

ARTICLES

## Building and Maintaining Community in Cohort-Based Online Learning

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Abstract

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In a multi-year study of a group of learners engaged in online graduate study, I explored the development of learners' sense of community using a variety of data-gathering instruments. An initial questionnaire established learners' pre-program perceptions of online learning and the notion of community; subsequent questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group monitored developments in learners' relationships with each other and in their sense of community. The longitudinal nature of this study afforded a rich and sustained investigation into the nature of community as it was experienced by one group of learners. Findings revealed that learners' perceptions of community and online learning shifted away from technical considerations and toward affective considerations; that learners took responsibility, and credit, for the creation and maintenance of their sense of community; and that the existence of robust community did not deflect learners from valuing face-to-face contact with cohort members.

Résumé

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Dans une étude pluriannuelle d'un groupe d'étudiants engagés dans des études de troisième cycle en ligne, j'ai exploré le développement du sens de la communauté des étudiants, en utilisant une variété d'instruments de cueillette de données. Le questionnaire initial a établi les perceptions préprogramme de l'apprentissage en ligne et la notion de communauté. Des questionnaires et interviews subséquents, ainsi qu'un groupe de discussion, ont examiné les développements dans les relations des étudiants entre eux et dans leur sens communautaire. La nature longitudinale de cette étude a résulté en une enquête riche et soutenue de la nature de la communauté, telle qu'expérimentée par un groupe d'étudiants. Les découvertes ont révélé que les perceptions des étudiants de la communauté et de l'apprentissage en ligne se sont éloignées des considérations techniques et vers les considérations affectives; que les étudiants ont accepté des responsabilités, et ont été crédités de la création et du maintien de leur sens communautaire, et que l'existence de communautés robustes n'empêchait pas les étudiants de donner une valeur au contact direct avec les membres de la cohorte.

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How does a sense of community develop, and who develops it? Does every online group find its sense of community? In the study that informs this article, I followed a group of online learners from the start of their graduate program to its completion: a two-year journey at minimum. Although this study's findings are more important qualitatively than they are quantitatively because of the stories they tell, the study is especially significant because of the duration of the learners' time together as a group. The details of program delivery vis-à-vis time—how long learners were involved with their online group, the length of the program, and how much actual interaction was expected of them—are critical to the process and the quality of community-building (Cecez-Kecmanovic & Webb, 2000; Conrad, 2002). The longitudinal nature of this study allowed me to include the dimension of time as a factor in understanding how online learners perceive the building and maintaining of online community.

A sound body of literature based on empirical studies now exists to confirm what early adopters of Web-based communications technologies announced a decade ago (Gundawardena & Zittle, 1997; Harasim, Starr, Teles, & Turoff, 1996; Hiltz & Wellman, 1997; Rheingold, 1993): community is important to the success of online learners. I define community as a general sense of connection, belonging, and comfort that develops over time among members of a group who share purpose or commitment to a common goal. The creation of community simulates for online learners the comforts of home, providing a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, an invitation for intellectual exchange, and a gathering place for like-minded individuals who are sharing a journey that includes similar activities, purpose, and goals.

Beyond the fact of its usefulness to distance learners, community is not well understood. Gilbert (2004) stated that he "does not expect ever to reach unanimity about the meaning and appropriate use of the term" (pp. 44-45). Woods and Ebersole (2003) acknowledged that the issues about building community are now being investigated, but they lamented the anecdotal nature of the research in this area and small sample size. In the literature, the term itself is often used synonymously with *community of inquiry*, *learning community*, or *community of practice*. It is used in connection with notions of collaboration and communication and is referred to as a commodity that can be built (Gilbert, 2004). Just as often it is referred to in less tangible ways as a "sense of 'community'" (Woods & Ebersole, 2002). Some novice instructors appear to be almost unaware of the existence of this important part of learners' affective domain (Conrad, 2004). And learners themselves have difficulty articulating what the term *community* means to them (Conrad, 2002a).

Who is responsible for the creation of community? Is it created or is it built? Or does it merely grow? The issue of agency—the person or thing that works to attain a goal or achieve an end—is critical to the discussion of online community, but is also often unclear. The literature on instructional design that suggests that course designers should build in community (Schweir, 2001) names designers as the agents of community. On the other hand, a recent conference paper suggested that learners themselves “recognized when the course required them to become a community” (Stein, Wheaton, Calvin, & Overtom, 2003, p. 203).

