Dialogue and Community in Online Learning: Lessons from Royal Roads University

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Abstract

This study used a grounded theory case study to identify the theoretical areas that account for the nature and success of Royal Roads University's (RRU) learning community model. This instructional model enables RRU's mission to serve adult learners who want to further their careers through education while living and working across British Columbia, Canada, and the globe. These interrelated theoretical areas are: a strong learning community consisting of cohorts that alternate residencies and distance learning; an emphasis on dialogue focused on real-world problems; the role of the instructor as simultaneously content expert and facilitator of dialogue; and the changing perspectives of learners. This model is highly dialogic and the learning community is characterized by caring and by support for difference. Dialogue is an affordance of distance education. For dialogue to be successful its characteristics must be featured in the learning model and be modeled by the instructor and by the community. The model at RRU continues to evolve and contribute to knowledge about how to create learning communities at any institution which uses online learning technologies.

Résumé

Cette recherche utilise une étude de cas selon la théorie à base empirique pour identifier les domaines théoriques qui expliquent la nature et le succès du modèle de communauté d'apprentissage de la Royal Roads University (RRU). Ces domaines théoriques interreliés sont : une communauté d'apprentissage forte composée de cohortes qui alternent entre résidence et apprentissage à distance, une emphase sur le travail d'équipe et la collaboration centrée sur des problèmes réels, le rôle du formateur à la fois expert en contenu et facilitateur de dialogue, et les perspectives changeantes des apprenants. Ce modèle est hautement dialogique et la communauté d'apprentissage est caractérisée par la bienveillance et le soutien de la différence. Pour que le dialogue soit couronné de succès, ces caractéristiques doivent apparaître dans le modèle d'apprentissage et reprises par le formateur et la communauté. Le modèle de la RRU continue à évoluer et contribue aux connaissances sur la façon de créer des communautés d'apprentissage utilisant abondamment les technologies d'apprentissage en ligne.

Introduction

The orange sun rises and lights the waters. Facing the sun, you can see the Strait of Juan de Fuca, the city of Victoria, and the snow-capped Olympic Mountains. A gaggle of Canadian geese flies in a V-shape overhead.

Behind is Royal Roads University on territories the Coast Salish First Nations frequented for many centuries. Hatley Castle is abundant with parapets, stone walls, ivy, and a Canadian flag blowing in the mild wind. The castle stands as a reminder of the recent history of this place. The castle was first a home to a coal-mining baron, James Dunsmuir. Then it was sold to the Canadian government for use as a military college. In 1995 it became a university dedicated to the innovative education of adults.

Later this same day, three cohorts of adult learners, about 70 people in all, meet together in a forest clearing near the lagoon where three roads meet, each group traveling a different path. Old growth western red-cedars and Douglas firs greet them. Members of the three cohorts are participants in the Environmental Education and Communication Masters program. As they walk into the clearing, drums beat and an eagle flies overhead. One cohort is attending their last residency and carries with them a finely-crafted wooden box filled with gifts and advice for the new cohort. Taking possession of the box is the middle cohort. They will return next summer to again fill the box for the new cohort of learners, just beginning their journey at RRU.

The emotion is evident. The learners created this ritual and they feel it. Something momentous is happening. A talking stick made by a learner is passed around and each person has a chance to speak.

This article presents a case study of the instructional model used at Royal Roads University (RRU). RRU attracts adult learners from across British Columbia, Canada, and the globe who want to progress in their careers. According to survey research, RRU has very positive learner satisfaction with the institution, good placement of graduates, positive referrals by graduates to others, and high measures of satisfaction among those who employ RRU graduates (Venture Research, 2005). Program directors report a completion rate of from 80 to 100 percent, which is high for conventional postsecondary education and even higher for distance learning programs. RRU continues to grow and to thrive when many other distance learning programs and institutions have not (Beaudoin, 2006).

RRU is a unique university not only because of its beautiful natural setting, but because, from its inception, RRU focused on the needs adults have for access to applied education relevant to their career development. To respond to these needs, RRU founders created a distinct learning model focused on community. At its founding, RRU focused on a mixture

of distance learning (DL) and residencies using a cohort model. In most RRU programs many courses are entirely DL, and others are blended using residencies and DL for the same course. The university has embraced this learning model for its programs in management, environmental science and sustainability, leadership, communication and culture, learning and technology, health leadership and research, peace and conflict management, and tourism and hotel management.

In this study, a RRU associate professor and a graduate learner in a masters' program explored the instructional model that accounts for RRU's uniqueness and success. We used grounded theory to add as much richness and objectivity as possible to our understanding of what we found to be a unique learning community.

