

Does Sense of Community Matter? An Examination of Participants' Perspectives in Online Courses

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Background

- Online MBA programs have seen a rapid rise in student enrollments during recent years while enrollments in traditional in-residence MBA programs have experienced a decline (Hayward, 2004; Lorenzo, 2004).
- With the increasing popularity of online education, there has been a concern regarding the quality of online education (Diaz, 2002; Islam, 2002; Moore & Kearsley, 1996).
- The Kelley Direct (KD) Instructional Research Team was formed during the 2004 calendar year.
- A comprehensive program evaluation research project was conducted with a primary focus on improving the quality of online teaching and learning.

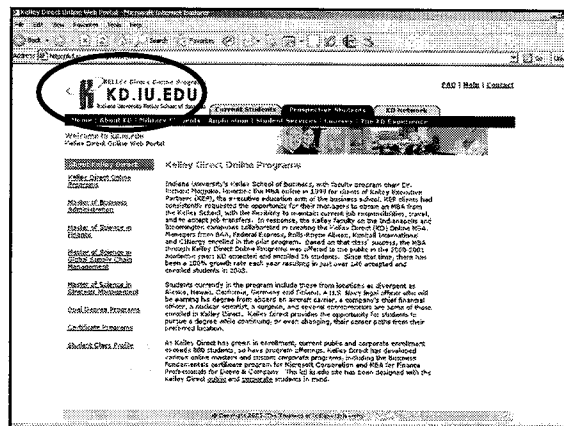
KD Online Learning Research Group



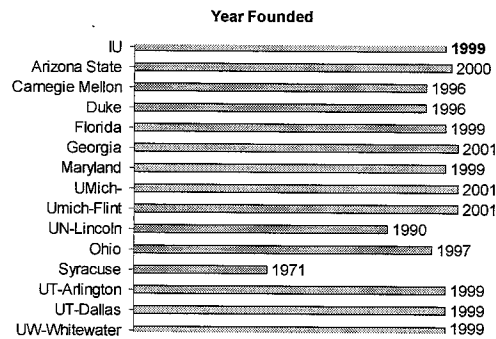
KD Faculty Training



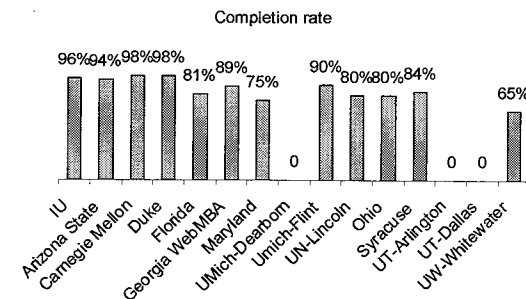
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About IU Kelley Direct Program (KD)

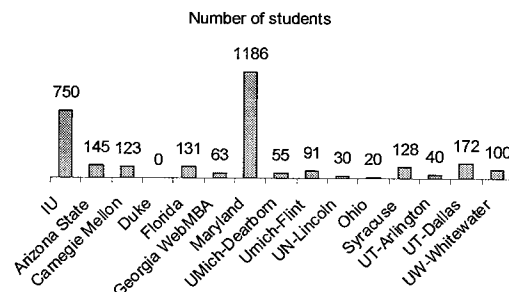


About IU Kelley Direct Program (KD)



* 0 indicates numbers unavailable.

About IU Kelley Direct Program (KD)



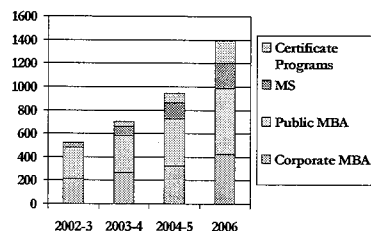
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About the Online MBA Program

- Founded in 1999
- Program length: 24 months
- Completion rate: 96%
- Course delivery: online
 - Course Management System (ANGEL)
- One week in-residence per year
- Number of students: 1398 (as of 2006)
 - Female students: 21%
 - International students: 15%



Growth in Student Enrollments



Purpose of this Study

- Examine participants' perceptions of sense of community in online courses
- Explore factors that affect community building in virtual environments

Research Questions

- Do students feel a sense of community in online courses? How does the sense of community correlate with learner engagement, perceived cognitive learning, and satisfaction?
- What are some communication and collaboration strategies used in online courses? How the participants perceive these strategies in facilitating community development in online courses?
- What are student and instructor perceptions of factors affecting building communities in online courses?