### The Study and the Participants

In May 2002, 18 eager, nervous adult learners convened at the three-week session that was designed to launch their participation in a 36-credit master’s program in a large dual-mode university in western Canada. The program used a blended delivery model that included two such face-to-face institutes, one in each of the two years of the program’s intended length. The program used WebCT for its online delivery. During their face-to-face residencies, program members would complete three core courses and finish a fourth core course that they had begun online in the months before. The remaining three core courses were designed for online study. The program also required learners to complete three elective courses. Learners could choose to complete their electives face to face or online, at their home institution or elsewhere, stepping outside both the cohort sequence and the program’s own course offerings to do so. Registration in online elective courses, therefore, could reunite learners with other cohort members whom they had met, as well as introduce them virtually to new classmates.

The 2002 group represented the program’s third intake of students. Using a cohort model, each group of learners was expected and encouraged to stay together as a group, completing courses on a part-time basis one by one according to the design of the program. At the time of Cohort 2002’s admission, the program was also celebrating its first graduates.

The new cohort was typical of this professional master’s program’s successful applicants. Women outnumbered men 14 to four. Twenty-seven percent of the group was over 50 years of age; the younger members of the group were in their mid-20s. All were working. Sixty-six percent of the group lived within 30 minutes of the university campus. Two other students lived in the same province; two lived a short plane ride away in an adjoining province. And for the first time in the program’s short history, the cohort included two international students.

As the administrator of the program, I conducted the cohort’s orientation to the program and to distance learning. At this time I presented to

them the notion of the proposed study. I outlined what we knew so far about the contribution of community to online learning. Documents describing the study and explaining the nature of voluntary informed consent were distributed. All but one cohort member indicated willingness to participate in the study. During the study, however, rates of participation in various data collections varied from 17 to 6.

## Methodology

Following my belief that qualitative research methods can provide generous insights into online learning phenomena and using lessons learned from earlier exploration into online learners' experiences (Conrad, 2002a, 2002b), I developed instruments for data collection that were primarily qualitative in nature but that also used Likert-type scales, yes/no questions, and rating questions. I used the responses to these items to generate simple percentages to support or clarify data gathered in open-ended questions.

*Data collection.* Data were collected five times over the two years of the program. First, I asked participants ( $n=17$ ) to complete an initial questionnaire as they entered the program. A combination of various types of questions described above attempted to capture learners' perceptions of online learning and their understanding and expectations of the concept of community. Second, after participants had completed their first online course eight months after they began the program, I administered an online questionnaire ( $n=14$ ). Repeating certain questions from the first questionnaire allowed some comparisons to be made, although three of the original respondents did not complete the second questionnaire.

Third, when the cohort gathered again one year into the program, a research assistant conducted interviews with those 11 learners who had indicated their willingness to participate in semistructured interview sessions. Each interview was approximately 60 minutes long and was taped and transcribed.

Eighteen months after they started the program, learners in Cohort 2002 completed their last scheduled core course. I conducted the fourth data collection after the completion of this online course, sending them another paper questionnaire. A mixture of ranking questions, yes/no questions, and open-ended questions again attempted to capture their perceptions of the sense of community that they had experienced during their online courses. Thirteen responses were received. Finally, fifth, I met with six learners in a focus group interview two years after they had begun the program.

*Data analysis.* Working inductively and iteratively, I revisited questionnaire results and transcripts to draw interrelationships, categories, and themes from the data (Ely, Vinz, Downing, & Anzul, 1997). I kept data

from the five collection periods separate, focusing on notions of community and agency throughout. In each case, I began with repeated reading of the data, then deductive categorization, then further reading, and finally identification of themes. These were then compared across collection periods by returning to the transcripts for learners' rich descriptions that reflected their various viewpoints across the various times. As a starting point for analysis, I used learners' initial self-categorization of their feelings about learning online—Very Positive (VP), Positive (P), Neutral (N), and so forth—as the base categorization for my analysis. Using this schema I noted both qualitative and quantitative differences in respondents' sense of what they initially thought *building community* meant to them.

## Results of the Study

This study sought not only to determine learners' initial perceptions of community, but also to capture their sense of community as it developed throughout their program of study. Several themes arose from the data analysis described above.

