〔Article〕

The Importance of Residency Sessions in Building Learning Communities in Two Distance Learning Programs

Paul D. McGRATH, Karen L. CAMPBELL

Nagoya Gakuin University / Goddard College

Abstract

This article is the first of two exploring the significance of "residency" (US term) or "schooling" (term used in Japan) ― in-person sessions incorporated into two distance learning MA graduate programs, one in the US and one in Japan. The authors, Karen L. Campbell and Paul D. McGrath, have taught in their respective programs (Campbell at Goddard College in Plainfield, Vermont and Port Townsend, Washington; McGrath at Nagoya Gakuin University in Nagoya) for more than a decade. The writers are specifically interested in how students interact among themselves and with faculty, and how such interactions influence the quality of the learning experience. While there are many studies of "community," or sense of belonging in online education, the in-person aspect of low-residency programs has been insufficiently studied and deserves our attention as it appears to reduce the isolation inevitably involved in distance learning programs and may actually enhance the quality of the students' research. Certainly Rovai and Jordan (2004), in their study "Blended[1] learning and sense of community," suggest "that blended courses produce a stronger sense of community among students than either traditional or fully online courses."

Keywords：Low residency distance learning, graduate education, community building, quality interaction

通信制大学院修士課程の在籍者が学習グループを形成する際のスクーリングの重要性について

―2つの大学院の事例から―

ポール D. マグラス・カレン L. キャンベル

名古屋学院大学 / ゴダード大学大学院

As we review a limited array of the vast numbers of findings concerning online and (far less so) low-residency programs, uppermost in our minds are students who pay to access accredited graduate learning through online or low-residency models of education. Our aim is to identify research questions that will aid our low-residency institutions to a) assess the value of residencies or schooling and b) better tailor our programs to increase student completion rates but also (ideally) ensure that students' satisfaction with their experience goes beyond the fact of having earned a degree or certificate; if indeed that was their goal.[2]

Distance learning: A very brief overview

Distance learning began with Sir Isaac Pitman's 1840 shorthand correspondence course in the UK.[3] Opportunities for higher education through similar handwritten/print-based forms of distance learning emerged in the late 19th century in Europe, the United States, Japan[4] and Australia; and distance learning dependent on postal services continues in many parts of the world where contemporary technologies are insufficiently widespread to be effective.

Goddard College's Adult Degree Program (ADP), begun by Evalyn Bates in 1963, was the first low residency program in the United States. Then one-way instructional radio and TV made possible low-residency Open Universities like those in the UK (1971) and Japan (1981), and several generations[5] of distance learning models have followed developments in multimedia and computer-mediated education (The OU Story; Aoki 2012, p. 183; Marques & McQuire, April, 2013).

We feel we must include mention of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs), originally intended as free, even open-source (non-copyrighted) 4 — 12 week courses with inbuilt evaluations (Marques and McQuire June, 2013); though as we later indicate, data on them is highly misleading and probably therefore not at present relevant to this particular discussion. Open Universities' open admissions policies, Salman Khan's (math) Khan Academy (2004), and iTunes U[niversity] (2007) were precursors of the now pervasive MOOCs (Marques and McQuire April, 2013).

George Siemens' and Stephen Downes' 2008 open online course — now recognized as the first MOOC — grew from Siemens' critique of contemporary educational theory and practice. In "Connectivism: A New Theory for the Digital Age" (2004), Siemens argued that connectivism, "the integration of principles explored by chaos, network, and complexity and self-organization theories," brings to the fore some intriguing perspectives on where knowledge resides, how it flows, and how we might help students develop swift, nimble critical thinking skills that will enable them to deal effectively with what Gonzalez (2004) called "the shrinking half-life of knowledge" (qtd in Siemens 2004). He persuasively develops his thinking in *Knowing Knowledge* (2006), a work that also deserves more attention than this paper will allow, though we do raise the relevance of knowledge construction in relation to learning communities below.

Now prestigious universities worldwide offer variations on MOOCs, as well as their earlier (not-for-credit[6]) free youtube or iTunes U lectures, so scholars are scrambling to assess the value and effectiveness of learning offered through non-residential or low-residency models of education that use online tools. Although many report 85–95% dropout rates with MOOCs[7], as Stanford mathematician and MOOC professor Keith Devlin (2013) convincingly argues, "applying the traditional metrics of higher education to MOOCs is entirely misleading. MOOCs are a very different kind of educational package, and they need different metrics — metrics that we do not yet know how to construct."

