Nursing student perceptions of community in online learning

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ABSTRACT
Nursing faculty need to understand the unique aspects of online learning environments and develop new pedagogies for teaching in the virtual classroom. The concept of community is important in online learning and a strong sense of community can enhance student engagement and improve learning outcomes in online courses. Student perceptions of community in online learning environments were explored in this study. Five focus group sessions were held and online nursing students were asked to give examples of experiences related to sense of community. Fifteen major themes emerged: class structure, required participation, teamwork, technology, becoming, commonalities, disconnects, mutual exchange, online etiquette, informal discussions, aloneness, trepidation, unknowns, nonverbal communication and anonymity. Themes sorted into the categories of structural, processual and emotional factors. Theme descriptions show how sense of community can be enhanced and/or diminished in online courses. This study adds depth and detail to the limited body of research on sense of community in distance education in nursing courses.

Keywords: sense of community; nursing; student perceptions; focus groups; RN to BSN completion; distance education

INTRODUCTION
Phenomenal growth in the number of online nursing courses has occurred at the associate, baccalaureate and graduate levels. Distance learning is fast transforming current assumptions of higher education and creating questions about what constitutes quality in education (American Association of Colleges of Nursing, 2005). The virtual environment is different from the traditional classroom with reduced cues among the instructor and students, more text-based course content, constant access and different instructional approaches required. Nursing instructors need new pedagogies to deliver online courses.

The National Study of Student Engagement’s first ever survey of undergraduate student experiences in online courses found online courses positively related to more active learning and collaboration compared with classroom based courses (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2008). Online instructors recognize that developing a sense of community in the virtual classroom is a critical strategy for successful online instruction. Evidence is accumulating in support of a positive
correlation between sense of community and student engagement and persistence, course satisfaction and perceived learning (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Seunghee, 2007; Ouutz, 2006; Rovai, 2002a). High levels of community have also been shown to improve group dynamics (i.e., increased cooperation among students, commitment to group goals and support to others) (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, & Robins, 2000; Rovai, 2002a). As a caring profession, nursing can use sense of community in virtual classrooms as a model of professional caring practice.

Student perspectives are important to study because their perspectives of e-learning environments are not always consistent with perspectives of course developers or instructors (Imel, 2002; Martens, Bastiaens, & Kirschner, 2007). This study was designed to explore sense of community among students in asynchronous online nursing courses. Understanding the student experience of community will facilitate design of engaging virtual course environments and development of effective online teaching strategies.

**BACKGROUND**

Factors related to the success of online courses consistently identified in the literature and empirically supported include a clear and consistent course structure, instructor interactions that are frequent and helpful, and valued and active discussion (Swan, 2002). A strong sense of community develops from ‘joint work’ of instructors and students (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006, p. 176). Sense of community has become a popular concept for academicians and researchers interested in understanding the optimal conditions for online learning. Community in educational settings has been defined in various ways but typically involves the elements of connectedness and learning (Rovai, 2002b; Shea, n.d.). Connectedness involves group membership and trust of members. Learning involves shared educational goals and benefits resulting through interaction (Shea, n.d.). When community is viewed as what people do together versus where or how they do it, community can exist in virtual space (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000).

Only a limited number of studies have explored the student experience of community in online environments and the course design, interactions and communications that build community. Conrad (2002) found through interviews with seven students that community building occurred through activities such as group projects and discussion. Conrad and Gilbert, Morton, and Rowley (2007) found that students highly valued discussion forums and the interactions and learning that subsequently occurred. Students learned from the postings and perspectives of other students. Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) found through telephone interviews that peer associations were important for support, encouragement, access to resources and learning.