Methodology: Survey



- Case study
- Mixed research methods
- Surveys
 - 264 public online MBA students responded
 - 162 first-year students
 - 102 2nd year students
 - Questionnaires handed out during one-week in-residence orientations

Methodology: Interviews



- One-on-One Interviews
 - 26 faculty members of online MBA programs
 - 10 first-year online MBA students
 - 10 second-year online MBA students
- Focus Group Interviews
 - 10 first-year online MBA students
 - 10 second-year online MBA students

Methodology: Content Analysis

- Content Analysis of Course Web sites
 - 27 courses were selected from diverse business disciplines
 - A coding scheme consists of 4 categories:
 - (1) Collaborative discourse, (2) instructor Presence, (3) virtual team, and (4) social interaction
 - Inter-rater reliability between two analysts



Literature Review: Definition

- What is an online class community?
 - The participants of an online course have "a feeling that members belong to each other, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that member's needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (McMillan, & Chavis, 1986. p.9).

Literature: Background

- In line with the exponential growth of online education, there is an increased discussion with regard to building online communities in web-based courses.
- The increased interest is primarily a reaction to two major concerns of distance education: retention and quality (Rovai, 2002).
- The clear directions based on empirical studies in this area is lacking (Lock, 2002).
- No consistent results regarding the role of community in students' learning (Misanchuk, 2003; Brown, 2001).

Literature Review: Benefits

- Enhanced social connection (Eastmond, 1995).
- Reduces the potential attrition rates of online students (Rovai, 2002;).
- Encourage information sharing among learners and spur innovation (Bonk, Wisher, & Nigrelli, 2004).
- The availability of greater support and socio-emotional well being (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Rovai, 2001).

Literature Review: Strategies

- The key role of course design and pedagogy in facilitating community building.
- Two kinds of interaction in facilitating a sense of community (Rovai, 2002).
 - Task-driven interaction facilitates the goal of learning
 - Socio-emotional driven interaction facilitates social well being of members and helps develop friendships

Literature Review: Strategies

- Promote online learning communities through increasing levels of communication and interaction (Misanchuk and Anderson, 2001)
Strategies include:
 - designing an onsite orientation
 - posting photos and personal profile
 - incorporating an online café for off-topic discussion
 - designing content-based group project that requires extensive negotiation
 - modeling effective communication skills in online discussion.

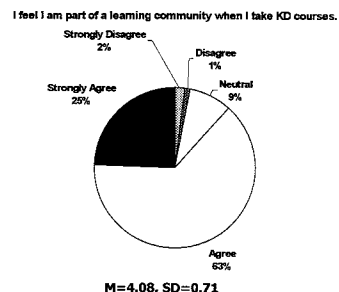
Literature Review: Technology

- The role of technology
 - Gathering place for a learning community
 - Asynchronous vs synchronous technology (Schwier, 2002; Duffy, Dueber, & Hawley, 1998).
 - Asynchronous communications foster deeper dialogue and continuous discourse.
 - Synchronous communications foster social interaction in online courses.

Literature Review: The role of instructor

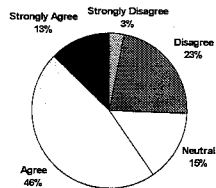
- The role of instructors
 - Previous research indicates a close relationship between teacher behaviors and the development of virtual learning communities in online courses (Shea et al., 2002).
 - Berge's (1995) framework of online instructor roles – social role.
 - The inexperienced online instructors often lacked essential social skills (Conrad, 2004)

Findings: Survey Results



Findings: Survey Results

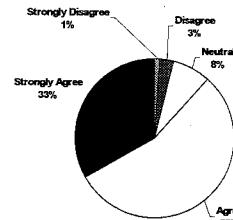
I never felt lonely or isolated when I took KD courses.



M=3.44, SD=1.07

Findings: Survey Results

In general, I think I am deeply engaged in learning in my KD courses.



M=4.07, SD=1.77

Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of community with satisfaction and learning

	Sense of community
Learning engagement	.62(**)
Perceived learning outcome	.60(**)
Overall satisfaction	.61(**)

(**P<.001)

Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of belonging to a learning community with social presence

	Sense of community
Perceived familiarity with other students	.44**
Not feeling isolated	.41**
His or her comfort level with reading messages or materials online	.42**
Perceived emotional presence of other students through online interaction	.43**

(**P<.001)

Findings: Correlation Analysis

Correlations between sense of belonging to a learning community with teaching presence

	Sense of community
The perceived helpfulness of the instructor's facilitation	.50**
Instructor offering regular feedback	.46**
Informative feedback on learning performance	.44**

(**P<.001)

Findings: Strategies

Instructional Activities	Instructional Activities	usage (N=27)	Effectiveness of Strategies in Build Learning Communities
Collaborative discourse	Asynchronous class conference	85%	"The discussions helped [building a sense of community] and I thought people were very cordial toward each other."
	Synchronous class conference	41%	"Only in the Quantitative [Analysis] course, professors used to hold lectures [literally] in chat rooms at specified times. That was the only real learning community experience so far."
	Participation in online discussions as part of assessment	67%	

