.100

Reis, H. (1994). Domains of experience: Investigating relationship processes from three perspectives. In R. Erber & R. Gilmour (Eds.), Theoretical Frameworks for Personal Relationships (pp. 87–110). Hillsdale, NJ: Erlbaum.

Roblyer, M., & Ekhaml, L. (2000). How interactive are YOUR distance courses? A rubric for assessing interaction in distance learning. Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration, 3(2). Retrieved from http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer32/roblyer32.html

Ryan, R., & Deci, E. (2000). Self-determination theory and the facilitation of intrinsic motivation, social development, and well-being. American Psychologist, 55(1), 68–78. doi:10.1037110003-066X.55.1.68

Ryan, R., Kuhl, J., & Deci, E. (1997). Nature and autonomy: Organizational view of social and neurobiological aspects of self-regulation in behavior and development. Development and Psychopathology, 9(4), 701–728. doi:10.1017/s0954579497001405

Salanova, M., Llorens, S., & Schaufeli, W. (2011). "Yes, I can, I feel good, and I just do it!" On gain cycles and spirals of efficacy beliefs, affect, and engagement. Applied Psychology: An International Review, 60(2), 255–285. doi:10.1111/j.1464-0597.2010.00435.x

Saltiel, I., & Russo, C. (2001). Cohort programming and learning: Improving educational experiences for adult learners. Malabar, FL: Krieger.

Schmuck, P. (1988). Preparing superintendents for the unexpected, the unanticipated and the untoward. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the University Council on Educational Administration (Cincinnati, OH, October 28, 1988) Retrieved from ERIC database. (ED309548)

Seifert, K., & Mandzuk, D. (2006). Student cohorts in teacher education: Support groups or intellectual communities. Teacher College Record, 108(7), 1296–1320.

Shapiro, N., & Levine, J. (1999). Introducing learning communities to your campus. About Campus: Enriching the Student Learning Experience, 4(5), 2–10. doi:10.1177/108648229900400502

Sinclair, B., & Ferguson, K. (2009). Integrating simulated teaching/learning strategies in undergraduate nursing education. International Journal of Nursing Education Scholarship, 6(1), doi:10.2202/1548-923X.1676

Stassen, M. (2003). Student outcomes: The impact of varying living-learning community models. Research in Higher Education, 44(5), 581–613. doi:10.1023/A:1025495309569

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1990). Basics of qualitative research: Grounded theory procedures and techniques. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications

Taylor, P. (2003). Epic: Blended knowledge and learning solutions (white paper). Epic Performance Improvement. Limited. Retrieved from https://mike-taylor.org/2007/11/23/epic-blended-learning-and-knowledge-solutions/

Tinto, V., Goodsell, A., & Russo, P. (1993). Building community among new college students. Liberal Education, 79(4), 16–21.

Tripp, D. (1993). Critical incidents in teaching: Developing professional judgement. New York, NY: Routledge.

Vincenzes, K., Drew, M., & Romero, L. (2015). Residencies in an online doctoral program. Ideas and Research You can Use: VISTAS 2015. Article 34. ACA Knowledge Center. Retrieved from https://www.counseling.org/knowledge-center/vistas/by-year2/vistas-2015/docs/default-source/vistas/article_346a5c21f16116603abcacff0000bee5e7

White, R. (1963). Ego and reality in psychoanalytic theory: A personal regarding independent ego energies. New York, NY: International Universities Press.

Williams, E., Duray, R., & Reddy, V. (2006). Teamwork orientation, group cohesiveness, and student learning: A study of the use of teams in online distance education. Journal of Management Education, 30(4), 592–616. doi:10.1177/1052562905276740

Woods, P. (1993). Critical events in teaching and learning. Washington, DC: Falmer Press.