### *Learners' Perception of Community*

Although many online learners experience the effects of bonding with classmates and speak positively of the communal aspects of this type of learning, they often struggle with labeling or giving clear meaning to the term *community* (Conrad, 2002a).

What is *community*? In its most common form, *community* is used as a noun that denotes a group of people who share a common place, history, or interest of some sort: social, political, or economic, for example. However, both education and the workplace have contributed a number of variations to the use of the term *community*: community of practice (Wenger, 1998), community of enquiry, learning community, knowledge community, and global online community. This study also raised another confusion of language related to the discussion of community: learners were unsure of the difference between the terms *class*, *cohort*, and *community*. Such uncertainties were revealed, for example, when learners referred to their classmate as *my cohorts*.

This study began by pointedly asking its participants what the term *community* meant to them in their learning context. At the beginning of their program, participants had been oriented to the concept of community as a part of online learning. They had had the opportunity to read about both online learning and community as a part of their preparation for distance study. Responses to this question were categorized according to the initial classification of learners' level of positive anticipation of the experience that lay before them. The more positive learners offered wor-

dier and more comprehensive descriptions of community than did their less positive colleagues. Fifty-four percent of the more positive learners used the word *group* in their responses compared with 40% of the less positive learners.

Thematically, participants in the first data collection expressed most strongly the following concepts: group, technology, and exchange. The concepts of shared purpose, support, friendship, relationship, and collaboration were also noted, but much less frequently. At this early point in participants' learning, community appeared to be best understood in terms of purpose and time-and-place and represented by a virtual, technological place. It was also clearly understood by all participants that the learning task ahead of them would involve using technology to work together as a group.

At the end of their first online course eight months into their program, participants completed an online questionnaire in which I asked them to restate their understanding of, and outline their contributions to, community. Fourteen responses were received, three fewer than had been received during the first data collection. Table 1 outlines the distribution of topics contained in participants' responses.

By the second data collection, their first online course completed, learners' perceptions of community—initially situated in time and place and anchored by technology considerations—appeared to have become more affective. Emphases on relationships and interconnectedness increased, and a new category, familiarization, appeared. The overwhelming initial tendency to describe community in terms of "a group of individuals who meet, work and learn in a Web environment" (group,

Table 1  
Participants' Thematic Notions of Community, May 2002 and January 2003

<i>Topics mentioned</i>	<i>Numbers of mentions by topic</i>	
	May 2002 ( <i>n</i> =17)	January 2003 ( <i>n</i> =14)
Friendship	1	4
Relationship	1	1
Familiarity	-	3
Collaboration	2	5
Common purpose	2	3
Support	2	1
Technology	7	5
Group/place/exchange	11	6
Group/exchange	11	2
Group/community	4	-
Group	12	8

place, exchange) dissipated. Learners appeared to have shifted from considering community in its external dimensions as an entity defined by temporality, action, and space to a more intuitively understood, relationship-based construct.

The nature of this evolution became clearer in subsequent data collections after learners had completed more online core courses together. Some learners had also completed elective courses, either face to face or by distance, which gave them opportunities to mix with learners outside the cohort and to bring their observations of these experiences back to the group and to this study for comparison. In the interviews, participants emphasized their commitment to their online community in a number of ways. In their choice of defining words, *support* was mentioned explicitly in half the replies received. The concept of support was alluded to implicitly in terms such as “a valuable social resource,” and other respondents referred to “family,” “friendships,” and “personal relationships.” The notion of working together for a common purpose was explicitly stated in two thirds of the responses.

Respondents also reflected on changes in their perception of their roles as members of the community. Many had not imagined the power of the connection that had developed:

When I began the program, I wasn't sure that a sense of “belonging” to a community of learning online could be achieved. I have learned over time that this sense of community does exist ... I did not think it would be as familiar as it has become. I thought it would be very cold or professional. I attribute this change in perception to the relationships that I have built with my cohort members.

Several participants emphasized that the sense of community that had developed was more “human” than they had imagined. Several described the ambience as less formal and more personal. Speaking metaphorically, one respondent wrote:

I thought of online community as a train station—a lot of strangers from different places together briefly in one place and trying to get to another place. Today I see it as more of a team experience, a gathering place for like minds. The train station has now become a destination in itself.

