

Chapter 2

Building an Adult Learning Community While Converting an In–Person Degree Program to an Online Format: A Case Study in Strategies and Lessons Learned

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ABSTRACT

This case study examines the transition of a residential professional graduate degree program in educational leadership at a major research university to an online learning model. The case incorporates the observations and field notes of the program director and the inaugural online course instructor, along with survey data collected from students, investigating the opportunities and challenges of converting an established, community-rich, in-person professional degree program to an online model, with a focus on maintaining a strong sense of community. The theoretical framework and relevant scholarship are initially considered, followed by the case. Specific instructional strategies for building a sense of community and the affiliated evidence of the case are also discussed. The chapter concludes with key recommendations for how instructors and university program administrators can partner to design effective environments that foster engagement and meaningful learning experiences for online professional graduate students, contributing to long-term benefits for the institution.

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INTRODUCTION

The field of online graduate education has demonstrated significant growth in recent years, offering adult learners access to an ever-growing number of professional degree programs unbounded by geography. In the wake of COVID-19, college and university administrators rapidly wisened to the benefits of expanding online professional degree offerings, given the potential for increased revenue generation through scalability. Adjacent prospective benefits such as enhanced student diversity, institutional brand amplification, and expanded applicant pools have also served as significant motivating forces in institutions' efforts to increase online professional degree offerings. These initiatives have been reinforced by the fact that the immersive global experiment of remote learning amidst the pandemic accelerated the normalization of virtual learning, diminishing the stigma associated with earning a professional degree online and increasing the marketability of such programs. Despite these overall benefits, challenges and tensions are emergent as institutions of higher education continue to weigh the affordances and constraints of programmatic changes from in-person to online modalities against a complex backdrop of limited instructional design/faculty resources, multifaceted student needs, ethical phenomena, and broader institutional values and objectives.

When adult learners participate in online degree programs, their sense of community can play a crucial role in shaping their learning experiences; developing their sense of institutional loyalty and belonging; and promoting their academic and professional outcomes. As more higher education institutions develop and launch online professional graduate programs, providing a sense of community should be a top priority. Our primary objective in this study was to investigate the various ways in which community can be built relatively rapidly, yet authentically, in an online professional degree program for adult learners. While our study focuses primarily on interactions that occurred in synchronous settings, when all participants were present simultaneously on the Zoom platform, we discuss asynchronous activities and strategies as well. We consider the intentional, improvisational, and ritualistic techniques that were deployed with the first online cohort of eighteen adult learners (in an eight-year-old formerly residential program) to cultivate a sense of community over the course of fourteen weeks. Our aim is to understand the key inputs that facilitated the shift from an initial online synchronous gathering of a diverse collection of strangers to a cohesive group characterized by acts of trust, humor, support, and camaraderie and exemplifying a powerful sense of community. We also seek to establish that an online graduate degree program model, which is inherently accessible to more people, has the capacity to result in greater cohort diversity over time, and therefore, enhanced learning outcomes. Finally, we aim to explore the perceived quality and salience of the new online cohort's sense of their capacity to establish community as adult online learners.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY THEORY

This study is grounded in a constructivist perspective in which learning is viewed as an active, social enterprise of ongoing, collective meaning-making (Bada & Olusegun, 2015; Tam, 2000). The community of inquiry theoretical framework focuses on the intentional development of a learning community. This kind of learning community is characterized as a group of individuals who engage in collaborative critical discourse and reflective practices with the aim of constructing personal meaning and confirming mutual understanding (Garrison et al., 2001). This framework revolves around intentionally cultivat-

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