Indeed there are many different means of accessing distance learning and different designs, platforms and pedagogies on offer. The motivations of those who do choose distance learning also vary considerably and the diversity of these factors makes meaningful evaluation of models extremely challenging.

Retention, persistence, attrition, presence

A large number of studies have focused on retention — variously defined as progression through parts of a program, degree/certificate completion, or individual student goal achievement (Nitsch 2003; Rovai and Jordan 2004) — or on persistence — in higher education this usually means graduating "on time" (Martinez 2003, p. 3) — in purely online or in low residency learning environments. Similarly studies have sought to identify why some programs have higher attrition rates than others:

> Sikora and Carroll (2002) reported that online higher education students tend to be less satisfied with totally online courses when compared to traditional courses. Fully online courses also experienced higher attrition rates (Carr, 2000). The research is mixed regarding the reasons for these higher attrition rates, however. Hara and Kling (2001), conducting a study of online courses, found that feelings of isolation were an important stress factor for online students, but not the primary factor as frequently mentioned in the professional literature. (Rovai and Jordan 2004)

Another related concept that is much studied in distance learning is the notion of presence — its definitions/modifiers constantly multiplying — and its relationship to "community" and quality of learning. Picciano (2002) explains:

> In an online course, the simplest definition of presence refers to a student's sense of being in and belonging in a course and the ability to interact with other students and an instructor although physical contact is not available. However ⋯ the definition is expanding and being refined to include telepresence, cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence, and other forms of presence. (p. 22)

Because student to student and student to teacher interactions in a conventional classroom are believed to significantly enhance learning, considerable efforts have been made to approximate the kinds of interactions available to students undertaking distance learning.[8] And there are vast amounts of mainly quantitative data available to peruse. Karen Swan (2002, 2003), for instance, notes that many studies report "…students perceive online discussion as more equitable and more democratic than traditional classroom discussions" (Harasim, 1990; Levin et al., 1990) (p. 136). Most of our students' professional and/or familial commitments (as well as time differences in the US) make it impossible to schedule many synchronous interactions such as teleconferencing/webinars, however. Swan also argues that asynchronous discussions allow students the time to read other participants' comments and "thus create a certain mindfulness among students and a culture of reflection in an online course" (Hawkes & Romiszowski, 2001; Hiltz, 1994; Poole, 2000). Still, she also notes others who acknowledge that CMC "is not inherently interactive" as well as studies that find "students' perceived learning …was related to the amount of discussion actually taking place in them" (Swan & Shea, 2004, p. 235). In Campbell's experience, the effects of asynchronous interactions, such as quality or quantity of participation in submitting questions and comments to an electronic bulletin board, can be very difficult to assess, depending on the sophistication of the technologies used, and whether participation is required.[9]

Acknowledging both that "[r]esearch supports the development of community in online learning as an important factor for maximizing student satisfaction with the experience" (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Ouzts, 2006; Rovai, 2002a) and that online technologies offer multiple means of creating learner to learner interaction, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) identified a number of interactions that contributed to "sense of community." Perhaps of most interest to our low-residency models are their finding regarding opportunities to share personal experience among learner-to-learner interactions that "explained almost 14% of the variance in Soc [sense of community]." They continue:

> While this type of interaction has not received much attention in the online learning literature (Ali et al., 2004; Wolcott, 1996; and Baab, 2004), it is apparent that giving students an opportunity to express how class content relates to their life or professional experience is important in terms of building connectedness and shared learning.

Community/Sense of Belonging

We have gathered compelling anecdotal evidence over the past decade from our low-residency students that a sense of belonging or of being in community is one key to their satisfaction, self-esteem and persistence but, as Rovai and Jordan (2004) point out, while isolation has been seen as influencing

attrition in low residency or online programs, studies show mixed results. As noted above, we suggest that the indeterminacy of findings may result from the number of variables that can confuse the issue. In the case of low-residency models, probably five main phenomena (at least) require attention in order to identify much needed research questions/studies:

1. Low-residency models vary in residency requirements or length of students' in-person interactions with each other and with faculty. For example, although Nagoya Gakuin University first year MA students have a 1–day orientation, then a 5–day summer schooling, and a later weekend block, and Goddard College's MA students attend two 8–day residencies a year, Antioch University Seattle's Center for Creative Change MA programs holds monthly 2–4–day modules on campus. While these differences are not easily comparable because Antioch's and, (given the size of Japan) to some extent Nagoya Gakuin's, serve a more local population, Nagoya Gakuin's 5–day summer schooling and Goddard's biannual 8–day residency may offer some clues as to how we might measure the efficacy and benefits of our respective in-person residency requirements.