When asked how an increased sense of connection reflected academically in their studies, all respondents indicated increased comfort in online discussions and postings; all but one indicated more off-line time together and more and better collaboration on group projects. Six respondents mentioned more sharing of resources; and five mentioned that there was more consultation on individual projects. Interestingly, the only area where there was any disparity concerned grades and assessment. Only

three respondents indicated that an increased sense of community had reduced concern over grades and competitiveness. Several commented that competitiveness had never existed in the group. And one felt that “some people were competitive from the start!”

### *Growing Community, Building Community: Issues of Agency and Construct*

Who should take responsibility for constructing community in online courses? Is responsibility taken or is it given? These questions form the basis for discussions of instructional role and presence, learners’ participation, interaction, and course design.

This study’s adult learners felt that they themselves were the primary architects of their well-developed sense of community. However, the data reflect some changes in participants’ views over time of who should take responsibility for building community.

When asked at the beginning of their program whose responsibility it would be to “work at building community online,” four of 17 respondents indicated that the responsibility belonged to learners and teachers together. Eleven indicated that responsibility should be shared among learners, teachers, and administrators. Only one respondent indicated that learners should be solely responsible for contributing to community-building. As was the case with other items on the initial questionnaire, those learners whom I classified as more positive in their outlook were also more inclusive and generous in their estimation of those who would assist in community-building.

I asked the study’s participants at the conclusion of their core courses to name those *outside* the online group who had contributed to the building of community. Instructors were listed four times. A particular administrator and two spouses were mentioned twice. Co-workers, visiting lecturers, and members of a previous cohort group also received one mention each. Four respondents did not name anyone outside their cohort group as being responsible for contributing to community.

Data collected from the first questionnaire contained 27 strategies for building community, including regular participation, shared problem-solving, personal contact, providing feedback, clear expression, frequent visits to the Web site, investing time, being open and cheerful, sharing their backgrounds, freely exchanging thoughts and ideas, developing trust, supporting others, exhibiting consideration and honesty, and encouraging the participation of others through supportive dialogue.

Using the initial categorization of respondents according to the level of positive feelings with which they perceived the potential of online learning, I noted that those who were most positive named more stakeholders as being involved in the creation of community than those who were less positive or unsure about their impending online learning experience.



Similarly, when asked how they would build community, the very positive learners contributed a greater variety of strategies than those who were less enthusiastic. The sole slightly negative respondent indicated a desire to “try to participate”; the sole unsure respondent simply wrote, “I have so much to learn.”

Almost two years later, participants’ stories and perceptions of the evolution of community in their group revealed a strong sense of both the process of building community and the product: the state of community at which they had arrived. Although initially learners had cited spouses and partners as their primary sources of support, by this time they rated the sense of community as a slightly stronger source of support.

The energy fueling community formation, however, seemed primarily to come from the participants themselves. Each respondent had answered Yes when asked whether he or she could identify “when or how a sense of online community had developed” among the group. Several incidents stood out as seminal in respondents’ perceptions of the growth of a sense of community.

*Opportunities to meet face to face.* The program under study uses a delivery model that includes both a cohort approach (learners proceed through prescribed core courses together) and two face-to-face residencies, each of three weeks’ duration. Distance learners who have the opportunity to meet each other face to face, even once, report an enormous surge in connectedness and satisfaction with the program design (Conrad, 2002a). This study’s learners reported dual complementary relationships between face-to-face and online communications: each facilitated a greater ease in the other medium. “I think once we had the opportunity to interact face-to-face in the first spring institute, our online course following was much more engaging”; and “Early on there was a warm supportive sense of community that intensified at the second spring institute—the ‘in person’ flattering the online experience.”

The opportunity for meeting face to face also contributed to “a better connection with those I knew from spring institute.” Comparisons between learning online with those who were known from face-to-face encounters and those who had not been met in the flesh were made more obvious when cohort members stepped out of the core course line-up to complete elective courses.

*Occasions of tragedy in the group.* It is commonly understood among adult educators that life’s tragedies befall at least one learner, and usually more, in every class (Wiesenberg, 2001). The occurrence of tragedy among learners in this study served as galvanizing events that many remembered as bonding moments. Several told the story of

a few classmates who lost parents during the first year. We all sent notes of condolence and bought them flowers as a group. We knew that our cohort

members were suffering and we felt for them. In a traditional classroom setting, I would have been more likely to do something on my own.