Findings: Strategies

Instructional Activities	Instructional Activities	usage (N=27)	Effectiveness of Strategies in Build Learning Communities
Instructor presence	Course announcement	100%	Regular course announcements and feedback was positively correlated with the feelings of sense of community ($r=0.46$, $p < .01$).
	Email communications with students	100%	
	Instructor's active participation in class discussions	44%	Online instructors strongly valued the immediacy of providing just-in-time feedback through email.
	Instructor participation in team discussions	4%	
	Virtual office hours	11%	

Findings: Strategies

Instructional Activities	Instructional Activities	Percentage of usage (N=27)	Effectiveness of Strategies in Build Learning Communities
Virtual team	Team-based learning activities	81%	93 percent of the respondents felt that sharing information and giving peer feedback in team projects contributed to student learning ($M=4.17$, $SD=.63$).
	Team deliverable	78%	
	Small team discussions	41%	
	Inter-team feedback/critique	15%	86 percent of the respondents felt collective knowledge is created through group work in taking online courses ($M=4.18$, $SD=0.8$).
	Peer evaluation	19%	
	Team membership change	7%	

Findings: Strategies

Instructional Activities	Instructional Activities	Percentage of usage (N=27)	Effectiveness of Strategies in Build Learning Communities
Social interactions	Personal profile	100%	<i>"I had an Introduction forum at the very beginning of the course where people wrote in and introduced themselves and so forth, and then several other discussions where I saw that they were talking to each other."</i>
	Student online coffee house	7%	
	Student introduction forum	7%	
	Bulletin board to express student expectations	15%	

Findings: Perceptions

- Mixed attitudes regarding the necessity of building learning community
 - Most instructor were not community minded.

"So I really encouraged the students to contact me in any way that they felt comfortable. I sort of gave them many options. But as far as creating a sense of we're all here at this moment, I did not."
 - Students' perceptions on the role of learning communities in online courses also showed variance.
 - Many students desired to get to know their peers better so as to get social and academic support when needed.
 - A few others seemed to not so much concern about interacting with other students.

Findings: Perceptions

- Pre-existing community
 - Many instructors noted that the students had a strong desire to work together with people from previous communities or groups

"so there are some students that do like to work together but normally they're people who know each other before they come to class."
 - Students also noted that existing social networks were key sources of gaining academic or emotional support.

Findings: Perceptions

- Social presence
 - Low social presence in online courses as a barrier to establish intimacy
 - Online instructors attributed the low social presence to the asynchronous technology
 - Students attributed the low social presence to the lack of social structures to promote identity formation and socio-emotional ties in the online courses.

Findings: Perceptions



□ Importance of group work

- Instructors did not structure group work for community purpose but believed it fostered sense of connection and community among students
- Students only felt a sense of community among group but not a sense of community as a class.

"I think we're all going through the same thing in the course and in reading what the other classmates are thinking, whether it's different or the same, it kind of, yeah, it forms a kind of community, but I think the major community that we do form is with our own team members."

Overall Conclusions

- Significant relationship between sense of community and perceived learning engagement, perceived learning, and student satisfaction.
- *Community awareness.* The findings of this study suggested that there was a weak awareness of online community and low value on its' learning impact.
- *Different levels of community.* The sense of community may come from the group or program level rather than the course level.
- *Technology vs Pedagogy.* The dichotomy of technical solutions and social solutions to the development of online learning communities is worth noting.
- *Social skills.* Instructors lacked skills in facilitating social discourse and community development.

Relevant publications

- Liu, X., Bonk, C. J., Magjuka, R. J., & Lee, S. H. (accepted). Does sense of community matter? An examination of participants' perceptions of building learning communities in online MBA courses. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*.
- Liu, X., & Schwen, T. (2006). Socio-cultural factors affecting the success of an online MBA course: A case study viewed from activity theory perspective. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 19(2), 66-69.
- Lee, S. H., Bonk, C. J., Magjuka, R. J., & Liu, X. (2006). Effective use of collaborative technologies in online MBA courses. *International Journal of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning*, 3(6), 17-32. Available at: http://www.itdl.org/Journal/Jun_06/article02.htm
- Liu, X., Bonk, C. J., Magjuka, R. J., Lee, S. H., & Su, B. (2005). Exploring four dimensions of online instructor roles: A program level case study. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 9(4). <http://www.sloan-cors/publications/salu/v9n4/index.asp>
- Su, B., Bonk, C. J., Magjuka, R., Liu, X., Lee, S. H. (2005, summer). The importance of interaction in web-based education: A program-level case study of online MBA courses. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 4(1). <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/PDF/1.1.1.pdf> and <http://www.ncolr.org/jiol/issues/2005/summer/toc.asp>
- Lee, S. H., Bonk, C. J., Magjuka, R. J., Su, B., & Liu, X. (2006). Understanding the dimensions of virtual teams. *International Journal of E-learning*, 5(4), 507-523. Abstract available at: http://www.edlib.org/index.cfm?CFID=28159138&CFTOKEN=86611478&useaction=ReaderViewAbstract&paper_id=18927

Questions?

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