2. As Rovai and Jordan (2004) report, findings suggest student comfort may well be impacted by faculty members' competence in managing online forums, or computer mediated communication (CMC), as much as by students' facility with the technologies used. Yet, online course designs and commercially available digital platforms are continually developing (and are differently priced) and so the findings of different studies do not necessarily lend themselves to useful comparison. How, then, can we identify the style or structure of faculty and peer feedback, virtual or in person (including one, two, or multi-directional flows of knowledge), that best spurs *our* students' willingness to take the risks needed to push their learning toward the creation of, or contribution to, new knowledge?

3. Relatedly, to what extent do both faculty and students need to develop new communication styles and facilitation skills that might avert misunderstandings on platforms where people cannot see and/ or hear each other — even the most simple and quite old platform of email exchanges?

4. The pedagogy of the institution undoubtedly influences satisfaction. Ranging from one-way "delivery" of specific content, pre-packaged in required readings and lectures, to somewhat individualized (Nagoya Gakuin) or completely self-designed study formats (Goddard College), satisfaction will depend as much on students' individual learning styles and reasons for pursuing a particular area of inquiry as prior knowledge, academic experience and research skills — or the subject areas available. How might we ascertain whether our respective institutions' pedagogy is in need of revision or enhancement?

5. An even trickier question that must inevitably follow from our research into community in our respective programs is the quality of the knowledge(s) our students identify, modify, reconstruct, and how. When Elizabeth Minnich (1990), in *Transforming Knowledge*, took on the largely white and male-constructed "dominant meaning system," bringing together thinkers of many different

backgrounds to expose the errors, the circular reasoning, that distorted the knowledge we were fed, perhaps she did not foresee scholars such as Lanier or Siemens debating the extent to which knowledge is *now* collectively constructed online. Minnich would probably agree that in the 1980s, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule *were* collectively constructing knowledge in their *Women's Ways of Knowing* project, as were peoples creating Indigenous Knowledges all over the unnoticed world. If knowledge is no longer static for any length of time, if it is indeed a collective endeavor as Siemens (2004; 2006) rather enthusiastically claims (albeit not without reservation) while Joran Lanier (2006) declares, "What I've seen is a loss of insight and subtlety, a disregard for the nuances of considered opinions, and an increased tendency to enshrine the official or normative beliefs of an organization," we must ask how are *our* students constructing knowledge? Are they still in the received knowledge mode, merely absorbing from authorities, or are they "out there" co-constructing new knowledges all the time? If so, what skills are they honing or developing as they evaluate and modify knowledges? How involved are their formal institutions' learning communities in this process — or are there other virtual co-learners who also enrich, grow and/or subvert their process?

From our experience, a primary need is to identify what students mean by isolation — or, conversely interaction and/or feeling part of a community   — and how these concepts/feelings impact their persistence. In the case of low-residency students, interaction and/or feeling part of a community may range across a number of face-to-face and virtual spaces, including but not limited to:

・The quality of relationships developed during residencies or schoolings;
・Meeting peers and faculty who share students' particular interests and being able to maintain connections, share learning, offer authentic feedback;
・Institutional intranet design (including resources offered within the site and the extent to which students can create their own closed group sharing spaces);
・People in the student's home environment who share an interest in and/or support the student's study;
・Workplace and/or family support;
・Academic sharing platforms such as Academia. edu, or area-focused discussion platforms such as list serves;
・Casual social online forums such as Facebook or Twitter;

Rovai and Jordan (2004) propose a few definitions of community:

McMillan and Chavis (1986) offered the following definition of sense of community, "a feeling that

members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (p. 9). Sergiovanni (1994) stressed the need for authentic community in schools, a tie binding learners and teachers through shared values, ideals, and goals.

One of the more illuminating studies of the importance of the learning community in distance learning graduate education is Bloomberg's (2008) article on the experience of community in a Jewish graduate school setting. She claims that a key indicator of success in a distance learning program is "the interactivity among students that is fostered through the creation of learning communities" (182). In the second article we will author in 2016 one batch of data we plan to gather centers on this very point: how much interactivity is fostered among students in our respective programs? We agree with Bloomberg that such interactivity is one indicator of a program's success.