*The energy of reunion.* Among these participants, two types of reunion bonding were recalled as the moment of realizing community. One occurred when several cohort members enrolled in an intensive face-to-face elective course at another institution: "A group of us took an elective and stayed at another member's home. We consider ourselves a tightly bound sub-set [of the cohort group under study]." Another added, "After that, while working online, we morphed as a ... virtual support group."

In the program under study, cohort members returned to their homes after the initial face-to-face experience. Three months later, they begin their first online course. Relationships that had been formed during the three-week face-to-face institute were rekindled. After the posting of holiday photos and chats in the online lounge, one participant noted that they had formed an online community "about six weeks into [the first online course]. That was the first course where the entire cohort was online together."

### *The Persistence of Community*

When six of the study's learners met with me for a focus group interview, two were poised to graduate within weeks; the others were either completing the program's final project assignment or enrolled in elective courses.

Already, though, members of the group were beginning to feel the effects of not having daily online connection with each other. "Project work is lonely," complained one learner. Another speculated that he was in a transition process, sensing his movement away from connection with the group. Another noted the changed dynamic and related a message that she had recently received from a classmate: "I haven't heard from you for 11 days.... what's up?" A fourth participant did not feel a sense of loss, but did note that it was a different experience "to be on your own" doing project research. She was making efforts to keep in close touch with group members, still feeling the pull of the network. Perhaps most poignantly, admitting that they "needed their fix of community," they were still checking the program Web sites. Finding nothing in the area designated for their project work, they migrated into the *Meet and Greet* sections that had been created by program administrators for new learners just starting the program.

## Discussion

From the five data collections, I focused on learners' understanding of the construct of community and on issues of agency in order to understand

the nature of online community and its development. The discussion that follows highlights some of the key insights that resulted.

### *The Construction of Community*

Who creates community? The data of this study speak against the notion of a unilateral sense of agency by, for example, instructors or administrators. From the outset, participants indicated that they attributed the construction of online community to several agents. They named not only themselves as learners but also instructors, administrators, and even employers as responsible for helping to create a sense of community.

From the outset, those learners who demonstrated greater enthusiasm for and more receptivity to the notion of online learning used a more expansive vocabulary and included more players in their understanding of the creation and maintenance of community. After two years, however, respondents spoke uniformly with high levels of conviction on the subject of community. Making comparisons with face-to-face situations was common.

When I began the program, I wasn't sure that a sense of "belonging" to a community of learning online could be achieved. I think the beginnings of it emerged after we met face to face; however, the bonds and online personalities developed slowly over time.

For whatever reason, the bonds seem to be stronger in online community than in regular face to face. Maybe it is that we (cohort) all started on this journey together, all experienced the same things at the same time whereas face-to-face you are but one of many with not as much in common.

Many other factors influence learners' perceptions of community-building. Earlier research has demonstrated that the focus of online learners evolves over the life of a course from initial concerns about the administration and expectations of the course to more socially oriented and learning-oriented involvement (Conrad, 2002a). Learners just starting online courses are preoccupied with functional and technical concerns, with getting started, with learning their way around a new medium. They are engaged in "forming and norming" activities, relying on external expertise for guidance and support. At this time, helpful instructors or helpful administrators can contribute positively to the well-being of learners with attention to details and shows of support.

Learners in this study indicated from the outset that they expected community-building support from a variety of sources, including administrators, instructors, fellow learners, family, and friends. Toward the end of the study, learners continued to name outside forces as contributors to community. Many cited guest lecturers, spouses, and partners as influencing the solidity of their commitment to their studies. Regular committed

involvement was closely connected to their sense of being a part of and contributing to building community.

It became clear through repeated data collections that learners did not distinguish clearly between *support* and *community*. Their coalescence of terms reflects a similar meshing of concepts in the literature, where notions of support, interaction, and participation first preceded, and then coexisted, with the more recently evolved notion of community (Conrad, 2002; Moore, 1989; Swan, 2002).

*Instructors as contributors to community.* Whatever dissension existed over contributions to the creation of community centered on the contribution of instructors. Over the length of their program, learners had encountered many instructors who demonstrated varying degrees of effectiveness in their online teaching. Simply put, learners said, "Good instructors created community; poor instructors didn't." These learners defined good instructors as present, prompt, energetic, responsive, and knowledgeable. Good instructors gave appropriate feedback and demonstrated a level of passion for their teaching and their subject. Experienced online learners were able to identify and label poor instruction; they felt that the strength of their community permitted them to survive poor instruction.