In this article, we first provide theoretical background for the learning model. Following grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) we first familiarized our selves with relevant literature but did not write the literature review. The review of literature was written after the collection and analysis of most data so that the data could drive the model rather than our expectations as researchers or as members of this community. Writing the literature review before developing the model would have obscured our objectivity (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). In other words, we would have assumed we knew what we were researching rather than orienting to the respondents and to the data with an open sense of discovery. In this article, we next describe our methods. Finally, we present and discuss our findings regarding the nature of the learning model at RRU and its implications for other institutions using online learning.

A Literature Review of Theory Regarding the RRU Instructional Model

This literature review integrates theory regarding the major topics addressed in this research. The first topic is the dialogic nature of learning communities. This topic includes the barriers to participation in learning communities. The second topic is the role of the instructor in online, dialogic learning. The final area summarizes research regarding the change in perspectives adults experience as they pursue higher education.

DL occurs when learners and faculty do not meet face-to-face in the same physical space. The term distance learning has come to be synonymous with terms such as online learning, e-learning, technology-mediated learning, online collaborative learning, virtual learning, web-based learning, and so forth (Conrad, 2006).

The Dialogic Nature of the Learning Community

The development of a learning community is essential to high-quality DL (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004; Renniger & Shumar, 2002). The word community has the same root as the words communication, communal, and common (Bohm, 1996). Riel and Polin (2004) define a learning community on two levels—micro and macro. On the micro level a "small group of people toils on a task, and over time accomplishes it together" (p. 19). On the macro level, an "organization accomplishes its work, evolving, developing, and improving, through the collective contribution of generations of individuals and subgroups over time" (p. 19). A learning community is intentional. It has a culture created and recreated through communication. Community means that the persons involved know and see each other. Members have expectations regarding each other. Building an effective community for DL is not easy or automatic (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004). Yet to realize the benefits of online learning requires learners and those who support them such as faculty and staff to become a learning community (Hunter, 2002).

To be successful, online learning must engage learners in not only learning from reflecting on their own experiences, but in learning from the online process itself (Wilson, 1992; Zieghan, 2001). There are many benefits to online learning. In an asynchronous context, learners have more time to reflect and to prepare how they will respond to each other. Students can take time to create a well thought out response. Also, students can post messages simultaneously. Lastly, participation can be equalized among members. The foregoing features make dialogue an affordance of DL. However, dialogue as an affordance of DL can be unfolded or impeded. Online learning can still fall short of face-to-face learning in socio-emotional content, a shortfall that can lead to a lack of collaboration and social relationship (Joiner, 2004).

In a learning community, learners and those who support them foster relationships that are conducive to learning (Bingham & Sidorkin, 2004). In DL, a key way to build relationships is through the alternation of residencies with online learning (Haythornthwaite & Kazmer, 2004). In residencies, learners establish relationships that support them through the periods of DL.

William Isaacs (1999) gave a broad definition of dialogue as a shared inquiry into the assumptions behind everyday life. Everyday life includes the decisions and actions we take in our professional careers. Dialogue happens in a context, a community. Arnett (1986, 1992) wrote about how dialogue characterizes an educational community. In such a community, partners coordinate to establish meaning between themselves (Pearce & Pearce, 2004). Some theorists of DL have taken a broad view of dialogue.

Moore (Moore & Kearsly, 1996) as well as Aretio (2000) integrated dialogue into a theory of practice for DL. However, dialogue has been too lightly treated as a way of relationship building in DL.

The treatment of dialogue in DL often ignores theories of dialogic education developed during the twentieth century. For example, Puil, Andriessen, and Kanselaar (2004) developed a structured dialogue system for online learning that consists of prescribed roles and sentence openers. This conversational control method failed to develop relationships among learners (see also Bosley & Young, 2006; Goodman, Linton, Gaimari, Hitzeman, Ross & Zarrella, 2005; Gorsky, Caspi & Tuvi-Arad, 2004).

The philosophies of dialogue in education developed throughout the twentieth century form ontological, axiological, and epistemological contrasts to the studies above. Buber (1965, 2002) wrote about the unfolding of personal relations in education. Friere (1972) extended Buber's ideas into a theory and practice of liberation education (Vella, 1995, 2002). In dialogic education, students, teachers, and content are related intersubjectively. One approach for understanding the intersubjective nature of education is the philosophical hermeneutics of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1982: 1960; Smith, 1993).

Gadamer explained a dialogic mode of knowing through communication regarding the interpretation of texts. He described principles for the shared interpretation of texts accomplished in a community. A dialogic community engages in praxis—conversations about actions and reflections upon them. In praxis, historic truths are open to inquiry. Dialogic conversations are egalitarian. Subject matter is shared among partners not as an object but as a subject with its own particular perspective. Interpretation is open-ended inquiry and not a search of unalterable, objective truth.