Another aspect of Bloomberg's research that has interesting implications for our own is her perception that her study "sheds light on the unique cultural vestiges that enhance Jewish learners' shared spirit or desire for community" (181). In discussing the findings of her project she reports that 91% of her students perceived "a learning community as being aligned with Jewish cultural values" (189). A similar finding was that "all of the faculty (100%) viewed Jewish education and the notion of a learning community as being fundamentally aligned" (189).

While Bloomberg provides no details about which elements of Jewish culture enhanced and facilitated the community-building aspect of the distance learning MA program, we can imagine that the shared values of Jewish adults pursuing an advanced degree in Judaic studies paved the way for a common understanding and mutuality of relation.

In the case of Nagoya Gakuin students, such a commonality and interest in mutual relation are part of a program that has been made up almost exclusively of Japanese adult professionals. Japanese cultural values, it need not be argued, place an emphasis on cooperation and consideration of others. The formation of a learning community is evident by the end of the first years' five-day long schooling session. These adult learners have come from all corners of Japan (occasionally, some working abroad) and share not only those positive aspects of Japanese mutuality described above but also common professional interests as the majority of students are teachers or translators of English. In Goddard's case, it may be argued, self-designed study that in residency advising groups[10] demands that students share resources, listen to each other's plans, and offer feedback, tend to unite the students even though their areas of inquiry may be very different.

An interesting question for this study will be to what extent Japanese students are conscious of Japanese cultural elements as they build a learning community together. Unlike Bloomberg's students who were pursuing degrees in Judaic studies in the larger cultural context of a secular society, Nagoya Gakuin students are acting to form a learning community within the larger context of the Japanese

society that fosters cooperation and consideration. To put it another way, would Bloomberg's students have been so conscious of the Jewish elements of creating a learning community had they been in an Israeli environment?

Identifying the sources of community building will be part of the data collection process involved in the next stage of this research project. How do Goddard students, (arguably) neither supported nor hindered by ethnocentric factors, go about the task of creating community within their programs? Campbell's decade-plus-long experience of working with them leads her to believe that passion for social justice is one key dynamic behind many communal online exchanges among Goddard students. Yet, it is clear that several different groups also keep in close touch via phone and Facebook, often putting out requests for resources on the latter that are swiftly answered. Many questions arise: How do these different interactions affect the learning process and the determination to continue of those involved? Is the quality of learning, of research any richer than those who study alone, or without much interaction?

The current writers believe that this research project will have a positive effect on their respective programs in raising awareness of students' perceptions of where and how learning communities develop in those programs. Bloomberg quotes Dewey (interestingly enough, a major founding influence on Goddard College's pedagogy) as asserting that "'the social environment. . . is truly educative in the effects in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity'" (p. 183: 1954, p. 26). A greater awareness of the function of learning communities within our programs can only serve to enhance the programs themselves.

Notes

1 Education that combines in-person blocks of time with online communication are termed variously low residency, blended or hybrid forms of education.

2 Some Goddard Graduate Institute students have conventional MAs or Ph. Ds but enroll to pursue studies that were outside the curricular constraints of their previous programs or to take a more transdisciplinary approach to problems they have since identified — both for their own satisfaction and to create new knowledge they see as vital to furthering understanding in their area of inquiry.

3 We do of course acknowledge that indigenous societies developed means of communicating across distances and that other forms of learning undoubtedly existed beyond the currently dominant western/"first world" paradigms of education but these are outside the scope of this study.

4 Waseda University's "lecture notes" model. See Aoki (2012).

5 Scholars differ over the number of generations according to their focus on technological, pedagogical or organizational models (J. C. Taylor 2001; Anderson and Dron 2010; Aoki 2012).

6 Though recently some efforts are being made to "translate" some not-for-credit learning into transferable credit — not unlike undergraduate Assessment of Prior Learning systems (Devlin 2013; Bergstein 2015).

7   See Onah, Sinclair and Boyatt (2014) "Dropout Rates Of Massive Open Online Courses: Behavioural Patterns." Available at: http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/dcs/people/research/csrmaj/daniel_onah_edulearn14.pdf

8   With Picciano, among others, we note that while students may be physically present and even attentive in the classroom some do not interact much with either the teacher or their peers yet nonetheless do well in examinations (Picciano p. 22).