However, looking back over their experiences from their vantage point of having completed the program, learners observed that occasions of poor instruction had been hard on the group and that absentee instructors who had "no sense of community" had negatively affected the group's sense of purpose and motivation. At times like these, an "underground community" operated outside the class structure. Learners supported each other through difficult learning periods: "We knew the ropes and did what we had to do."

Research has indicated that instructor immediacy is key to creating a sense of community (Arbaugh, 2001; Christophel, 1990). Online learners depend on instructors to be involved, to offer guidance, and to demonstrate teaching ability through content expertise (Bishop, 2002). Although learners newly arriving at online course sites are more concerned with familiarizing themselves with content and course expectations than they are with chatting with their instructors, they soon come to expect the stability and comfort provided by reliable instructor presence (Conrad, 2002b). The role of the online instructor is multifaceted and demanding; it includes attending to cognitive, social, technical, and managerial functions (Collins & Berge, 1996). Learners request that instructors not only be present, but also that they be respectful, knowledgeable, and prompt (Bishop, 2002). Learners in this study, when indicating that instructors had contributed to their sense of community, commented on good instructors'

ability to facilitate discussion and “engaging in meaningful ways in online discussions, including personal discussions.”

*Ensuring community: “If you build it, they will come.”* Using the familiar metaphors of architect and builder, Edelstein and Edwards (2002) hold that facilitators “may opt to incorporate threaded discussion as a means of generating or promoting interaction”; community purports to follow. Certainly a carefully designed “ground floor,” containing not only fora for threaded discussions, but also venues for live chats and other group functions and lounges for social activity, must provide foundational support for effective learning environments (Schweir, 2001; Swan, 2001; Naidu, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The learners in this study, however, did not discuss course design as a contributing factor to their perception of sense of community.

Woods and Ebersole (2002) use the term *communal scaffolding* to describe the action of bridging “the gap between the task (cognitive, intellectual) and interpersonal (social, affective, interpersonal) requirements of online learning” (para. 5). Their model of communal scaffolding supports social learning theories that acknowledge that “communication ... is at the heart of the learning experience, whether the setting is online or face-to-face” (para. 6). This study, however, questions their vision of the communal architect “who erects a communal scaffold for the purpose of community building” (para. 3).

The tools for community-as-scaffold can be, and should be, imposed on online learning environments in an early attempt to lay a strong foundation for the dynamic process that will follow. Over time, external mediation can be replaced with internally grown community. Meaningful community creates a level of group self-sufficiency as communal scaffolding transitions to *communal intentionality*.

What are the effects over time of the presence of deliberate and purposive community among learners? The learners in this study expressed two levels of understanding of the role of community in their program.

### *Learners as Owners of Community*

When asked if or how their understanding of community had evolved from their initial stance, those who could not remember how they had expressed their initial understanding still commented that whatever their perception had been, it could not possibly have foreseen what they ultimately experienced as community members. Many responses echoed the positive emotions of this comment on the nature of community among this group.

I think of online community as a group of people who know each other well enough personally (f2f) that their online collaboration becomes powerful. This is evidenced by active online participation, sharing, mentoring and

support for not only the course work but also individual work (i.e., theses or projects) and personal exchanges.

My analysis of participants' descriptions of the strength and pervasiveness of their community yielded two understandings and applications of their sense of online community.

*Community "in the head": learners' perception and use of community as a learning tool*

From the outset, learners in this study identified community as a group construction with certain features, most notably shared purpose and commonality of time and space. Learners evolved, however, from understanding community as a function of their learning mode to appreciating it as an intrinsic part of their ability to learn online.

In the focus group discussion held two years after the group began their online studies, I asked participants to rate the worth of these relationships to their learning: learner-learner, learner-instructor, and learner-content (Moore, 1989). Although learner-learner relationships were judged as the most important element, the resulting discussion centered on the fusion of learner with content through discussion and communal exchange, that is, these learners felt that they could no longer consider content as separate from their own epistemological actions on the content. One learner commented that their knowledge of each other "had us way ahead in interpreting each other's messages."

Learners' comfort in their community and their familiarity *with* other members of the group also directed their choices of small-group partners for online learning activities. As time passed, they chose partners proactively rather than reactively, using their knowledge of each other's learning styles and strengths in planned and constructive ways.