Gadamer saw dialogic partners in an I-thou relation rather than an I-it, objective relation (see also Martin Buber, 1923, 1958). In an I-thou relation, each partner listens to the other with the possibility that what the other person says may be true. Students' roles change from being passive learners to becoming co-creators of understanding.

In DL, ideas about learners becoming co-creators of knowledge have been developed by Marlene Scandamalia and Carl Bereiter (1993, 1994, 1996). In their constructivist, intentional-learning model they begin with the practice of knowledge-building rather than knowledge telling. Knowledge building occurs in a community typified by discourse and dialogue. In this process the computer supported intentional learning environment fosters the knowledge-building of learners.

Egalitarian relationship is a characteristic of effective DL (Lobel, Neubauer, & Swedburg, 2005). Further, the institutional community

supporting the virtual community needs to model the behaviors of collaboration necessary to build the online community (Hunter, 2002).

In a dialogic community, transactional relationships are left behind to build the leadership networks which enable collaboration (Senge, Lichtenstein, Kaeufer, Bradbury, & Carroll, 2007). Furthermore, collaboration is most evident when people openly discuss real problems and ask for help. Members offer help as a natural response to others and to the shared problem.

Creating a learning community involves facing barriers. Community work can have drawbacks such as social loafing. People work less hard when they feel they can defer to others, but work harder when the situation calls for a contribution (Thompson & Ku, 2006). Research has shown that people rely on stereotypes when assessing their team members and gauge their level of social loafing accordingly. In fact, participants performed more effectively when they perceived that their teammate was someone who stereotypically would be unfit for the task, and less effectively when they believed that their partner was effective in the task situation (Plaks & Higgins, 2000).

Another problem that can arise is group think, which is the process of generating pressure to conform to the dominant personalities in the group (Janis, 1972; Sinclair, 1992). There can be such pressure to have everyone agree in a task-oriented group in which conformity becomes normalized. Also, the group that has interpersonal difficulties such as an autocratic leader, cynicism and distrust amongst members, and cliques that withhold information from each other, has a high incidence of errors in their decisions (Janis, 1985).

Roles of the Instructor and the Learner in Online-Dialogic Learning

Up to now in this literature review we have addressed theories about learning communities and about problems of participation inherent in such communities. Now, we integrate the roles in the learning community, particularly the role of the instructor. Kanuka (2002) wrote that both instructors and learners can feel distress when participating in a learning community. Instructors often have a fear of losing power and learners often fear taking more responsibility. These problems can be exacerbated in an online learning environment because of the distance between learners and instructors (Kanuka, 2002).

Theorists have described the role of the instructor in DL and in adult learning as a facilitator rather than a content deliverer (Lawton & Montague, 2004; Mezirow, 2000). In DL, the role of the teacher in facilitating the online conversation was crucial to creating an engaged conversation (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). Key to the facilitator role was being present for learners online. Presence meant engagement

and a sense of belonging in a social context. In such a context, critical enquiry was modeled by the facilitator to engage learners in higher order cognitive, social, and emotional learning (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999; Kirschner & Van Bruggen, 2004).

Anderson et al (2001) developed a model of teaching presence as part of their community of inquiry theory. Teaching presence has three parts: design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Particular behaviours attend each category of behaviour. For example, design and organization consists of tasks such as establishing weekly activities and giving guidelines for netiquette. Facilitating discourse represents tasks such as appreciation and encouragement to interact. Direct instruction consists primarily of giving knowledge and advice concerning thinking. Their model furthers understanding regarding the role of the instructor in DL.

In DL, the dialogic instructor needs courage to embrace the risks and paradoxes of dialogue. Students may disagree with the instructor or among themselves. Being real in a personal relation with students requires what Martin Buber called the essential courage (2005). The dialogic instructor must share his or her voice with the students regarding the topic of instruction. At the same time, a dialogic instructor engages the voices of others (Vella, 2002).

The experience of learners is central in adult education (Vella, 2002). Learners in educational programs seek to change their place in the world (LaPointe, 2006; Mezirow, 2000). They join a degree program because they want a new job, a promotion, or to take their career to a new level in the same position. These changes require changes in the perception of self, others, and life.

In any dialogue, including online dialogue, each party is open to discovering new knowledge and perspectives through the conversation. When we experience such conversations of discovery, we find new ways of looking at the world (Friere, 1972). A learning community provides a context for altering how a learner thinks about their place in the world. An effective instructor models transformation and provides content regarding career growth. In a learning community, each person aids others in altering the way each person thinks about their careers and possibilities.

Dialogic theory explains this altering of identity or sense of self. Bakhtin (1984) articulated a theory of self as socially constructed (see also Baxter, 2004). Otherness, conversation, and social relations define self. Communication is social, and communication alters our sense of self. According to the dialogism of Bakhtin, everyone and everything is in dialogic relation. Educational experiences in which the objective is

professional development necessarily are dialogic and alter the sense of self.