Ouutz (2006) interviewed online students who scored high and low on the Classroom Community Scale developed by Rovai (2002b) and found that community online was important to students. A pattern of connections to instructors and students and quality learning was found in courses rated high in sense of community. Student responses to courses rated low in sense of community showed a pattern of poor teacher characteristics, low levels of peer connections, individual assignments and poor quality of learning. El Mansour (2007, p. 4) found through interviews with college students that online courses can result in ‘feeling lost in cyberspace’ and feeling frustrated by technical problems and course management systems. Other barriers to community were student concerns of ‘looking stupid’, instructor tone or messages that the course is purely academic and side chatter (Conrad, 2002, p. 8).

Studies are scarce on the nursing student experience of community in online courses. The few existing studies were not exclusive to nursing but also included participants from other related disciplines. Moule (2006) used online diaries, interviews and online discussion from students in varied health professions to evaluate the presence of community in online courses and found essential aspects of the community of practice framework (i.e. mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoires) in online learning environments. Focus groups
were used to explore perceptions of students and lecturers involved in distance learning programs in nursing, nutrition and family medicine (Mash et al., 2006). Interaction (student–instructor and student–student) was regarded by both groups as essential to encourage community, provide motivation and support and create opportunities for learning and exchange of ideas. Nursing has embraced online learning, but has not examined the impact and possible influences on student learners.

The purpose of the study was to explore nursing student perceptions of online community and describe experiences that enhanced or detracted from sense of community in these learning environments. A better understanding of student perceptions in online learning will provide insight into nurse education challenges, particularly online learning and the strategies required to build a better future.

**Methods**

Focus group interviews were the method of choice because of their value in capturing the authentic voices of participants, allowing for moderator probing and maximizing candor and spontaneous group dynamics. It was anticipated that such collective and original responses would yield extremely rich data. Focus groups were conducted via teleconference to include greater geographic participation. Over a 3-week period, five focus groups were conducted with three to four participants per group. Group size was kept purposefully small, which allowed discussion to flow comfortably among participants in each of the teleconference focus group (Krueger, n.d.).

Participants recruited were registered nurses (RNs) completing their bachelor in science of nursing (BSN) degree from programs at a major state university system in the Midwest region of the United States (nursing programs on five campuses). Following Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval, announcements soliciting participation in the study were posted in nursing program e-newsletters and in online courses. Study criteria required that participants had completed two or more online courses. Individuals who expressed interest, met study inclusion criteria and completed a study consent and demographic questionnaire were scheduled into a focus group. Prior to the teleconference focus group, participants were sent a list of key questions that would be discussed in the focus group (Krueger, n.d.). Participants were instructed to dial into their assigned focus group using a toll-free phone number at a specified date and time. Each student who agreed to participate, with the exception of one, attended his/her scheduled focus group.

Each focus group, which lasted approximately 90 minutes, was facilitated by two experienced moderators. A brief introductory script was read at the beginning of each focus group and eight key questions were asked to guide the discussion. Key questions focused on participant experiences of community and isolation, actions taken to build community and value of community in online courses. Questions included: (1) Give a specific example of a time in an online course in which you felt connected or part of a community; (2) Give a specific example of a time in an online course in which you felt quite isolated or anonymous; (3) What have you or a peer done to build community in an online course?; and (4) What can be done or has been done by instructors to facilitate a strong sense of community in online courses? All focus groups were facilitated in a similar manner with participants encouraged to respond to all questions. Focus group sessions were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim into print.

Using a modified version of LaPelle’s (2004) technique, Microsoft Word was used to create data tables for each focus group with columns for participant identification code, content theme coding, original participant responses and sequence numbers. The researchers individually read through focus group data tables and identified significant phrases related to sense of community. After multiple re-readings and in vivo coding of the data, themes evolved. A codebook, bearing each semantic code and its description, was developed. Participant responses were coded in accordance with the defined themes. Code validation was performed by comparing
assigned codes and participant responses among the three researchers. Researchers further examined the data for additional themes and sub themes.

Theme narratives, including a text description of the theme and participant quotes, were developed to further illustrate each theme. In addition to the triangulated mode of analysis, focus group participants reviewed and verified theme narratives to ensure credibility of the themes.

