

## Assessing connectedness in an online MBA course

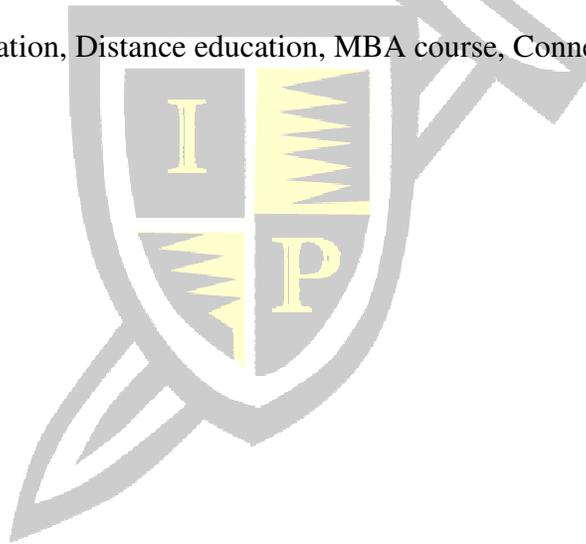
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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of paper was to assess connectedness that students felt in an online MBA course in which they were registered. Effective online instructors know that their students may succeed or fail depending upon many factors. The factors assessed in this study focused on building trust and a sense of connection between the instructor, students, and the materials. The ultimate goal of this study was to find ways to help students participate, collaborate, and actively engage in purposive activities within the online learning environment. A research model was chosen and used as the framework for developing a survey that would be distributed to students registered in an online MBA course.

Keywords: Online education, Distance education, MBA course, Connectedness, Sense of community.



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## INTRODUCTION

### Online Learning

There are many reasons why institutions of higher education choose to implement online learning. Online environments make it possible to extend the school's reach, it increases accessibility for students who many otherwise not be able to attend, it supports time management, it augments campus-based classes, it introduces students to a learning environment that is increasingly prevalent, it models the changing nature of human interaction in the workplace and in society, and it allows for the addition of new methodologies to the learning environment, engaging students at multiple levels.

The online learning environment poses distinct challenges for both faculty and students, and overcoming those challenges is important in order to promote a learning environment where active student engagement exists. One of these challenges is the lack of connectedness students may feel to the instructor, other students, and course material. It is important to investigate ways to build a sense of community in the online environment, helping students feel connected to the instructor, other students, and material.

Fortunately, online technology has allowed for educational institutions to extend beyond the walls of the classroom and beyond the confines of a particular class period. Technology advancements have, and continue to, hold great promise for transforming the learning environment. However, technology is not at the heart of the online learning environment, teachers and students are (Watson, 2008.) Developing a positive sense of community may help online instructors as they try to analyze their online classroom environment and as they pursue to understand the undercurrents of online learning collaborations. Communications that take place between student-to-student and student-to-instructor are vital aspects in developing a positive sense of community within any learning environment, but specifically within the online learning environment.

### Sense of Community

The sense of community has been defined as members having a feeling that they belong, they matter to one another, they matter to the group as an entity, and that they share a commitment to the goals and objectives of the course (McMillan & Chavis, 1986.) In the online environment, students can be miles apart from each other and from the professor. As a result, feelings of isolation may ensue if a feeling of connectedness isn't fostered at the beginning and throughout the duration of the course. Paloff & Pratt (2007) state that by fostering online communities, the educational experience of participants may be increased. Therefore, it is important for instructors of online courses to think about ways to incorporate connections in course development, delivery, and evaluation.

Research indicates that the experiences students have in learning communities with a positive feeling of community are associated with positive learning outcomes, and a deeper level of fulfillment with the complete educational experience (Richardson & Swan, 2003.) The interactions that occur between the student-student, student-material, and student-professor are all critical aspects to developing a sense of community and should be interwoven throughout the course design, implementation, and evaluation.