This literature review has explained theory relevant to the major objectives in this study concerning the effectiveness of the learning model at RRU. First, the literature review explained theories of educational communities with dialogic relationships. Also, the literature review introduced the problems of participation inherent in such communities. We also addressed the instructor as facilitator of dialogue, and we addressed the changing perspectives of learners. Next, we describe the methods used in this research.

Method

Two researchers worked on this study. One is a student soon to graduate from a masters' degree program in Professional Communication at RRU. The other researcher is a faculty member in the School of Communication and Culture at RRU. The researchers employed grounded theory to identify the nature of the RRU instructional model.

To understand the richness of dialogue requires a different methodology than quantitative social science. For example, Martin Buber, wrote about studying dialogue, "we have to do here with a separate category of our existence . . . Yet insight into its peculiarity is extremely important not only for our thinking but also for our living" (2002: 668). Understanding dialogue requires qualitative research methods. Practicing dialogic instruction requires a far greater reliance on learner participation than is regularly practiced online. For example, Anderson et al (2001) post 18 content analysis categories for assessing teaching presence. Of these 18, only three are questions. Their content analysis model is at odds with dialogic theory because a major dialogic teaching method, asking questions, is minimized. We seriously question if quantitative analysis is the best way of understanding dialogic processes that are rich in complex, unexpected, and even paradoxical lived experience.

The theory of knowledge-building developed by Marlene Scardamalia and Carl Bereiter (1993, 1996) contributes to a cognitively focused conversation, and the model of a community of inquiry by Anderson et al (2001) suits a dialogic element. Yet, these models do not account for the richness of dialogue as it exists in learning communities such as RRU.

In grounded theory, theory emerges from the data collected. This emerging theory is further refined through the modified collection and understanding of data. Because it features participation, grounded theory has the potential to enhance collaboration and dialogue among all participants and researchers. This was a case study, a form of research ideally suited to the flexibility and qualitative richness of grounded

theory methods (Charmaz, 2006). A focus on dialogue features the humanistic over the social scientific (Buber, 2002).

In grounded theory, existing literature and the research background provide sensitizing concepts rather than an established theory to be tested (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Our sensitizing concepts focused on dialogue, learning communities, cohort models, dialogic instruction, teaching presence, knowledge building, and changes in learners' perspectives.

We held face-to face interviews with 17 learners and 13 faculty members or staff with extensive experience with the RRU learning model. Learners were interviewed within one to six months after program completion. Before the interviews, they had time to complete their program and to reflect on the RRU model and their experiences. The sample represented a cross section of the programs. Participants were selected in a snowball sample according to their reputations as knowledgeable, honest, and articulate about the instructional model either as learners, faculty, or staff. The qualitative methods allowed for a rich description of open-ended and complex information.

Researchers conducted 30 interviews and studied the available data after each sequential group of ten. We employed a coding scheme leading to categories utilized to analyze the data (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss 1967).

Internal reliability was increased by having two researchers read the notes taken for all interviews. This enabled a meeting—a dialogic process between the two researchers—regarding evolving results. This process iterated until consensus was reached on a list of theoretical areas.

Because grounded theory is iterative, the second stage interviews explored the theoretical findings beginning to emerge from the data. Questions were very open ended. Examples of questions regarding the nature of the instructional model at RRU were: 1) How would you describe your experience of the RRU learning community? 2) How has participation in the program affected your professional and personal life? 3) What was the role of the instructor in this model? 4) What is your experience or observation of changes learners experienced in this program? and 5) What else would you like to say about learning at RRU? Further, we probed into emergent findings such as dialogic conversation and the alternating residencies and DL. What emerged from the study of data and iterative interviews further extended and refined the emergent theoretical findings. The third iteration allowed a saturation of the data, which confirmed and elaborated the theoretical constructs that emerged in the first two iterations. Saturation meant interview notes were redundant in confirming the findings. The researchers remained open to discrepancies and elaborations. However, because the time three

interview data confirmed the results, these saturation data enabled us to trust the accuracy of the findings that emerged in iterations one and two.

As a learner and as a professor at RRU, we were participant observers at the campus. Although we may have bias due to our organizational affiliation, we made every effort to be honest and objective in the design, collection, analysis, and reporting of this study.

Findings

Four interrelated, theoretical areas accounted for the success and the nature of learning at RRU—a strong learning community and cohort model, dialogic conversations often focused on actual life problems, instructors with relevant experience who could facilitate dialogic conversations, and changing perspectives by learners. These areas are explained below.

A Strong Learning Community and Cohort Model: For interviewees, RRU had a strong learning community. This community involved all those who worked for the university as well as learners and partners in the community. RRU's instructional model focused on the needs of adult learners through a shared commitment to improving the work lives and career goals of learners.