9   For example, in the Spring 2015 semester, five members of the Goddard Graduate Institute and MFA-Interdisciplinary Arts faculties presented a second pilot of 5 linked webinars. 9 students signed up but usually fewer than 3 or 4 were able to participate in the webinars on Saturday afternoons, though could watch them later and post to the discussion board that recorded the number of posts, authors and views. Since faculty checked the board to offer feedback, and only four students actually posted, these numbers alone do not provide a reliable measure of participation or satisfaction. Posts from a few students and faculty tended to be substantial. In fact, one student posted to each (though was unable to attend four of the webinars), one student posted twice to the first webinar (which she missed), one posted to two different webinars (one of which she missed), one posted to one webinar. Those present participated actively but even those who did not nonetheless claimed that they wish the webinar series to continue.

10 Goddard students select a faculty "advisor" each semester and thus enter an advising group (rarely more than 7 students) at each residency and design their respective semester syllabi in daily group meetings as well as privately with their advisor and in larger open seminars and workshops.

References

Aoki, K. (2012). Generations of distance education and challenges of distance education institutions in Japanese higher education (181–200). In Paul B. Muyinda Ed. *Distance Education*. InTech: Open Access. Doi: 10.5772/3097; or Doi: 10.5772/50090 Retrieved from: http://www.intechopen.com/books/distance-education.

Bergstein, Brian. (2015). Take free online classes, get course credit at MIT. MIT technology Review, October 7. Retrieved from: http://www.technologyreview.com/news/542201/take-free-online-classes-get-course-credit-at-mit/

Bloomberg, Linda Dale. (2008). How a learning community enhances individual learning in a graduate distance education program. *Journal of Jewish Education*, 74: 181–200. Doi: 10.1080/15244110802105214.

Devlin, Keith. (2013). MOOCS and the myth of dropout rates and certification. *Huff Post College* May 2, 2013. Retrieved from: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/dr-keith-devlin/moocs-and-the-myths-of-dr_b_2785808.html.

Martinez, Margaret. (2003). High attrition rates in e-learning: Challenges, predictors, and solutions. *The E-Learning Developers' Journal*. July 14, 1–9. Retrieved from: http://www.elearningguild.com/pdf/2/071403MGT-L.pdf

Marques, Juliana, and Robert McGuire. (2013). What is a massive open online course anyway? MN+R attempts a definition. *MOOC News and Reviews*, June 7. Retrieved from: http://moocnewsandreviews.com/what-is-a-massive-open-online-course-anyway-attempting-definition/

Marques, Juliana, and Robert McGuire. (2013). A short history of MOOCs and distance learning. *MOOC News and Reviews*, April 17. Retrieved from: http://moocnewsandreviews.com/a-short-history-of-moocs-and-distance-learning/

Nitsch, W. (2003). Examination of factors leading to student retention in online graduate education. Retrieved from: http://www.decadeconsulting.com/decade/papers/StudentRetention.pdf.

Picciano, Anthony G. (2002). Beyond student perceptions: Issues of interaction, presence, and performance in an online course. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks* 6(1), 21–40. Retrieved from: http://www.anitacrawley.net/Articles/Picciano2002.pdf

Rovai and Jordan (2004). Blended learning and sense of community: A comparative analysis with traditional and fully online graduate courses. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning.* 5(2). Retrieved from: http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/192/274

Shackelford, J., & Maxwell, M. (2012). Sense of community in graduate online education: Contribution of learner to learner interaction. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distributed Learning, 13*(4), 228–249. Retrieved from http://www.irrodl.org/index.php/irrodl/article/view/1339/2317

Siemens, George. (2004). Connectivism: A new theory for the digital age. Retrieved from: http://www.elearnspace.org/Articles/connectivism.htm

Siemens, George. (2006). *Knowing knowledge*. Retrieved from: http://www.elearnspace.org/KnowingKnowledge_LowRes.pdf

Swan, Karen (2002). Building learning communities in online courses: The importance of interaction. In *Education, Communication & Information*, 2(1), 23–39. Retrieved from: https://www.uwplatt.edu/files/ICET/2015Fall_TechMash/swan.2002.pdf

Swan, Karen & Shea, Peter. (2004/2010). The development of virtual learning communities. In Hiltz & Goldman Eds. *Learning together online: Research on asynchronous learning networks*. New York: Routledge.

Swan, Karen (2003). Developing social presence in online course discussions. In Som Naidu Ed. *Learning and Teaching with Technology: Principles and Practices*. London: Kogan Page.

The OU [UK] Story. Retrieved from: http://www.open.ac.uk/about/main/strategy/ou-story