Moore (1989) defines the three types of interactions: student-student, student-instructor, and student-material. In student-student, interactions take place “between one learner and other learners, alone or in group settings, with or without the real-time presence of an instructor” (p.4.) This type of interaction has been found to be important in creating a sense of community. Frederickson, et al (2000) assessed over 1,000 students registered for an online course. They found students with high levels of perceived knowledge also reported the uppermost levels of collaboration with other students in the course and the professor.

In student-instructor, “this interaction is regarded as essential by many educators and highly desirable by many learners” (p. 2.) The student is encouraged to learn the content better through interactions with the professor on various levels and at various times. Moore defines student-content as “the process of intellectually interacting with content that results in changes in the learner’s understanding, the learner’s perspective, or the cognitive structures of the learner’s mind” (p. 2.)

## **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this study was to assess the sense of connectedness in a fully online MBA course. In this study, feeling of connection was assessed using ideas that were adapted from Cristol, Lucking, and Rovai (2001), where a feeling of connection includes a buy in to purpose and values, trust, value proposition, active participation. Questions were designed using Moore’s (1989) three concepts: student-student, student-material, and student-professor.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

To what extent do students feel a sense of connection to each other, the professor, and the material in this online course?

## **RESEARCH DESIGN**

The survey instrument was designed around the four characteristics of connectedness. Questions were developed that were directly related to each characteristic. Participants included students registered in an online MBA course. There was an 81% response rate, which included thirteen students. With such a small sample size, it was not the intent of the researchers to generalize, but to treat this study as action research.

Action research tends to pursue both action and research outcomes at the same time. Altrichter, Kemmis, McTaggart, and Zuber-Skerritt (2002) define the cyclical nature, and steps, in the action research methodology. The steps include plan-act-observe-reflect-re-plan. They also explain that the three leading exponents of action research include improving education, improving educational practices, and improving educational organizations. Action research is used to develop hypotheses from data, or as a research tool for investigative or pilot research, and typically a means for diagnosis or evaluation. Furthermore, it’s typically qualitative, participatory, and reflective.

The researchers strongly agree with Parsons & Brown (2002) in stating that in order to be an instructor that is effective, he or she needs to take an active role by detecting, assessing, and interpreting data. Then, using the interpreted data to evaluate, plan, reflect, and make decisions that will enhance the educational experience and learning outcomes for the students.

## FINDINGS

In regard to the most valuable aspect of the course as indicated in Table 1, the pre-semester correspondence ranked number one. This finding is relevant in that the pre-semester e-mail sent to the students set the tone for the course. It not only gave them crucial information but also set ground rules, expectations, and most importantly opened the line of communication between instructor and student early on. A clear and concise line of communication between student and instructor is essential in the online environment. Interestingly, aside from the pre-semester e-mail correspondence, e-mails from the instructor during the semester ranked much lower. Though not asked why, the researchers believe this might be due to the fact that a synchronous meeting was held each week. The weekly synchronous online class ranked number two by participants. This weekly discussion gave students the opportunity to clarify information, ask questions, and build relationships with each other and the instructor. By seeing each other via the webcam, everyone was still able to get to know one another in a simulated face to face situation.

In regard to the sense of connectedness felt course as indicated in Table 2, the two highest scored areas focused on the instructor having a genuine interest in the students and desire for them to learn the course material. This is a relevant finding in that the instructor is a critical aspect in the delivery of the material and student learning. If the students felt the instructor didn't have an interest in them, it would likely be most difficult to build a sense of connectedness that fosters a positive learning environment. However, the instructor and material are only two aspects in the three-pronged connectedness approach. The students are the third aspect in this approach. The lowest ranked factor in connection was that other students had a genuine desire to participate in course activities and give contribute to course objectives. Participants didn't see their classmates having the genuine desire to contribute. In the conclusions, the researchers will address this finding in detail.

## CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions are based in the reflection and re-planning phases of the action research model. In regard to reflection, the researchers concluded that the -most significant area for reflection and re-planning fell in the student-student interaction. Overall, results indicated that students would like to see increased participation between themselves during the weekly online synchronous class period. Respondent One noted "I think there could be more and better participation by the students. It's easy to converse when in the same room. There is a more real feeling of presence and immediacy. Perhaps if we could see ourselves in a 3-D holographic classroom sitting together, that might help." Respondent Four noted "instruct students that participation is mandatory." Respondent Seven noted "Students somehow need to be forced to participate more. It was not the instructors fault that people didn't participate, but somehow there needs to be more participation. Maybe through point incentives toward participation grade."