Appendix - Figures

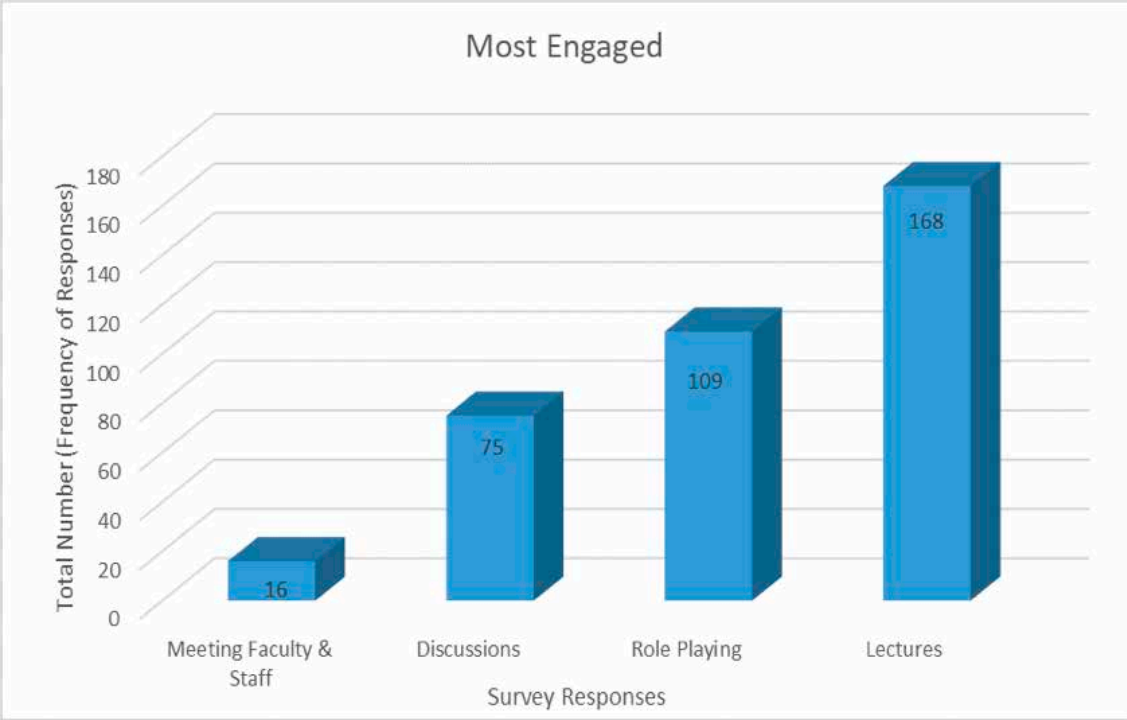

Figure 1. Students' responses to feeling most engaged
This shows the frequency distributions of the sorted and coded first question, "At what moment in class today did you feel most engaged with what was happening?"

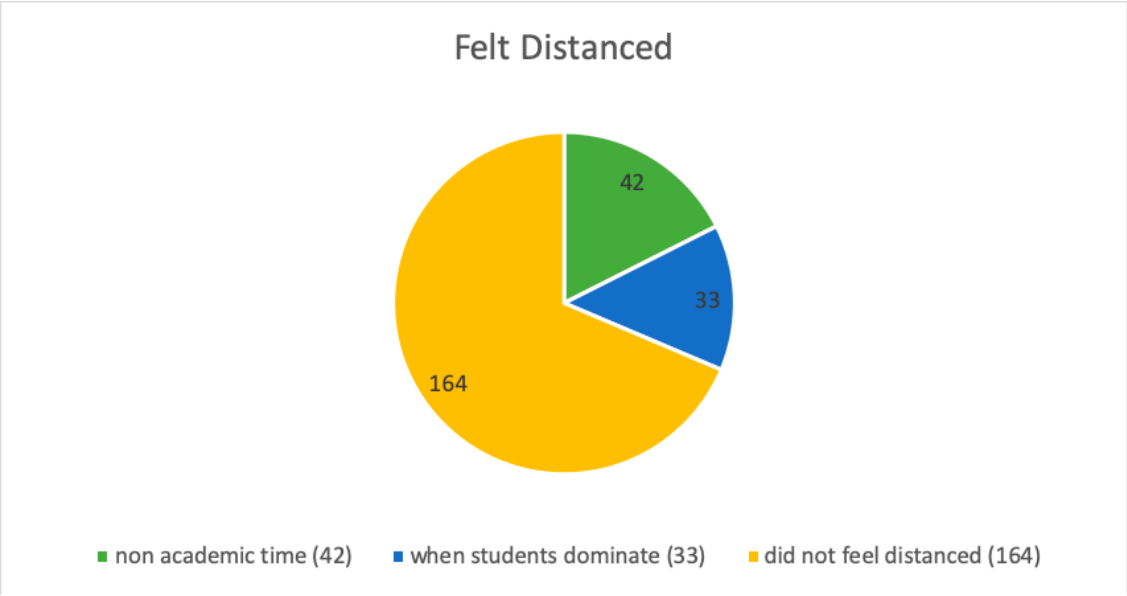

Figure 2. Students' responses to feeling distanced
This chart represents the students' coded responses to the question, "At what moment in class today did you feel most distanced from what was happening?" Overall, the students did not seem to feel distanced, and when they did it coincided with nonacademic time or with the connection they felt to their classmates.