**Findings**

Focus group participants \(N = 18\) were predominantly female (89%), white (100%) and attending an RN to BSN Completion Program part time (100%). A total of 56% were employed full time. Participants were located in eight states throughout the United States. Participants had completed at least two or more online courses (range of 2–12 courses) and fell into the following age categories: 25–34 (28%), 35–44 (22%) and 45–54 (50%).

In reviewing participant reported experiences of community in online courses, 15 themes emerged reflecting factors that supported and/or detracted from sense of community. Findings are clustered into structural, processual and emotional factors.

**Structural factors**

Structural themes, illustrated in Table 1, included class structure, required participation, teamwork and technology. *Class structure* contained responses about instructor presence and style, structured activities such as discussion boards and small groups and the syllabus. Closely associated with this theme was *required participation* which involved forced engagement through mandatory course activities and discussion postings. *Teamwork* covered collaborative assignments such as group activities and team scenarios. Participants indicated awareness that their participation in the team effort could be viewed through their postings. *Technology,*

<table>
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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Selected participant quotes</th>
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<td>Class structure</td>
<td>[Instructor] ‘adding comments that both stimulate conversation and that redirect’</td>
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<td></td>
<td>‘The instructor created subgroups for discussions which was nice.’</td>
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<td>‘It was actually easier to forge a more connected sense of community...online because you didn’t have the environmental distractions that you have being in an open class... People are talking, listening to their iPods; they’re on their phones, sleeping or whatever.’</td>
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<td>Required participation</td>
<td>‘... It almost seems like it has to be a mandatory thing from the instructor, at least to initially get people to get to work with each other.’</td>
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<td>‘required to have a buddy and talk about the assignment’</td>
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<td>[required to] ‘post to somebody that you disagreed with their response’</td>
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<td>‘I definitely feel that with these courses, in particular, as opposed to the in classroom experience, it’s definitely a much better sense of community in that everyone contributes. When you’re in the classroom experience... I’ve taken a number of classes where I can remember that people haven’t said a word in class the whole semester.’</td>
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<td>Teamwork</td>
<td>‘I think if we are able to go into teams..., it really helps because you feel closer to those students.’</td>
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<td>‘definitely required a lot of interaction’</td>
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<td>[instructors] ‘read the postings and see how people are participating;’</td>
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<td>‘a little frustrating to try to do group work ... you get people submitting their stuff late.’</td>
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<tr>
<td>Technology</td>
<td>‘I think if I had had better computer access I would have felt more connected overall’</td>
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<td>‘that first course I was so nervous about using the computer that I would actually feel sick to my stomach when I had to sit down with it.’</td>
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the cornerstone of virtual instruction, involved participant knowledge and skills with computers as well as dealing with computer malfunctions.

**Processual factors**

Processual factors identified in this study included becoming, commonalities, disconnects, mutual exchange, online etiquette and informal discussion. *Becoming* involved the process of learning to be an online by activities such as comparing the differences with conventional classes, dispelling misperceptions and getting ‘into the rhythm’. The theme of *commonalities* dealt with responses about how participants identified similar shared interests and experiences (e.g. goals, majors) with classmates through their interactions. In contrast, *disconnects* involved dissimilarities found by participants, such as disparate opinions or personal differences. Central to online courses, *mutual exchange* involved reciprocity or the ‘real exchange’ that occurred and allowed participants to know that others are there (e.g. talking back and forth, giving feedback to others). *Online etiquette*, another part of the online experience, involves spoken or unspoken principles and rules of conduct considered necessary for online communication or in online courses. Lastly, *informal discussion* was the frequent casual chatting occurring outside course content through an open discussion forum. Selected participant quotes are listed in Table 2.