It should be noted that 10% of the students' overall (final) grade was based on in-class participation, specifically during the weekly synchronous meetings. The syllabus contained a participation rubric, thus the students knew what was expected of them in regard to in class participation. Before each synchronous weekly class meeting, the professor reminded the students that participation was important. The weekly online meetings were conducted via

Cisco's WebEx and it was mandatory for each student to have their webcam turned on the entire class period.

It is important to note that students "want" to hear from each other, not just the instructor. The researchers agree, and believe that students can learn from each other, just as they learn from course material and instructor. With that being said, moving forward, it becomes relevant to revise the participation aspect of the online courses taught. Specifically, the researchers have decided to revise the participation component in the following ways: 1. the instructor will use the rotation method during each online synchronous meeting. During the introductory class period, the professor will make it clear that he/she will call upon each student during each weekly online class period. 2. Upon the first meeting, students will be made aware that they will each be assigned a structured question. At some point during each class period, every student will be required to respond to the question they have been given. It is the researchers hope that by implementing these two ideas, discussion between students will be sparked during these times and enhanced participation will not only happen in this mandatory manner, but begin to happen organically as they become more comfortable with speaking during class.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers recommend that the study be replicated once the indicated revisions have been made in at least one similar online course. The researchers also recommend that the study be conducted on a larger scale, preferably conducting it with all online classes taught in an entire department during one semester.

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## APPENDIX

Table 1

## Most Valuable Aspects of the Online MBA Course

	Ranked in Order of Importance							
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Pre-semester e-mail correspondence	54% (n=7)	15% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	15% (n=2)	0% (n=0)
Weekly Web Ex class meeting	0% (n=0)	46% (n=6)	23% (n=3)	23% (n=3)	8% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)	0% (n=0)
Weekly online discussion posts and comments	23% (n=3)	8% (n=1)	23% (n=3)	23% (n=3)	0% (n=0)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)
Self-reflection essay	15% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)	23% (n=3)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)	15% (n=2)
Current topics	0% (n=0)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	38% (n=5)	8% (n=1)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)
E-mails from the instructor	0% (n=0)	8% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	23% (n=3)	8% (n=1)	38% (n=5)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)
Textbook	0% (n=0)	8% (n=1)	15% (n=2)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	23% (n=3)	31% (n=4)	8% (n=1)
Videos shown during Web Ex class	8% (n=1)	0% (n=0)	15% (n=2)	0% (n=0)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	8% (n=1)	54% (n=7)



**Table 2**

Sense of Connectedness in an Online MBA Course

I identified with the other students and felt a sense of buy-in to the group's purposes?	Strongly Agree 54% (n=7)	Agree 46% (n=6)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
I identified with the instructor and felt a sense of buy-in to the course's purpose?	Strongly Agree 69% (n=9)	Agree 31% (n=4)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The instructor generally acted for the good of the entire class?	Strongly Agree 100% (n=13)	Agree 0% (n=0)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The other students generally acted for the good of the entire class?	Strongly Agree 69% (n=9)	Agree 31% (n=4)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The instructor added value with respect to course objectives?	Strongly Agree 85% (n=11)	Agree 15% (n=2)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The other students' added value with respect to the course objectives??	Strongly Agree 54% (n=7)	Agree 38% (n=5)	Disagree 8% (n=1)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The instructor had a genuine desire to participate in course activities and contribute to course objectives?	Strongly Agree 100% (n=13)	Agree 0% (n=0)	Disagree 0% (n=0)	Strongly Disagree 0% (n=0)
The other students had a genuine desire to participate in course activities and contribute to course objectives?	Strongly Agree 38% (n=5)	Agree 38% (n=5)	Disagree 15% (n=2)	Strongly Disagree 8% (n=1)