At the heart of this model were cohorts and the alternation of residencies with DL. RRU learners joined a cohort whose members go through the program together. Although programs differed, most began with a three-week residency on the RRU campus. Then, members spent the remainder of the year engaging in DL courses. They began their second year also with a three-week residency. Then, they took additional DL courses and residencies unique to the program during a second year. This learning model fostered interdependence and the development of relationships within the cohorts.

Often, faculty infused the first residency with the community building features of the RRU learning community—caring, relevance, commitment, and collaboration. Then, each cohort took on a life of its own. Learners who changed cohorts for personal reasons noted that each cohort had a distinct character derived from the personalities of the learners. The relationships developed in the residencies aided the learners in helping each other with the stress which can occur in education, particularly in DL courses.

Overall, learners and faculty attributed the success of the learning model to the strong cohorts. Members of a cohort often invented terms to describe themselves. For example, one cohort took to calling themselves "cohortniks." The dedication of the learners to each other was a hallmark of RRU and the learning model. Learners often felt they had become

friends for life, which would be important both professionally and personally.

Caring and support characterized the cohorts. For example, one learner was a 70-year-old man who injured his shoulder and could not participate in the DL classes. Other members of the cohort took turns taking dictation so that he kept up and graduated with his cohort. Interviewees described the cohort culture as warm and intimate. As one learner said, "I met some amazing people. The second residency I stayed on campus—the discussions, debates, and wine tastings taught me almost as much as the courses" (Learner Interview, January 16, 2007).

The hard work created a time management challenge. A common simile was the first residency was like a boot camp in the military. The paradox was that although the community was supportive, it took awhile for that support to make a difference. One learner said during an interview, "The first week of residency was my own private hell. Then, support and trust began to grow" (Learner Interview, January 12, 2007). Overall, the learners struggled against being overwhelmed by the course work and by social demands. Learning happened over time. Learners interviewed often said, "people were more relaxed and confident in the second residency" (Learner Interview, February 14, 2007).

Dialogic Conversations Often Focused on Actual Life Problems: Learners depended upon conversations with each other to learn the content of programs and also to learn the process of the learning model itself.

> The teams were more than helping each other with the work. The team members offered moral support to overcome negative thoughts. I was overwhelmed, confused. A team member said, "do it and forget about it." It was a huge weight off me. She cared. Therefore, I want to be a better team member.
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> (Learner Interview, January 26, 2007)
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> Teams of learners tackled real life problems, sometimes unfolding in real time. RRU instructors set up problems in case study formats that required a team to research, understand, break down and prioritize tasks, and write a summary with recommendations. As one MBA learner said, "It felt like it was designed to break people. But it worked. I learned that you could accomplish so much more rapidly as a team. A symbiotic thing happens"
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> (Learner Interview, February 14, 2007).

Using the knowledge base of a profession to solve problems was common. One faculty member would set up authentic problems in her

class, requiring the learners to collaborate and to use the knowledge base of a profession. A learner in the Master of Arts in Applied Communication program said that this approach to learning was applied to what he would do as a professional, and he found this very validating for his studies.

Group work during residency was face-to-face, yet online groups continued to give meaningful support during the DL component of programs. The interview data showed that participation in a team helped the participants develop personally and become more confident. Indeed, the learners reported that the focus was off competing and was on co-creating group projects that would be marked collectively. One point of balance was between learners' own reflective practice and their engagement with others. Learners had to take care of their own learning while being responsible for meaningfully contributing to the learning of others.

Of course, not all experiences in the RRU learning community were positive. One learner said that her experience of collective work was very difficult. "The whole team had to pass and we had a team member who would not equally contribute. There was no back up from the school so we just had to do the work" (Learner Interview, January 18, 2007). In this case the instructor wanted the team to solve the problem, which proved unsolvable. This interviewee felt that the hands-off approach to interpersonal problems added a lot of stress to an already intense learning experience. Although leaving her to solve the conflict may have been an intentional strategy by the instructor, the learner found this difficult and frustrating. Individual work and collaboration required a fine balance. Overemphasizing group accountability encouraged social loafing, while overemphasizing individual accountability undermined the cohesiveness of the group.

Role of the Instructors and Facilitating Dialogue: At RRU the instructors supported and facilitated the learners' experience of engaging with the course content. First, an instructor was someone current and up-to-date in theory and practice in their given specialty. Instructors had experience often in the world of work outside of academe. A faculty member who was interviewed said she felt that her professional industry experience gave the courses she taught at RRU validity. Effective instructors employed the relevant content that learners themselves wanted.

Second, instructors cared, they were involved, and they responded to learners by challenging them. The learners reported that the difference between an engaging instructor and a more passive instructor was particularly evident online. Caring was a dialogic feature of RRU instructors. Caring meant listening and respecting the uniqueness of each learner and helping learners accomplish their unique aspirations. The

down side of caring was that caring instruction took time, but there seemed no other alternative. Caring appeared in evaluations of instruction at RRU overall.