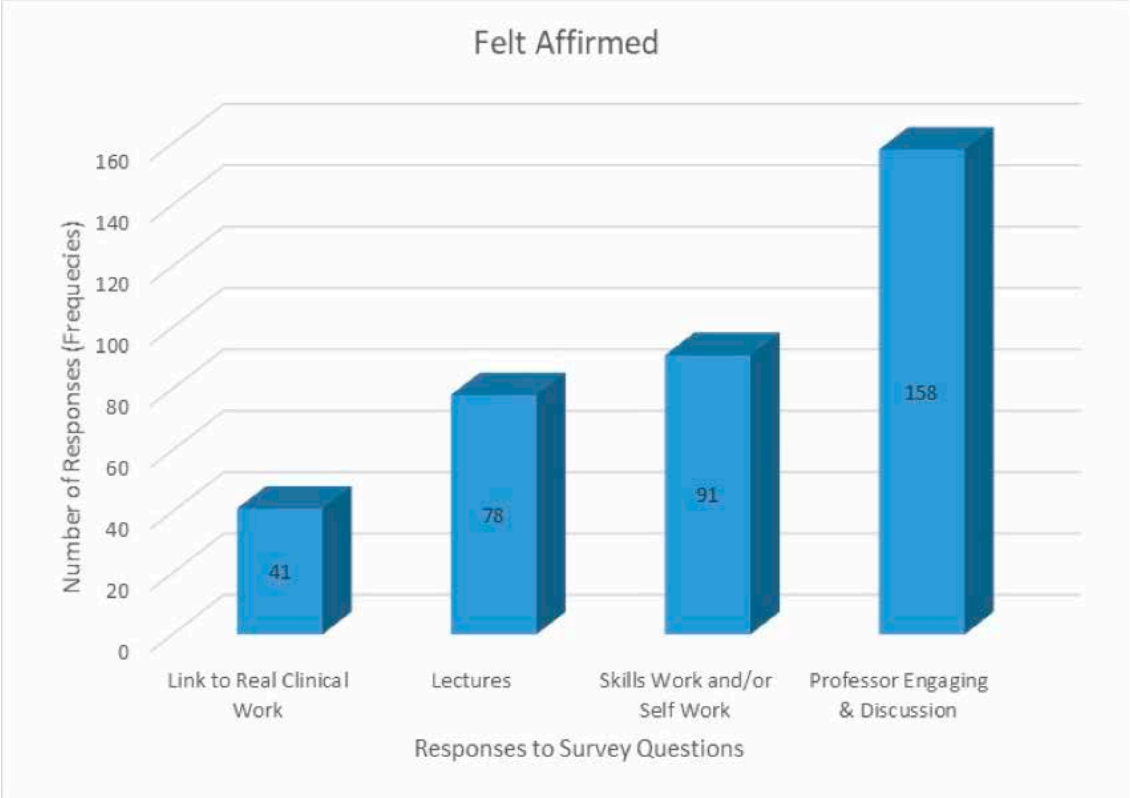

Figure 3. Students' responses to feeling affirmed
This chart represents the students' coded responses to the question, "What action that anyone (teacher or student) took in class today did you find most affirming or helpful?"

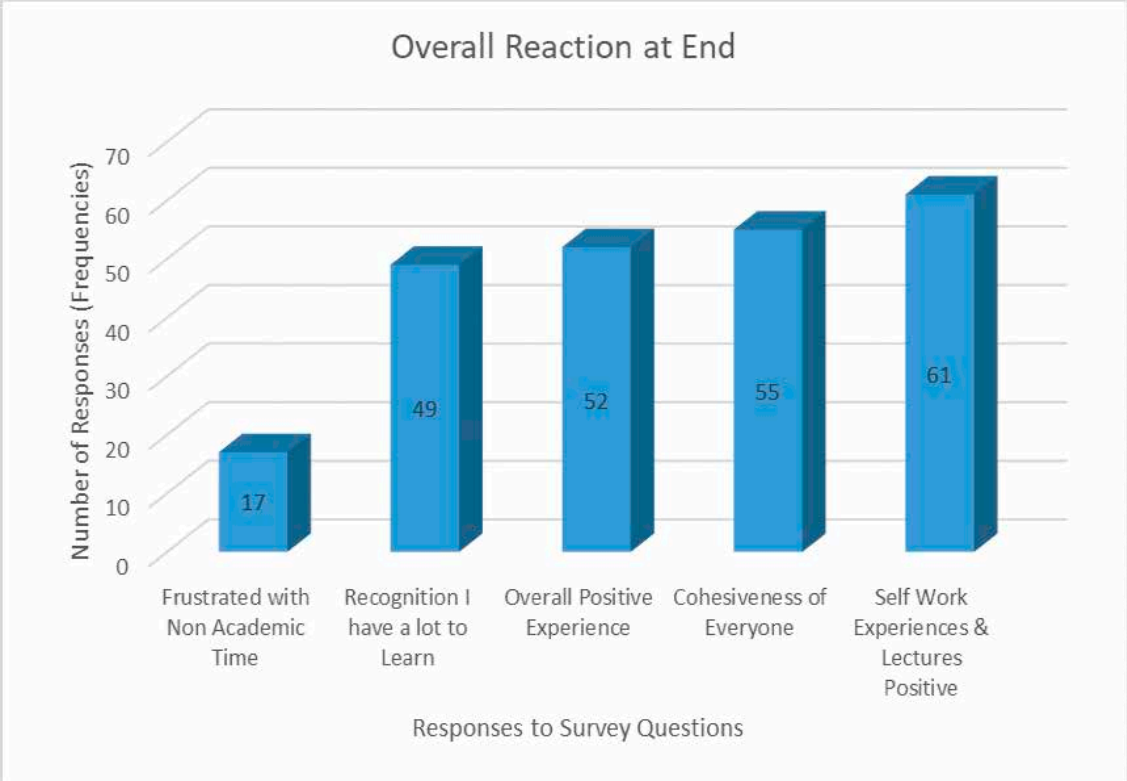

Figure 4. Students' responses to overall reaction at the end

This chart represents student's coded responses to the question, "What about the class today surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you)."