Chapter 9

Enhancing Online Adult Learning Communities Through the Lens of Social Climate Theory

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ABSTRACT

The dramatic expansion of online learning programs for adult degree-seeking professionals has opened significant access and opportunity for institutions of higher education, as well as for the adult learners they serve. However, this recent dramatic increase in online graduate degree offerings has posed challenges to educators and students. One of the most significant challenges is building and maintaining strong connections, and a sense of community, among the participants within the online setting. Social climate theory provides a useful lens for a reconsideration of the social climate of an online learning environment (synchronous and asynchronous) as embodying a "personality" that iteratively shapes the learning community and the experience of participants, and is shaped in return. This chapter presents an in-depth analysis of how educators can strategically enhance online classroom communities for adult degree-seeking professionals through the application of social climate theory principles and a proposed conceptual framework.

INTRODUCTION

In the recent literature regarding online learning for adults, the critical role of community for successful achievement of learning outcomes is more widely recognized than one to two decades ago when a more technical and self-directed conceptualization of online learning predominated (Hartley Bendixen, 2001; Land Greene, 2000; Rovai, 2002; Song, 2005). In the early days of online learning, numerous studies explored its key attributes including flexibility (Chizmar Walbert, 1999) and convenience (Poole, 2000),

while a lack of community in online learning environments was specifically identified as a key challenge and cause for learner dissatisfaction (Song, et al., 2004; Rovai, 2002; Shea, et al., 2001). The ways in which adult learners and their instructors adapt, perceive, and co-create community within the virtual classroom is influenced by the extent to which social connections are engendered by all participants, contributing to an overall social climate (Oren, et al., 2002; 2015; Ni, 2013). F Moreover, studies have consistently signaled that virtual classroom social climate elements, such as having more opportunities for human interaction with instructors and classmates, directly impact student satisfaction with their online learning experience (Ghaderizefreh Hoover, 2018; Shea, et al., 2002). Although research suggests that the virtual classroom climate with regard to community is affected—positively and negatively—by instructor behaviors, course design and structure, course clarity, and student connectedness (Kaufmann, et al., 2015), the strategic cultivation of a positive climate remains elusive to some faculty who are re-sponsible for the facilitation of high quality online learning experiences for adults in professional degree programs (Dewaele, et al., 2022; Sithole, et al., 2019). The increased enrollment in online education for adult learners in the wake of COVID-19 has put significant additional pressure on instructors to dem-onstrate a facility with employing different strategies to create a positive climate in online classes (Qui, 2022; Shahnama et al., 2021; Dewaele et al., 2022).

Given that the role of classroom climate is central to adult learners' assessment of their educational experience (Reid, et al., 2003; Ghaderizefreh Hoover, 2018), and online professional degree programs are growing exponentially, understanding how to facilitate a positive social climate for adults learning in an online community is an essential skill for instructors (Sriharan, 2020; Sithole, et al., 2019). Larger institutional implications for high quality online instruction in professional degree program contexts also exist, as colleges and universities seek to expand online offerings to enhance revenue and promote orga-nizational sustainability (Elliot, et al., 2015; Gamage, et al., 2020). Therefore, a consideration of social climate in online learning environments, and the affiliated theoretical framework (Moos,1979,1984,1987) should provide deeper insight into the way social climate is constructed within an online adult profes-sional degree learning community, and effective means for leveraging it for the benefit of students, instructors, and the institution.

WHAT IS COMMUNITY?

The notion of community has long been the subject of diverse definitions and interpretations within academic discourse. The seminal contribution of McMillian and Chavis (1986) provides a useful theory for understanding the meaning of a sense of community as a social force. Their framework highlights four fundamental attributes of a sense of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection (McMillian Chavis, 1986). The notion of membership describes an individual's perception of belonging or interconnectedness within a specific group, distinguished by a sense of personal identification and investment. The term "influence" is conceptualized by McMillan and Chavis as the perception of members' abilities to exercise an impact on the group, coupled with the notion of the group being valued by its members. Integration and fulfillment of needs describes the ways in which resources which are furnished to the members of a group through their membership will satisfy certain needs. When individual needs are met within a community, this reinforces loyalty to the group which inspires ongoing engagement. Elements which drive need fulfillment within the community include shared values, competence of fellow members, and the success and status of the community. A

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