REFLECTING : FACULTY APPLICATION AS A DOCTORAL LEARNER

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ABSTRACT

Online instruction is an alternative to the traditional classroom setting, yet without intentional planning and design, students may feel isolated and alone. Intentional strategies within a learning management system allow faculty members to put research-based theory into practice. While studying for my doctoral degree it was unexpected how the new learning and experiences would inform my role as an online faculty member. This article presents a reflective perspective of how ideas and knowledge gained through doctoral learning informed the practice of online instruction leading to the contribution of ideas and collaboration with fellow scholars. Utilizing the reflective practice criteria established by John Dewey, evidence supports personal, academic, and professional growth.

STATEMENT OF PURPOSE

Doctoral students invest a substantial amount of time and resources into the degree program. An overriding question for many is how the degree will prepare them for new career directions. The purpose of this reflective article is to share how one doctoral learner utilized research from doctoral leadership courses to apply a new instructional strategy as a faculty member. The innovative approach caught the attention of several educational leaders and provided many opportunities for me to present my findings to other scholars and administrators. This instructional strategy could apply in other online classrooms regardless of the area of content or degree level.

As a doctoral learner in an Educational Leadership program, much of my research centered on organizational leadership. The emphasis in my degree path was Higher Education. Through the research, learning, and knowledge gained in my doctoral classes, I began to evaluate my experience as an online student. Was I gaining the knowledge expected? Were there opportunities to connect to other students and the professor? What could I do to get more out of the experience?

These questions led me to consider my own online classroom as an instructor. Did my classroom resources support the topics I wanted my students to learn? What opportunities did I provide my students to connect with me and with their peers? Were my students gaining all they could from my classroom? With these queries in mind, I began to see the research in my EdD program as applicable beyond the course assignments; this information could inform and change my teaching.

The role of a college instructor is to build an environment where students are comfortable and confident in sharing ideas and resources. In an online classroom, teachers utilize a combination of design features and technology (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). Interactions within the classroom take the form of learner-to-teacher, learner-to-learner, and learner-to-content. Students benefit from a setting that encourages multi-faceted connections in this triangulated approach. Instructional approaches that focus on and engage students in a variety of ways increase student learning (Blackie, Case, & Jawitz, 2010; Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2014).

From that moment of recognition, my focus was to find a way to further encourage learner to learner interactions that also supported and extended the curriculum.

STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

While studying for my doctoral degree it was unexpected how the new learning and experiences would inform my role as an online faculty member. As an instructor for the College of Education, I regularly encouraged my students to reflect on their learning and to find ways to apply the new knowledge they gained. Approaching my own educational journey, I applied the same advice and discovered a new strategy for the classes I taught. Sharing this approach with other faculty members allowed me opportunities to present this idea to several different audiences.

Pursuing a doctoral degree is a unique experience. This is an excursion unlike any other physical or educational endeavor. Through the process from doctoral learner to doctorate, the scholar encounters new concepts, terminology, and theories. Acquiring this knowledge requires a significant time commitment, yet through the process of learning, the ideas begin to permeate other areas of life. As a doctoral learner, I began to identify places in my personal life and career where the new principles applied.

A merger of ideas and overlap of application occurred in my role as an online doctoral learner and an online faculty member. Researching leadership theories, I stumbled upon the sense of community theory (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). This theory applied to several assignments, from designing a code of ethics for a fictional school district, to exploring the importance of community on a college campus. As I continued to apply the sense of community theory in my academic work, I found a connection to using this theory to inform instructional strategies in my online classroom. Ultimately, doctoral knowledge affected actions within my classroom and the wider community of scholars and faculty on the campus where I taught.

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Early in their degree program, pre-service teachers learn of men and women instrumental in educational history, philosophy, and reform. John Dewey is one of these key figures in American education (Rodgers, 2002). During the early 20th century, Dewey prolifically wrote and spoke about public education in the United States. In a time where the student or child was secondary to the content, Dewey focused on the learner and the process of growing intellectually, morally, and emotionally (Rodgers, 2002; Tan, 2016). The heart of learning is the intersection of the subject matter and the learner.