The third feature of peak instructors in addition to relevance and caring was they were catalysts for a dialogic conversation involving learners. Even though many DL courses were already written, involved instructors customized the package so they could express their unique perspective and be present online. The involvement of RRU instructors seemed paradoxical. They did not smother the conversation with their own knowledge. Rather, they were subject experts who were receptive to the ideas of learners. More than one learner referred to the best RRU instructors as having humble confidence. Such instructors created a safe space for learners to communicate—free and yet protected by a respectful context.

Overall, being involved as a receptive expert led to the engagement of learners. A peak instructor sparked interest and enthusiasm. At RRU, the instructional model featured a conversation in which DL conveyed much of the content. The instructors were not so much purveyors of content as they were facilitators of a dialogue featuring the viewpoints of learners in the online community. The instructor was essential but not dominating. Instructors asked questions that evoked the experiences and ideas of learners.

Instructors provided quality relationships with learners and others in a network which often began before learners arrived for their first residency. As the conversation unfolded, instructors kept things respectful and on track. Learners gave critical evaluations for the instructors who were not able to support respect in the cohorts' conversations. Further, effective instructors responded to questions by being able to tell learners where to go for more information. As one learner said, "at RRU there is no 'I'm the expert' like traditional schools, RRU is not traditional" (Learner Interview, February 24, 2007).

Changing Perspectives: Most learners and faculty interviewed talked about changes in perspectives by learners. These changes were both personal and professional. Many learners faced personal challenges beginning with their first residency. In the residency, they left all that was familiar to them—their families, work, and homes. Learners then became interdependent with strangers—other learners, faculty, and staff—and faced additional challenges to their identity such as beginning a new educational program.

RRU learners showed up in an educational program because they wanted to advance professionally and personally. They wanted something new—a career, a promotion, a better way of living. Then, by participating in a program, these aspirations were enhanced. They

learned how to think more analytically, critically, and strategically. They engendered a new way of thinking about themselves professionally. For example, one learner knew she could analyze a communication plan and therefore took an expanded role in her team at work beyond her conventional tasks with logistics. Another said, "I went in trying to get the most out of it. Now I have a better income due to my studies. This was a rocket-launcher for my career" (Learner Interview, February 14, 2007). Many learners reported that they changed their thinking about themselves, their relationships, and their work. Some learners went through personal change in their relationships with significant others. One learner lost a lot of weight.

Leadership, entrepreneurship, sustainability, and conflict management have been themes at RRU since its founding in 1995. The content of these themes often centers on changing perspectives. These themes influenced the curriculum, which was designed to provide a forum for the learner to have his or her own insights. Many learners who were interviewed were predisposed to change. They were looking to change careers or to re-enter the work force after being at home with children. One MBA learner described how the leadership stream of her cohort did one whole residency out of three focused on transformational learning and leadership.

> Everyone in there changed and grew, became more self-aware and open to others. Because most people were used to being in charge, it was hard to learn not to be in charge. The jobs in the teams had to rotate. We had to trust others and find balance. We learned about ourselves and what makes us tick. The residencies were necessary for the transformation.

(Learner Interview, February 24, 2007)

Learners told different stories about their change of perspective due to being a part of this learning community: "Something shifted as I began the program after a period of dormancy. I began to believe in my own intelligence. I will never see the world as I did" (Learner Interview, March 5, 2007). Another learner said, "I am now more comfortable speaking with senior management and in performing strategic planning. I'm even more comfortable with loud people" (Learner Interview, February 23, 2007). The change could be as commonplace as overcoming fear when making one's first post on a discussion board.

All learners had to practice self-discipline and perseverance to complete their program. The learner, their spouse, and family often experienced great personal sacrifice. This was particularly true of the DL where emotional support can could be low and attendance was only

through a computer. The self-discipline developed to complete the DL segments had an up side. Learners reported taking the learning strategies with them. Reputation with employers was that RRU graduates are good because they have had to practice self-discipline in order to succeed in their studies.

Not everyone at RRU saw the learning model the same way. Some who were interviewed said they wished RRU would adopt new technology faster, such as the more dynamic technology of podcasts and audio files for instructor feedback. Some members in upper-division bachelors programs shifted to RRU's on-campus programs rather than stay with the blended DL option. While supporting RRU overall, two Indigenous learners wanted people to have more expertise in communicating with marginalized groups.

In addition, some findings such as transformation, collaboration, and community have dark angles. No faculty member we talked to wanted to plan someone else's transformation. Too much collaboration can undermine freedom. Virtual identity can be paradoxical—good and bad, helpful and phony. But as one learner said, "If it was easy, everyone would be doing it. Learning in a community is due to difference. An example is young academic learners working with older, more experienced people" (Learner Interview, November 1, 2006).