**Emotional factors**

Emotional factors, described in Table 3, include aloneness, trepidations, unknowns, nonverbal communication and anonymity. The theme, *aloneness*, involved not knowing other students, being away from the course for a short time, or starting a first online course. Closely aligned with feelings of aloneness were *trepidations*. This theme reflected the apprehensions students had about online learning, such as feeling overwhelmed by course materials or intimidated by overachievers. Also, participants described many *unknowns* about course specifics, classmates and instructors in the virtual classroom. *Nonverbal communication* involved the lack of face to face communication, which at times, required extra effort to know classmates and understand communications. The theme, *anonymity*, covered the continuum of comfort which students grappled with about how much personal identity to share online.

**Discussion**

This study gives voice to nursing students, who increasingly are becoming consumers of distance learning, one of the most rapidly growing approaches to the educational experience (Moore & Tait, 2002). In the focus group discussions, the primacy of sense of community was evident, as the specifics were provided of what makes this learning environment engaging, facilitative and supportive.

**Structural factors**

Evolving themes converged into three pieces of a puzzle: structural factors, processual factors and emotional factors (see Figure 1). These three foci parallel, yet are distinct from, other studies concerning distance education. Moore's Theory of Transactional Distance has been referenced often with distance education. One key variable in the theory is structure, which refers to aspects of the course design and organization, such as learning objectives, planned interaction and assignments (Moore, 1973, 1993). In this study, Moore's structural elements were echoed, though the findings showed that structure was also related to the instructor’s style; teaching strategies, including required participation; teamwork; and technology.

*Class structure and required participation.* In online classes and discussions, focus group participants benefited from faculty involvement as positive reinforcers or coaches, content experts and facilitators of collaborative learning. These findings are consistent with Shea et al. (2006) who found that instructors using more teaching presence behaviors were associated with higher levels of sense of community. Moreover, group members of this study appreciated having clear guidelines for planned communications, such as mandatory postings and identified required participation as
<table>
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<th>Selected participant quotes</th>
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<td>Becoming</td>
<td>‘I would say in the beginning you feel rather isolated until you start learning the personalities. It takes a little bit longer because of the computer language and the fact that you are just looking at a screen of letters. Definitely over a short period of time, I feel like a learning community.’&lt;br&gt;‘I thought it would be less interactive and more isolating than it turned out to be’&lt;br&gt;‘getting my sea legs and getting comfortable with it.’</td>
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<td>Commonalities</td>
<td>‘... I have most often felt like a member of a community. I feel like it’s everyone’s in it for the same purpose, we’re all nurses,’&lt;br&gt;‘We’re all going in the same direction’</td>
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<td>Disconnects</td>
<td>‘I’m older and I don’t know what they’re talking about half the time;’&lt;br&gt;‘There are students that are so incredibly opinionated about certain topics’&lt;br&gt;‘It’s when you write something and don’t get a response, even from some of the professors, you don’t get a response. You feel like, ‘Well do they not like what I wrote.’ That isolates me a little bit.’</td>
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<td>Mutual exchange</td>
<td>‘Sometimes they (the instructors) will have a specific activity... and that has helped to get to know people and then the other thing that fosters that sense of community is when people respond to one another and if humor is used, that also seems to help.’&lt;br&gt;‘A real exchange that’s happening’&lt;br&gt;‘feedback whether from the instructor or other students, it makes you feel more connected’&lt;br&gt;‘see it from a different angle that I may not have noticed before in reading what other people have to say.’</td>
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<td>Online etiquette</td>
<td>‘And I was quite surprised by some of the comments that I read...’&lt;br&gt;‘My initial response was anger, but you obviously can’t - how can somebody write that?’&lt;br&gt;‘... Just learning to communicate properly.’ ‘some people don’t have Internet etiquette’&lt;br&gt;‘you really have to think about what you say to somebody online ...’&lt;br&gt;‘We all deserve to be treated with respect ...’</td>
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<td>Informal discussion</td>
<td>‘talk with other members in an offline sort of way’&lt;br&gt;‘Just have conversation about something other than the class’&lt;br&gt;‘kind of an outlet.’&lt;br&gt;‘I’ve noticed that when people have problems, either at home or at work or in some areas of their lives, that they may put something in the ‘water cooler’ section (of the discussion board) and then other people will offer encouragement.’&lt;br&gt;‘Well, my sister has terminal cancer and so we were talking about that and... I used some examples in the class and she (the instructor) had just responded, ‘if you need more information on this, I’ll be glad to send you something.’ So I responded back, ‘I would love anything you could give me.’ So she had actually posted it for not only myself at that point, she just... posted it online.’&lt;br&gt;‘It really...humanized the experience of an online program.’</td>
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**Table 3: Emotional Factors**