*Community "in the heart": living as a community of learners*

Most learners in this study experienced community with their colleagues as one would enjoy a lifestyle: with comfort, familiarity, dependence, tolerance, and ease. As a group, their understanding of their connectedness did not waver; in fact testimony to the group's unity strengthened as time passed. Participants' ways of describing community grew broader, deeper, more lyrical, and more familial as time went on. Toward the end of their two-year stay together as a cohort, all but one of the learners ( $n=13$ ) who responded to a paper questionnaire indicated that their perceptions of community had shifted substantially; in describing what community had become for them, their language reflected the positive, humanistic emotions of sharing, caring, belonging, and support.

"I'm just one of the fish here," remarked one cohort member, metaphorically underscoring not only a sense of belonging, but also a sense of safety, of pattern, of expectation, and of rhythm. This "school of fish"

sought to stay together and to continue to bond through community by reaching out to its members who lived geographically far away. When meeting for social occasions, as they were wont to do, they placed long-distance telephone calls to the group members who were not able to be there physically. The strength of this outreach gesture was not lost on the learners to whom it was directed: one of them was one of the first participants to include the concept of family in her description of the group's sense of community.

Learners in this study demonstrated that they were concomitantly members of and users of community. One participant who described the social nature of their evolution thus: "I believe the development of online communities is dependent upon emergent leaders [who are] also social leaders" challenges those who would instead equate the development of community to the conquering of technical hurdles (Salmon, 2000).

### *The Value of Time*

This study was privileged to have as its participants a group of adult learners enrolled in a program that kept them tightly together for almost two years and then more loosely coupled—doing project work—for a minimum of four months more. Data gathered during this time indicated that elements of the online experience perceived by novice learners as inhibiting or frightening became in fact the glue of online community. Specifically, learners described the effects of group work, the frequency of sustained discussion, and the permanence of Web-based texts as powerful community builders. Group work was touted as "really getting that sense ... when you're sharing very specific ideas towards a common goal, versus discussion in an open forum," echoing research that documents greater learner comfort in small, well-managed groups than in larger, open discussions (Rourke & Conrad, 2004). Similarly, "the daily contact or the twice daily or thrice daily contact" afforded by sustained online contact fostered close connection with online colleagues: "I had used electronic medium to communicate with people in my own industry or with other friends that I have. It didn't have the same sort of significance that this does."

But perhaps the time factor played out most fully in the archival nature of online learning systems, in this case WebCT. The permanent record of Web postings has long been an inhibiting factor for novice online learners, who are beset by insecurities about the quality of both their thoughts and their ability to express those thoughts. It is common practice for new online learners to create their responses in offline documents and then cut and paste those spell-checked documents into online formats. Participants in this study, however, came to believe over time that "you keep the wisdom as you go along ... the next time you read it, you have to find

some way of dealing with it, to get some closure and understanding.” Their community grew hand in hand, as it were, with the written word.

### *Community and Theory*

The power of community’s application to effective pedagogy links to several important theories of distance education. Moore’s (1991) transactional distance theory, for example, defined distance as pedagogical and social rather than merely physical and geographical. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) community of inquiry model has evolved over the years, but has always linked community with social presence as an integral constituent in the online teaching-learning dynamic. Similarly, social learning theories hold that the interrelationships of the learning process are mediated by complex webs of factors both in and outside learners’ immediate learning domains (Wenger, 1998). “In short, understanding how to build and manage a positive social dynamic can encourage knowledge construction in ways that extend learning opportunities in the online classroom” (Woods & Ebersole, 2002, para. 2).

Recent studies acknowledge the importance of community as a key variable in successful online learning. Swan’s (2002) equilibrium model supports the findings of this study that suggest, first, the importance of online interaction as a vehicle for building and maintaining community; and second, that community will, and must, manifest itself among committed learners however it can. Swan’s study indicated a switch from affective behaviors to verbal expressions of community. This study’s participants “went underground” to maintain their required level of community when engaged in an online course that did not provide adequate opportunities for community involvement. The phenomenon of online learners’ role adaptation creates a continued interest in the connection of community, learning, and social process (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2004).

How important is the formation and healthy maintenance of community to online learners’ experiences? This study indicates that learners not only conceive of community as an important addition to their learning “tool kit,” but that they also experience community affectively in humanistic and caring ways. For these learners, learning in this way—engaging in graduate studies with a cohort over an extended period—the formation of a robust online community was of paramount importance.