In addition to sharing views on education, Dewey proposed that learning involves reflection. Reflection brings focus and intentionality to the merger of content and learner understanding. Being intentional about any pursuit brings with it the need for "purposeful inquiry and problem resolution" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Reflection may begin with a question, a doubt, or problem; alternatively, there may be a search or experiment to test a theory (Dewey, 1910). Many different models have illustrated reflective practice, including Dewey's approach.

Across all the models, the action of reflection is not passive or stationary. Dewey expressed reflection as either a historical look back or an active process while doing (Finlay, 2008). Dewey conceptualized four criteria for the process of reflection. Rodgers (2002) distilled these as the following:

1. "Reflection is a meaning-making process that moves a learner from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas."

2. "Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking…:"

3. "Reflection needs to happen in community, in interaction with others."

4. "Reflection requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others" (p. 845).

In my own reflection process, I did not seek out a reflective model. Reflection on this learning and teaching event was a historical look back on what happened, how, where, and why. Of the four criteria posited by Dewey, three of these were evident in my development of an instructional strategy to engage online students. The first element that I experienced was a deeper understanding of online community.

The first criterion is that reflection helps to add meaning and make sense of an experience. Through this action, the learner changes and so does the environment (Rodgers, 2002). Applying research-

based theories in my online classroom transformed my perspective of the need for community in the classroom. As a learner, I had research to validate my feelings of disconnection and isolation from others. Additionally, developing this strategy and reflecting on it altered the classroom environment for my students and potentially those of other faculty members.

Criterion number three aligns with the idea of community; reflection does not occur in a vacuum (Rodgers, 2002). While planning for a change in my classroom, I first engaged in discussions as a learner. In my doctoral classrooms, conversations began with other learners on how effective leaders must develop a rapport and connection to their team. As I implemented my strategy for building community in the classroom, discussions with other faculty members began. Fellow faculty offered suggestions, feedback, and encouragement.

Finally, criteria four resonated with me as both a learner and an educator. In my capacity as a learner, I strived to gain the most from my courses and personally take responsibility for my learning. As a teacher, I wanted my students to grow and develop into strong, effective educators. Just as I strived to remain a life-long learner, I hoped to instill this attitude in my students as well. Reflection does require an attitude adjustment to value personal and intellectual development (Rodgers, 2002). This was seen first in my own learning and then in the learning of my students.

CONNECTION FORUM STRATEGY

Researching for a doctoral course on leadership, I came across the theory of sense of community. Introduced in 1986, this theory applies to physical neighborhoods, businesses and organizations, committees, and even classrooms. McMillan and Chavis (1986) proposed four elements to this theory; membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. As I read about how the sense of community theory applied to learning environments and the need students have for belonging and connectedness, I thought of my own educational journey and the isolation of taking online courses.

Membership is the first component of sense of community theory. This idea of membership stems from a personal ownership and commitment to a group of community (Terosky & Healey, 2015).

Within this membership, there are boundaries that form a secure environment. This allows for emotional connections and vulnerability. Ten years after the proposed theory, McMillan (1996) exchanged the term membership with spirit. In his terms, this better explains the spark of friendship occurring in a community. Spirit embodies the setting and audience needed to allow individuals to express their personality.

Influence is the second component in sense of community theory. The idea of influence is the combination of making a difference and being an integral part of a group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). First, there is a connection or attraction to some element of the group. In an online classroom, the connection may be attraction to the shared pursuit of a degree. Additionally, influence relates to the ability to contribute to others (Terosky & Healey, 2015). This reciprocal relationship often occurs in the online discussion forums or in a collaborative project.

The third element is fulfillment of needs. In the original explanation of this component, McMillan and Chavis (1986) described it as reinforcement. There is a rewarding association for being a part of the community. Both the needs of the individual and the others in the group find fulfillment through interactions and engagement (Terosky & Healey, 2015). This feeling of togetherness leads to the final aspect of sense of community.