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<th>Theme</th>
<th>Selected Participant Quotes</th>
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| Aloneness              | ‘I have doubts like an isolated learner, because it’s just me and my computer’  
‘out of the loop’  
‘And I wished there was someone else to talk to about it. You know somebody who was right here and we could look at it together. That’s the only time I really felt isolated.’  
‘For me, in the online course, I’m a very independent learner…I like to feel isolated while I’m learning.’   |
| Trepidations           | ‘I’ll put a posting in and think ‘maybe I didn’t do that right, maybe I did that wrong and maybe it wasn’t any good,’ that kind of thing.’  
‘It was just so hit or miss to get a comment and to not know a grade until three-quarters of the way to the end of the class, you have really no feel for how you’re doing because you’re just kind of out there. Communication is so vital with everything in life and it’s no different in the classroom online.’   |
| Unknowns               | ‘As far as a sense of community, that first (online) course was really big because of the fact that I had no idea what to expect and I didn’t expect people to be connected to each other and share as much with each other…’  
‘It is really big because of the technolog…’  
‘You are not daydreaming out the window… or listening to the kid next door snoring or tapping the pencil.’   |
| Nonverbal communication| ‘I see names of my classmates, but it’s kind of hard not having that face to face conversation.’  
‘I think people are more free to participate online because they don’t get caught up in, maybe, being shy as opposed to being in a classroom… I think people more anonymous are willing to maybe give a more honest, maybe vocal participation in the class. And everyone does have a voice.’   |
| Anonymity              | ‘I have doubts like an isolated learner, because it’s just me and my computer’  
‘out of the loop’  
‘And I wished there was someone else to talk to about it. You know somebody who was right here and we could look at it together. That’s the only time I really felt isolated.’  
‘For me, in the online course, I’m a very independent learner…I like to feel isolated while I’m learning.’   |

Important in developing a sense of community. Students who tended to be more passive learners were forced to be more active. Although required participation is a hallmark of most online classes, this approach has received only limited attention in the literature. An exception is an article by Gulati (2008) who considers ‘compulsory participation’ to be a possible threat to student individuality and as foundational to non-productive power differentials in interactions. Though these alienating dynamics were not evident in the current study, it is acknowledged that rigidly structured learning experiences may interfere with student autonomy.

Teamwork. Teamwork, another component of structure, was acknowledged by students as instrumental in promoting a sense of community. Teamwork gave students an opportunity to interact with peers and feel connected. Rovai (2002a) identified small group activities as positively correlating with sense of community. Thorpe and Godwin (2006) regarded interactivity as important to learning and identified many collaborative benefits with online learning environments (e.g., learning from more experienced students; knowing that others had difficulty with an assignment). For some, however, group work created difficulties (e.g., scheduling, late submissions) and dissonance, rather than community.

Technology. Finally, technology, the most ubiquitous structural aspect of the virtual classroom, was considered. Essentially, technology provides a gathering and communication space for participants (Schwier, 2002). The accessibility and effective use of technology for online discourse facilitates virtual learning communities (Schwier, 2002). Study participants valued easy access to course materials and the ability to perform a number of other operations that facilitated learning or connected them with others. Technology can certainly influence learner satisfaction and moderate the growth of a
learning community’ (Liu et al., 2007, p. 12). It should be borne in mind, however, that a sense of community will not occur just because of the use of technology itself (Barab, 2003). Study findings demonstrated that computer glitches, slow operating systems and the need to spend time on technical issues distracted from learning. This study was consistent with Liu in that frequent technical problems can result in learners feeling less connected with the learning community. Thus, the role of technology in community building requires deliberate planning and designing with available technical support, as needed. Such a strategy provides a secure, psychologically safe, yet open and inviting environment for information sharing and knowledge construction (Barab, 2003). Competence with computer skills is also a necessity.