There were a variety of perspectives on the learning model. Faculty and staff tended to have a longer view and to be more reflective because they were with the model longer. One faculty member saw residencies as "a hero's journey, a liminal cycle in which one leads and then goes home" (Faculty Interview, January 9, 2007). Another faculty member said to learners, "I hope you leave more confused than when you came" (Faculty Interview, February 21, 2007). A third said, "Transformation is pretty darn good when people come into the program. I don't want a summary, I want to ask: what was meaningful for you?" (Faculty Interview, December 6, 2006). Although not everyone sees it the same, programs held learners to high standards and workloads that were challenging, particularly given the everyday demands of family and work life.

One program emphasized self-disclosure, feedback, collaborative teaching, and a unified focus on outcomes. Another program emphasized case studies and collaboration. Some programs allowed for more closure—a third residency at the end, for example. Some programs had very few full-time faculty members, others proportionately more. Some programs focused more on fit (philosophy, outcomes) and others cared more about instructor success with learners. One program focused on caring relationships. Each program from applied environmental science to management had its own areas of focus within a larger learning community.

Discussion

The lessons learned at RRU are relevant for other universities and institutions dedicated to applied learning for adults and for those that want to employ distance education. Many writers have criticized DL for its lack of traditional elements in higher education—particularly, the establishment of an emotional and relational context (Beaudoin, 2006). At RRU, the learning model addresses this issue directly. RRU is not unique in having elements such as adult learning, professional relevance, and community learning. What is unique is the way these intentional, social elements are woven together in the conversation (or dialogue) that creates and recreates this dialogic experience. Beginning with a beautiful place for its campus-based residencies and programs, the model focuses on human relationships built through dialogue.

We would like to recognize the model for a community of inquiry developed by Anderson et al (2001), which includes a focus on social presence and relationships. This model provides a background against which the dialogic learning model at RRU can be seen. The community of inquiry model has three major elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Our findings follow these three elements yet goes beyond them by focusing on dialogic educational theory. Unlike the work of Anderson et al, which uses a quantitative methodology, dialogue is best understood through qualitative methods. Dialogic education theory addresses the whole of the educational experience. This whole is best conceived as a community of inquiry with communication as its medium.

Our first finding concerned the university as a learning community. There is no substitute for residencies and cohorts in the RRU instructional model. In the learning model, DL is more than technology. The model is a process of communicating and relationship building. Human connections are accomplished through face-to-face interaction and through online conversation. The relationships built often last a lifetime.

Community and dialogue are structured into the model. The structuring of learning in a cohort is an intentional strategy aimed at building a community of learners. Social events such as kayaking trips and pub nights are also structured. However, each cohort is unique. Nobody can predict how exactly a pub night or a kayaking trip will go. Nobody can predict the needs, conversations, and events that make each cohort different. The informal, emergent community is both inevitable and desirable. This ability to collaborate and to build networks is a central skill for contributors in the world of contemporary work.

Quantitative analysis adds to our understanding, but a full understanding also requires qualitative methods that allow for the

richness and paradox that form lived experience. We hope this article has provided this richness and paradox (more will be said about paradox soon). For the learners, faculty, and staff the central experience is being a member of a social community in relation to others with shared meanings created, recreated and transformed through communication. This social capital drives learning and knowledge building. This social learning and knowledge building keep the cohorts together and progressing in their studies. The relationships built are essential to learning how to contribute in the world of work.

RRU is a dialogic community. We believe this learning community is best understood with the characteristics of hermeneutic (or dialogic community) as described by Hans-Georg Gadamer (1982). The RRU learning community is a dialogic conversation in which communication is crucial. For dialogue to be successful it must be featured in the learning model—its netiquette, shared activities, engaging questions, and interaction. This study discovered a model for intersubjective, dialogic instruction. This model emphasizes the relationships between learner and learner, learner and instructor, and the relationship of all to the content of instruction. The content of instruction focuses on knowledge regarding the career goals of learners. The how of instruction, its process, and the building of trusting and supportive relationships is a significant contribution of dialogic education at RRU.

The RRU learning model is a good example of dialogic conversation. This conversation is among adult learners and is centered on the knowledge, skills, and attitudes that will enhance their professional development. The conversation itself is based on respect for difference regarding the interpretation of texts. Every member seeks truth about the topic. The conversation at the height of dialogue requires courage on the part of all and evolves ideas that no participant anticipates.

The role of dialogic instructors is paradoxical. On the one hand, they are brilliant, knowledgeable, and able to articulate their ideas. On the other hand they are receptive to the different ideas of others. Dialogic instructors are able to reconcile great rigour in thinking with great receptivity toward difference. They are able to encourage others in conversational skills—a focus on the content; a respect for all who participate, particularly those who are different; high energy for the conversation comingled with caring for others; and relevant knowledge.