The final element of sense of community is shared emotional connection. A shared emotional connection starts with commonality. The interactions and events shared bring people together in a way that outsiders cannot connect with (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In the online classroom, even in the first course in a program, there is a connection to the shared history that is developing. Each student identifies with the confusion, questions, and struggle to begin a new educational journey. The online classroom becomes the common place, the shared time, and the similar experience.

As I learned more about this theory, I could see an application to the online learning environment. In a classroom where students and faculty never meet in person, there is still a need for belonging and connectedness. I also thought of my own educational journey and the isolation of taking online courses. An online classroom can be an

isolating place for any student; this is especially true in a rigorous course. The feeling of being alone in the endeavor had two elements. The first was the isolation of fully online courses. Unlike my master's degree, there was not a weekly evening cohort to attend. I had not developed a peer-review relationship with another learner. I did not feel a connection or friendship with any of the students in the courses. While there were some names that popped up course after course, that was all they were—names. This led to moments of doubt related to the completion of assignments as well as the pursuit of the degree.

The second aspect of isolation is in the type of degree. A doctoral degree, an EdD or PhD is a terminal degree. Less than two percent of the population earns this type of degree (United States Census Bureau, 2011). This degree pursuit is unlike an undergraduate or master's program. The course content is at an advanced level that requires a commitment of time to read and comprehend the topics. The expectations for research and writing are advanced. Simple errors of missing an indent or punctuation are noted and points deducted. Explaining these expectations to others becomes an in-depth description or an exercise in futility. Together the combination of the modality and the degree type converged to create a perfect storm of "I am in this alone."

Recognizing this feeling of isolation, I began to question what an instructor could do to help bridge that sense of disconnection. There is a correlation to learning in the relationships between student-to-teacher and student-to-student (Shackleford & Maxwell, 2012). When an instructor is intentional with design elements or instructional strategies, they engage in "purposeful inquiry and problem resolution" (Finlay, 2008, p. 3). Since I knew I had experienced isolation in the classroom, I posted a question in my undergraduate classrooms looking for insight on their perceptions.

Not unexpected, undergraduate students commented that they also felt alone in the learning process. Many commented that they would find value in a way to connect socially and cognitively with others in the class. One of the students asked if there was a way to form a study group online. With this posed as a question or a dilemma to solve, I began to brainstorm ways to strengthen the academic, social, and emotional connections of students.

For my solution, I wanted to work within the framework of the learning management system our university utilizes. In the courses I teach, there is an open forum area. While intended for collaborative learning groups, there are no group assignments so the forum is unused. With a few adjustments to my announcements, I set up a discussion area called the Connection Forum for learners to connect and converse with each other beyond the welcome message posted in week one.

Each subsequent week, I would start off the forum with a post related to the content for that topic. This post might include a reminder about the reading, or an important resource. There was always an encouragement to converse, connect, and share ideas. As the course progressed, more and more students commented about the Connection Forum and how much value they were gaining from the additional interaction.

My thoughts drifted back to the research in my doctoral program. The sense of community theory had come alive in my classroom. The students were all members of the course; they experienced a sense of belonging and connection. In the Connection Forum they had an opportunity to offer suggestions or advice, to influence others. Since the forum connected directly to the learning objectives for the week, there was an "integration and fulfillment of needs" (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, p. 9) as they worked toward completing each assignment. Finally, there was an emotional connection. Students began to build trust and relationships.

Following the first course where this forum was available, I replicated the setup and forum in a new section of the same course. Students in this new section also posted comments and stated they found value and connection to the content and to each other in this new forum. After using this same approach and adjusting my involvement with each subsequent section, I decided to share the idea with other online faculty members. I prepared a short proposal on the concept and was part of the group accepted to present at a Teaching Showcase, an event with other faculty members, administration, and advisors where several faculty members present their instructional strategies and innovations for the online classroom.

