Chapter 5
Online Interest Groups for Graduate Students:
Benefit or Burden?

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ABSTRACT

This chapter extends discussion of an educational innovation project where faculty (the authors and associates) provided virtual gathering spaces (Clinical Interest Groups) for online health professions students to congregate. Unlike gathering spaces offered in discrete courses, the non-graded Clinical Interest Groups were open to all students in the nursing faculty's graduate programs. Getzlaf, Melrose, Moore, Ewing, Fedorchuk, and Troute-Wood (2012) found that students believed the virtual gathering spaces offered a valuable place where learners could discuss common interests and support one another. However, findings also revealed that participation in the groups was limited due to competing demands on students' time from other commitments. As online learning programs become commonplace, and as online social networking spaces also increase in popularity and usage, educators must consider both the benefit and the burden of inviting professional learners to participate in supplemental activities such as online interest groups. Areas for future research are suggested.

INTRODUCTION

Initially, when universities moved away from delivering professional programs exclusively in brick and mortar settings and towards online venues, students' experiences interacting with one another in a virtual environment were not well understood. Literature suggests that supportive student-student interactions foster social and academic integration (Kanuka & Jugdev, 2006; Rourke et al 1999; Thomas, 2000) and that such integration leads to increased satisfaction (Mayne & Wu, 2011; Richardson & Swan, 2003) and course completion (Lovitts, 2000; Lovitts, 2001; Rourke et al 1999). Literature also reveals that student-student ties and support evolve over time (Oren, Mioduser & Nachmias, 2002; Stodel, Thompson & MacDonald, 2006; Yuan, Gay & Hembrooke, 2006). However, as online learning programs become more commonplace and social networking spaces became integrated into everyday life, students' experiences interacting with one another also became more familiar.

In a unique action research project Getzlaf, Melrose, Moore, Ewing, Fedorchuk and Troute-Wood (2012) implemented and evaluated an educational innovation where online health professions students were provided with virtual gathering spaces (Clinical Interest Groups). The groups were framed from a 'program' perspective and spanned several discrete courses taken over a period of time. Getzlaf et al suggested that other online educators may be interested in replicating this innovation with graduate students who are health care practitioners. And yet, as contemporary educators

consider innovations such as online interest groups, questions about how the activity both benefits and burdens learners must be raised. In this article chapter we extend discussion of the project by including emerging views that suggest student- to-student interaction can be negative as well as positive and suggest areas for future research.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Getzlaf et al's (2012) project was guided by the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework described by Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999). The COI framework highlights three major dimensions of the online learning environment that overlap to form the educational experience of the student: social presence (interpersonal connection), cognitive presence (construction of meaning through communication) and teaching presence (facilitation of active learning). Of these dimensions, social presence was the most relevant to the project and to the present discussion. Social presence is defined as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally in a community of inquiry (Rourke et al., 1999). Social presence includes feeling comfortable, safe and willing to accept both support and differing points of view (Anderson, 2005).

The action research project involved inviting students enrolled in a Master of Nursing (MN) or Master of Health Studies (MHS) program at a Canadian university to participate in optional, non-graded online Clinical Interest Groups. While students in the MN program hold undergraduate degrees

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