What kind of person can reconcile these paradoxes—rigour with flexibility, knowledge with vulnerability. Paula Freire (1972) addressed this issue with a controversial answer having to do with the character of the instructor and nature of the conversation. Freire talked of dialogue as an act of love—of commitment to the cause and needs of others. This character of the instructor seems an indispensible catalyst in the RRU

learning model. Love can take many forms—humour, respect, caring, hard work on behalf of others. Surely, RRU is not unique in regard to the character of instructors. Yet, a focus on this character in the context of DL is what makes the model work for adult learners.

Overall, the findings of this research are consistent with adult learning theory (Knowles, 1990; Vella, 1995; 2002). In higher education, we are all adult educators and we need to address the needs of adult learners for relevance, for respect for their agency, and for working with their own experience. RRU provides a model because it focused on applied adult education from its conception. In this model the experience and aspirations of the learners are central.

At RRU, extensive use of DL serves the needs of many adult learners who have already developed a career and want to remain close to their work and to their families. Yet, the cohort model comes at a cost to freedom. Learners are in lock step with the members of their cohort. They cannot pick courses timed as they want but must stay in step with other cohort members or take a leave of absence and return to missed courses with another cohort. Coherence in a cohort might also undermine cross-disciplinary studies in other schools at the university.

Of course, no workplace or university is perfect. There remain at RRU controversies and issues. Some members of the faculty close to the founding of the university lament the loss of the good old days, which were more innovative and less driven by procedure. For some, the learning model is labour intensive. Even though there is good institutional support for the online platform, some faculty members complain of workload and of little time for research. Some programs employ many faculty members who are part time. The community paradigm is expensive to deliver and as of this writing, the tension between a highly centralized and a more decentralized program management model remains unresolved as the university charts its future course.

RRU is different. As such, it reaps benefits and pays the cost. As one faculty member said, "criticism is a pain, therefore be strategic without apologies." The authors of this article celebrate the differences—the learners who liked counter-culture outcomes (e.g., I'll never shop at WalMart again, and we don't have cable TV any more) shared the same courses with those intent on the commercialization existent in a capitalist economy. Perhaps RRU is like the story of the blind men who each feels a different part of the elephant and comes to a different conclusion. Yet as in any community, commonalities prevail.

The key lessons remain regarding a university that focuses on the applied education of adults using DL. An applied focus and the alternation of residencies with DL using cohorts in a strong community

enable the benefits and affordances of DL. Education is a dialogic conversation focused on the problems and opportunities existing in the workplace. Engaging instructors who have the courage to be content experts and still receptive to others' views engender a high quality learning conversation. Successful programs for adult learners optimize changing perspectives regarding self, others, and careers.

The research led us to identify some additional questions regarding effectiveness factors for adult learners seeking professional development in online university programs. One area is teamwork and collaboration. What are the specific problem solving models that are productive for adult learners as they solve problems collaboratively using professional knowledge? Another area is the professional development of faculty. How do instructors learn to be engaging online? A third area concerns the nature of learning communities. How does what we can learn about the success of one learning community transfer to another institution perhaps just beginning to use DL?

Also, RRU could be said to be a leader in the neo-liberal management discourse in universities. In this discourse, students become customers, the university becomes a business, and the more traditional university values can fall by the wayside. Similar to a business, RRU must constantly improvise as other universities emulate RRU's successes and try to take market share that RRU has generated through improvisation in programming. Indeed, this article has said little about an important RRU contribution, which is innovative and responsive programming. Understanding RRU's role in this discourse could be another area of research barely touched upon here.

Conclusion

RRU has important lessons to teach regarding the practice of DL at any educational community. DL is not a cheap alternative to classroom instruction. DL requires pain-staking work in its careful creation and implementation. The RRU model highlights the importance of the social in using technology to deliver instruction. The careful nurturance of a learning community requires also the careful selection and development of faculty. Care given in communicating with learners so they feel valued is essential to a successful learning community. Then, with continued attention to content and the conversation, the learning community will prosper due to the relationships between learners and learners; learners and faculty; and staff, administrators, and faculty with all. To be successful, learning communities require the respect and engagement of everyone.

The model at RRU continues to evolve and contribute to knowledge about how to structure and create learning communities with extensive use of learning technologies. RRU is an experiment in DL for adults that has achieved notable success—sustained growth, satisfied learners, and high rates of program completion. RRU faculty, staff and administration is willing to reflect on its own educational practices, and to improve those practices for learners. RRU is relevant to understanding how DL can be delivered successfully for adult learners through the establishment of a strong dialogic community of learners, faculty, administration, and staff.

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