After presenting this strategy to fellow faculty members there were other opportunities to share

this approach. A member of the online leadership team approached me and a few other presenters. An invitation to share our innovative ideas and strategies in teaching with other university administrators at a Provost meeting followed. This same group of faculty members also presented at the Fall Faculty Conference where our audience was a mix of traditional ground and online professors and instructors. Each of these opportunities allowed for further growth as a faculty member and expanded the concept of community in the classroom. Adding a Connection Forum in the online classroom where students can engage with the content and fellow students changed my perception of the need for community in the classroom.

UNEXPECTED OUTCOMES

During the development and implementation of the Connection Forum, I observed several unexpected outcomes. One unanticipated result was in my own growth as a faculty member. Akerlind (2003) identified three categories wherein a university faculty member experiences growth. The first category reflects a change within the teacher; there is an increased confidence in teaching. This category encompasses a better understanding of the content aspect but also a stronger self-awareness and assurance in teaching ability. In this process, my awareness of the course increased but so did my awareness of the needs of other faculty members. Having an opportunity to share my strategies to a variety of groups provided a boost in self-confidence as an instructor.

Another area of unexpected outcomes was in the development of new strategies. Akerlind (2003) further posited that changes in teaching practices including the skills to adjust strategies, and tactics of instruction signal progression as a higher education educator. The final category that reflects the growth of a university teacher is the change in learning outcomes. This was also an area of unexpected change. The Connection Forum provided a safe location within the online learning management system to build sense of community—a community of learning. In this forum, students built trust in each other. They formed connections and developed a sense of belonging. The online classroom was no longer an isolating place; it was a classroom where others knew you and wanted to learn with you.

This forum provided an additional resource for success in the course. By adding a post each week with reminders, suggestions, or tips, I was able to share more insight into the expected learning outcomes. Students had an opportunity to view these comments and add to them or to simply take the knowledge and apply it. When questioned about their use of the Connection Forum, many students commented that they loved just knowing there was a place they could connect with others who were working on the same assignment. Other students pointed out that since the Connection Forum was optional, they were free to view the resource and not feel required to comment.

Post-secondary teachers desire their students to develop independent and critical thinking skills. With student-centered instructional strategies, instructors encourage students to focus on meaning and understanding how their learning applies to real-world settings (Akerlind, 2003). The Connection Forum provided another resource for students to build academic skills. Overall, there were multiple positive outcomes from the process of developing and implementing this forum.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Looking at the Connection Forum, there are many research-based theories that support and defend the student need for connection. The first theory is social constructivism. This theory has its roots in work by Lev Vygotsky who stated that social interactions are a vital element in the learning process (Yakin & Tinmaz, 2015). Both Vygotsky and Piaget were key developers of constructivism. Elements of this concept begin with eliciting prior knowledge or elaboration (Mbati, 2013). From there, students experience dissonance as they recognize differences between old and new information. The next step is application of the new information accompanied by feedback. Feedback can come from a teacher or fellow learner. Finally, the learner reflects on the new knowledge they have gained.

Another theory identified and instrumental in support of a Connection Forum is sense of community. As mentioned earlier, McMillan and Chavis (1986) developed a definition and theory of sense of community. The four criteria include membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Rovai (2002) posited that members of a classroom community must develop trust in each other and

to the school to meet educational needs and reach academic goals. This feeling of connection or a strong sense of community stems from motivation, responsibility, and active participation. Rovai developed a Classroom Community Scale to apply the idea of community to the classroom setting. In this scale, he identified the two elements of connectedness and learning as critical (Seckman, 2014). The Connection Forum is a teacher-designed tool to promote engagement, connectedness, and deeper learning.