**Processual factors**

Building on the structure of online courses, processual factors constituted the actions or mechanisms which promoted confidence, motivation and learning. These actions heighten the level of interaction.

**Becoming.** The most dominant of the processual factors and a core experience of focus group participants, was the process of becoming an online learner. This socialization process involved students self-directedly learning the idiosyncrasies of online instruction as they gained competence with the internet, mastered the course content and simultaneously monitored self-disclosure. A number of participants were stressed and overwhelmed by the nuances of online learning. This tedious juggling of new skills is well documented in the literature.

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**FIGURE 1: NURSING STUDENTS’ PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNITY: KEY FACTORS AND THEMES**
Nursing student perceptions of community in online learning

and is particularly challenging for the adult learner (Coombs-Richardson, 2007; Reay, Ball, & David, 2002; Zemblylas, 2008). Becoming an onliner, however, was also depicted as a progressive continuum whereby participants moved from novice to expert. During the participants’ first experience with online classes and throughout the process, they consciously and unconsciously differentiated online courses from conventional classes. They identified pros and cons of the virtual versus the traditional classroom. More than one half of the students were thrilled about the convenience and other aspects of online learning, however, the artificiality of online courses was of particular concern for some, requiring major adjustments. In Conrad’s (2002) interpretive study of the nature of online community, respondents referred to some online courses as having stilted ambience. That students must be deliberate in overcoming this negotiated or situated environment resonates in other studies focusing on online learning (Conrad, 2002; Rovai, 2002a). Among the focus group participants, standard and ingenious strategies were engendered as students learned from others or used trial and error strategies. In addition, misperceptions of online courses were dispelled as students became more engaged. Some non-believers actually came to prefer online courses to conventional approaches after enrolling in several classes. Immersion in the process of taking the courses online promoted self-confidence and efficacy and ultimately won over the majority of onliners.

Mutual exchange. Engagement in online learning was facilitated by mutual exchange. Feedback from students and faculty promoted trust, confidence and learning. Students referred to ‘real exchange that’s happening’ and contrasted this reinforcement with the purportedly more passive experience that may take place in a lecture hall with note taking. These findings are consistent with studies related to peer learning and collaborative learning (Stein, Wanstreet, Calvin, Overtoom, & Wheaton, 2005). Findings in the current study revealed that mutual exchange was valued as a means of feeling connected and certainly trust was engendered. According to Rovai (2002a), candor comes with trust as participants feel safe and subsequently expose gaps in their learning. In doing so, participants anticipate that others in the community will respond in supportive ways. Conversely, some communications were superficial and excessive. Other researchers have also acknowledged the practice of over-posting not only as a means to connect but for reassurance or to gain approval (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Conrad, 2002). Clearly, increased learner interaction is not an inherently or self-evidently positive educational goal. Unquestionably, quality of interaction should be the focus of establishing community as online learning takes place (Stein et al., 2005).

Informal discussion. Informal discussion was another processual component instrumental in establishing social capital and building community. Casual conversations outside of the boundaries of the course helped build ‘friendships and camaraderie’ among students. Exchange of information and support for personal problems were gleaned from this informal chat which served as a ‘kind of outlet’ for the participants. Although this water cooler engagement is a strategy the participants found to be an important part of bonding with other members of the course and ultimately facilitated their learning, research findings are conflicted regarding the value of this practice (Conrad, 2002; Gulati, 2008). For example, Conrad documented that this informal, outside of the classroom dialogue was actually superfluous to the learning process.