Recent calls for the consideration of theory and theory development in the field of adult and distance education extol the need “to make sense of complex practices and phenomena” (Garrison, 2000, para. 44) by recognizing the collaboration among partners that is essential to successful distance learning. The creation of learner community ranks among those constituent pieces that are central to the teaching-learning dynamic. This



fact is especially evident in constructivist-based, cohort-centered programs like the one studied here. However, our theoretical appreciation of community should remain constant and should contribute substantially to considerations of “getting the mix right again” (Anderson, 2003) as the introduction of new technologies into the learning mix tempt us to reevaluate the effect of meaningful person-to-person interaction.

## Conclusion

Although research has borne out early studies that predicted that “CMC use would develop a new type of learning community that would provide a space for collective thinking and access to peers for socializing and communication” (Stacey, 1999, p. 15), it has also consistently called for further investigation into learners’ perceptions and use of community. This study was born of an opportunity to explore over a two-year period the perceptions about community of a cohort of online learners who were enrolled in graduate study part time. The conclusions that follow may offer insight into the creation and condition of community formed in this type of learning environment.

*Evolution of community over time.* The growth of community over time was marked by increased levels of comfort, intimacy, self-reliance, and self-knowledge. Initially perceived in terms of the technology that would sustain online learning, community came to be understood as a condition that embraced learners as individuals. This evolution was most strongly noted in the change of language used by learners to describe their sense of community: language that moved from issues of place and space to issues of relationship. Resultant relationships slipped over course boundaries and existed outside learners’ formal program linkages. Learners experienced community both cognitively and emotionally, using it as a tool to enhance the quality of their learning and as a comfort. Over time, learners in this study were able to muse and reflect on the presence and effects of community as if its existence were one of their program’s learning outcomes.

*Community grows; it is not made or given.* Neither course designers, administrators, nor instructors can give a sense of community to learners, although careful consideration of design and facilitation of learning environments is essential for the creation of appropriate spaces for community development. As community grows among its members, it becomes intentional and sustainable. It becomes a social fact with a tangible presence that is obvious to its members.

*Membership in the community.* The bonds established among learners in a cohort constitute the strength of community, although learners receive inspiration and support from friends, family, partners, and colleagues. Instructors are appreciated for their instructional adeptness: being

prompt, responsive, knowledgeable, and most of all present. In this study, learners could not agree on the value of instructors to community, but it was clear that their sense of community survived in spite of what they regarded as poor instruction. It should be noted that the instructor and course with which they were not pleased had occurred near the end of their two-year program when their group had already developed sufficient cohesiveness to carry it through what many condemned as a “not good” experience.

*The value of face-to-face interaction.* Face-to-face interaction remained the benchmark for this group of learners in spite of the robustness of their online community. Their face-to-face encounters encouraged a reciprocally valued relationship: seeing and meeting each other, they felt, was a contributing factor to the health of online community. In turn, the results of sustained online community contributed to renewed energy for their second and last face-to-face encounter that occurred one year into their two-year program. It was not clear, nor could it be determined from the data, whether those learners who were less positive about online learning at the beginning of their program clung more closely to the fact of, and the value of, the cohort’s face-to-face sessions. It was clear, however, that these learners did not perceive online learning as a substitute for face-to-face encounters and that they appreciated the program design that permitted them two three-week sessions together.

The findings of this study support the work of those (Harasim et al., 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Rourke et al., 2001; Swan, 2002) who in recent years have emphasized the importance of learner-learner interaction in the development of community. The results of this study also clearly reflect the presence and intimacy of the cohort factor, which brought learners together for an extended, familial learning experience.

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### *Appendix: Interview Questions, May 2003*

1. How would you define "online learning community" now?
2. Both previous surveys asked you about your understanding of online learning community? Has your perception of online community changed? If so, how? Can you point to any specific incident that led to or prompted this change?
3. Have you been surprised in any ways by the nature of the development of online community in your group?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10, how would you gauge your involvement or commitment to your group's online community?
5. On a scale of 1 to 10, how important would you say your involvement or commitment to your group's online community is to your:
  - a. sense of satisfaction with online learning?
  - b. learning success?
6. Do you think that you are experiencing a different type of "community" attachment to your group than you would in a face-to-face learning environment?
7. Would you prefer a face-to-face learning environment?
8. Are there ways that you can think of that online community could be better promoted or supported in your online group?