In a community of learning in the online modality, intentional steps by faculty members help to ensure learning. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) analyzed cognitive presence in computer-mediated communication (CMC). This communication form was a precursor to the term online learning. From their research analyzing the online learning environment, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) developed community of inquiry theory. With overlapping elements of social presence, teacher presence, and cognitive presence, this theory sought to explain components for learning in the online modality. Jacobi (2017) stated that the Community of Inquiry model is a significant tool for examining the key components of effective online discussions.

DECISION

Reflecting on the research support for a tool like the Connection Forum, two theories form a link that supports the emotional and learning needs of students. In sense of community theory, learners are members of an integrated learning group where support and interaction strengthen their awareness of belonging. Community of inquiry theory brings a variety of elements together to maximize learning. The overlaps of these theories led to changes in my online classroom.

Further support of the connection between sense of community and community of inquiry is seen in research. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) found that learner to learner interactions contributed to a sense of community in graduate online education settings. Building an environment that encourages interaction between and amongst students is a step that offers the highest yield of positive results for the instructor. Through purposeful planning and action by the online instructor, there is a profound and positive effect on student success and persistence.

In Figure 1 below, the elements of membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and emotional connections from sense of community theory, all influence the three areas of teacher, social, and cognitive presence in community of inquiry theory.
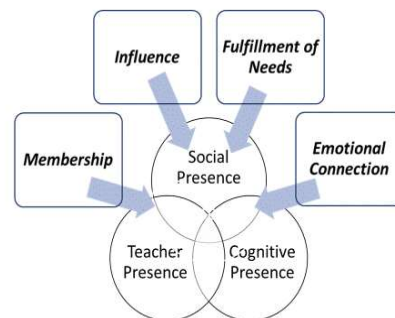

Figure 1. Merging Sense of Community and Community of Inquiry

The use of a Connection Forum strengthens the relationship between the two "community" theories. Discussions in the online classroom can be content driven or focused on the development of relationships. Jacobi (2017) identified four themes found in the elements of successful asynchronous online discussions. The first argument Jacobi posited was that the discussion prompts should be structured and relevant to the assignments in the course. In the Connection Forum, the instructor begins the collaborative, community-building thread. While the prompts are collaborative in nature, they follow the content for the topic taught. Jacobi extended the requirements for a successful conversation by stating that the discussion should be visible, easy to access, and be time-bound. Postings in the Connection Forum from the instructor and fellow students are accessible from the main home page of the classroom as well as through the Forum menu. Like the required discussion area, the timeframe for active conversation remains the current week. Evaluating the criteria of a successful online discussion reflects that each of these elements is present in the Connection Forum.

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

Starting any new journey, a traveler brings along the tools of hopes and dreams as well as the baggage of fears and apprehension. What will I encounter? How will my journey change my perspectives? All these questions and more face a new doctoral learner. Reflecting on the process of development and implementation of an innovative instructional strategy strengthened my desire to complete the doctoral degree and continued to support online instruction.

Through the reflection process, I developed a clearer understanding of both sense of community and community of inquiry theory. Together, these research-based theories intertwine and support the need for the other. The opportunity to reflect, present, and publish ideas on the application of these ideas has facilitated my personal and intellectual growth both as a doctoral scholar and an online instructor. Going forward, I plan to pursue further development of the Connection Forum.

One area of future study should be in exploring the generalizability of this strategy to other online courses. The population to target is courses where students are not in the same degree program, such as general education or basic required classes. The level of difficulty of the course is another factor to consider. Students who are taking courses that are easy to complete may not be as inclined to join in a collaboration forum.

Another area of future study would be to seek to understand student perceptions and perspectives of the use of a voluntary collaboration and study forum to overcome feelings of isolation. Does participation change when a discussion or collaboration is not mandated or tied to a score in the grade book? Do students see the Connection Forum as helpful to build connections and reduce isolation? Finally, there is a need to determine the factors in the classroom that lead to building trust, sense of connection, and strengthening persistence. Could the reduction of isolation positively affect the levels of trust, connection, and persistence in pursuing an online degree? These areas of future study should help strengthen the online learning community and contribute to the scholarly research related to online learning environments.

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