Commonalities and disconnects. Findings have been consistent, however, that commonalities among participants, another theme, promote a sense of community. According to Rovai (2002a), the experience of sharing common goals, identifying with other students and becoming familiar with each others’ work allowed for reciprocal awareness, a positive correlate of a sense of community. By the same token, disconnections among the students consistently had the potential for isolating class members. Different reasons for taking the courses, levels of interest in the course content, variations in the pace to complete coursework
and employment schedule/demands factored into disconnects. With autonomous students going ‘in different directions’, using unfamiliar jargon and wondering if their posting even mattered to anyone, establishing commonalities was essential. Importantly, however, one student pointed out how ‘personal differences’ could ‘bring up the learning curve’. ‘You’re maybe not all starting at the same point and everyone has had different experiences, they work in different settings…they can be from all different fields, so you’re getting all kinds of different input, which may be totally foreign to you. But you learn a lot that way, too.’ Thus, embracing the diversity of cyberculture is essential for enhancing a sense of community.

**Online etiquette.** Finally, appropriate etiquette during online coursework, though a separate prosessional theme, was a concern that traversed all focus groups. The finding associated with this theme, that rules of conduct in online communications are necessary, yet nebulous, is consistent with numerous studies on online communications. The respondents in our study clearly grappled with the conventions of politeness and the use of community participation skills (Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004) in virtual classrooms, phrased by other researchers as netiquette (Scheuermann & Taylor, 1997) or digital citizenship (Ribble, Bailey, & Ross, 2004). Some rules were assumed and seemingly based on common sense (or common decency) while other protocols were created to fit a particular situation. The uneven and uncertain knowledge of proper online behavior generally reflects delays between advances in technology and the development of appropriate protocols to use it. Clearly, to engender a sense of community among online class participants, the ones who know and are guided by the evolving rules of this new culture may well have an advantage over those who do not (Scheuermann and Taylor, 2007).

**Emotional factors**

Study participants clearly identified emotional/personal factors as critical for having a sense of community in online learning environments. In previous literature emotional connection was identified as one of the essential multidimensional constructs necessary in the assessment of sense of community (Peterson, Speer, & Hughey, 2006). Although historically, emotion is treated as separate from cognition, contemporary authors such as Lehman (2006), Picard et al. (2004) and Woods and Ebersole (2003) agree that the feelings component needs to be re-integrated with cognition in educational technologies, theories and online teaching strategies for optimal learning results. Clearly positive (excitement and encouragement) and negative (anger, frustration and isolation) emotions were expressed by focus group members as they described their online learning experiences. Emotions are important because they can either impede or motivate learning (Dirkx, 2001; Yorks & Kasl, 2002). These current findings revealed that ultimately, emotional context can contribute to the nurturance or the dismantling of a learning community.

**Unknown and anonymity.** Student responses, categorized as unknown, varied from not knowing or trusting classmates to unexpected connectedness and sharing with classmates. Similarly, anonymity reflected the students’ dilemmas across a continuum of how much personal identity would be shared with online classmates. Conrad (2002) posited that lack of anonymity in online learners factored into increased sense of inhibition, which was consistent with some student responses in this study: ‘I’m normally very shy in a live situation… I’m better on telephone and typewriter (than face to face)’ and ‘I can be very verbal (online)... in class I would not be the one to raise a hand.’ While not noted in this study, Marx (1999) indicated that the frequent context, tone and style of communication in online postings can identify individuals to each other in a class, even if the postings were anonymous.

**Trepidations.** Student responses listed varying apprehensions and uncertainty about online learning and not knowing online classmates. Students identified personal strategies used in
online learning to overcome trepidation, such as frequently checking grades or aligning their posts to assimilate postings of classmates. These strategies reflect Conrad’s (2002) findings that students made concerted efforts to ‘be nice’ and maintain a harmonious balance in the online classroom. Lehman (2006) cited examples of teaching strategies such as interactive discussion and activities that increased student assurance, confidence and engagement in the learning experience, thereby decreasing trepidation.

Nonverbal communication. Closely associated with trepidation was concern about the inability to discern nonverbal cues. Some students in this study found it hard to communicate without nonverbal cues (e.g. facial expressions) and expressed fear of missing nonverbal information and possibly offending a classmate in an online encounter. Conversely, some students enjoyed online learning and described enhanced learning because they did not have to deal with distracting nonverbal behaviors of peers, such as pencil tapping. Previous literature has not addressed the effect of nonverbal communication on sense of community in online learning.

Aloneness. Student responses of feeling alone in cyberspace or ‘out of the loop’ from other classmates revealed another concern and paralleled the student responses found by Conrad (2002). Aloneness can be decreased as sense of community is increased through required course dialogue, as described by Moore’s theory of transactional distance (the psychological and communications space between learners and instructors) (Rovai, 2002a; Stein et al., 2005). Unique to this study, aloneness was also created by a lack of validation or support from co-workers outside the course.

CONCLUSION/IMPLICATIONS

Developing a sense of community has many direct benefits in the virtual classroom. Some online educators and students question the notion that community in online learning is important (Liu et al., 2007). Their rationale is built on the belief that the advantages of online learning are flexibility and self-paced learning. In the view of these authors, because students have multiple responsibilities, particularly as adult learners, putting effort into building a sense of community would be an extra burden on both the students and instructors. The goals of online learning, collaborative versus unilateral, may be a persistent dilemma. Importantly, findings from the current study clearly underscore the criticality of online instructors creating learning pathway options as suggested by Leach, Neutze, and Zepke (2001), to support an array of learning styles and needs.

Responses from students who completed online courses reflect a myriad of variables to consider regarding sense of community in distance learning. Although the general consensus was that sense of community is desirable, achievable and can be structured, a number of questions and unexplored nuances remain. Of particular relevance is the question of how distance education can be structured in a manner that will successfully meet the diverse learning needs of its targeted audiences. Focus group respondents provided good examples of what did and did not work, what put participants at ease or made them uncomfortable, ideal conditions they wish they had had, as well as what convinced students to become onliners. Various strategies to facilitate community building have been offered by other authors. For example, Rovai (2002b) suggested using both task-driven and socio-emotional interactions to enhance sense of community. Similarly, Misanchuk and Anderson (2001) proposed increasing levels of communication and interaction to promote online learning communities. Because of the range of responses in our study, however, it is difficult to develop a composite of what unequivocally constitutes a sense of community for the study participants, making it essential to build the body of knowledge around strategies to enhance sense of community.

Another core question centers on how online nursing courses should be structured to facilitate the modeling and eliciting of caring behavior, the core of nursing practice? The benefits of online courses for those who would not otherwise...
be able to attend classes because of their lack of proximity to an educational program, family and employment responsibilities, health conditions and others reasons, are indisputable. The online educational option is particularly salient given the persistent nursing shortage and the current economic decline. As the online educational experience becomes more mainstreamed, the challenge is to construct learning communities that will be transformed into what nursing faculty hope students will mimic in healing environments. However, the caring behavior that nursing faculty purportedly model in the classroom, in clinical settings and beyond, is significantly modified over the wire. Nonverbal behavior, the lack of which was a major concern of the research participants, cannot be simulated. Our findings, however, support the fact that politeness, concern, respect and trust can be conveyed in online written responses. Results further suggest that innovative approaches must be implemented to bridge the virtual and real environments for the development of social capital and optimal learning.

Distance education is here to stay and continues to expand exponentially. As the horizons of nursing education grow locally, nationally and globally, discussions about how best to transmit the core constructs and values of the profession are vital. Creating online learning environments will increasingly reflect the range of issues that permeate the community at large. Pedagogical, ethical, technological and philosophical concerns must be carefully contemplated whenever online courses, particularly related to nursing, are being constructed, taught and evaluated. The student respondents gave food for thought that hopefully will provide some insight and guidance as nurse educators and students embark on this journey together.

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