Engaging the online learner:

An examination of the use of narrative to create online social presence in a post-secondary environment and its implications for learner engagement

by

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Contents

Abstract

The increased demand for flexible learning at the post-secondary level means more courses are being offered online, presenting the need for pedagogical and communicative strategies to ensure learner engagement. Often physical proximity is conflated with effective communication and engagement, however, it is possible to replicate online the best of face-to-face communicative learning experiences using virtual social strategies such as the sharing of narratives and the use of small collaborative groups to increase social presence and thus learner engagement. Online learners participated in a narrative inquiry to determine the place of narrative in the online learning process. The study confirmed knowing the other through narrative increased individual social presence and was an important factor in student engagement, regardless of whether learners were face-to-face or online. Such relationships lessened the sense of online isolation and created an accountability and commitment to others, particularly within compatible groups, contributing to a replication of structure similar to that of "showing up" in the traditional classroom, resulting in more satisfying learning outcomes and a motivation to do well. Thus narrative, particularly in small groups, is an effective virtual social strategy to help learners succeed online, and has implications for engaging younger online learners.

Keywords: e-learning, online learning, distance learning, narrative, social presence, narrative inquiry, group work, student engagement, story telling.

Introduction

The increased demand for flexible learning at the post-secondary level means more courses are being offered outside the traditional face-to-face classroom. This presents not only a set of pedagogical challenges in terms of how material is presented and how students are

"taught" online, but also in communicative strategies to ensure students are engaging with the material, the instructor and each other.

To me, pedagogy and communication are intrinsically linked. Two-way communication is integral to effective and interactive learning; these are the necessary elements of student engagement. It is easy to assume that physical presence equates to effective communication and learning, and thus engaged learners. If we can "see" someone in a classroom, we believe we can gauge levels of engagement because we can observe individual responses. Conversely, it's presumed to be more difficult to determine engagement in online courses due to a lack of non-verbal cues, or to even equate online learning with engagement because of a perceived lack of interaction. This has created a belief that face-to-face instruction is inherently more engaging and mediated communication is inferior, and that only more mature and motivated learners can succeed online. I believe we assume engagement can be assessed through personal observation, and that we conflate physical proximity with engagement. I intend to challenge that assumption by determining if it is possible to replicate online the best of what face-to-face communicative learning experiences have to offer. If this is possible, then what virtual social strategies can increase the engagement of the online learner?

While there is some research demonstrating that it is possible for online learners to create a viable social presence, there is little research examining effective methods to increase this presence online, specifically how the social aspects of communication can impact interaction and thus learning, and how groups could be a way to develop social presence and thus facilitate engagement (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Yoon & Johnson, 2008). My research seeks to make the linkages between the use of narrative to establish online presence, and

in turn the use of that presence to enhance interaction and group cohesion and thus learning, more explicit.

My personal experience as an online learner and as an instructor at four different post-secondary institutions has exposed me to a variety of educational experiences. Since 2004 I've completed more than 20 online credit courses where introductory face-to-face sessions (residencies or institutes) were mandatory before the online component (Royal Roads University and the University of Alberta) and where there was no face-to-face (Athabasca University). I have taught two blended classes combining face-to-face with online work, and created a course containing online modules complemented by face-to-face workshops (Camosun College).

My experiences led me to consider the sharing of narratives, specifically through the focus of small group work, as a way to replicate face-to-face presence in online classes thereby enhancing learner engagement integral to student success. Engagement in an educational setting can be defined as "the intensity and emotional quality of [learners'] involvement in initiating and carrying out learning activities" (Skinner & Belmont, 1993, p. 572). George Kuh, director of Indiana University's Center for Postsecondary Research, home to the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) which administers surveys of student engagement at post-secondary institutions throughout North America, has written extensively on student engagement and on how the NSSE measures student engagement by determining the degree to which students participate in educational practices. While the definition of student engagement has changed over the years, Kuh says that "Today *engagement* is the term usually used to represent constructs such as quality of effort and involvement in productive learning activities [by students]" (2009, p. 6, italics original). Kuh tells us that engagement can also be described as investing time and energy on task, interaction with peers and instructors, and application of learning (ibid). The greater the

participation, the more engagement students are deemed to have, which is linked to student satisfaction (Zhao, Kuh & Carini, 2005). According to Chen, Gonyea and Kuh, "engagement is positively related to a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and persistence" (2008, ¶ 2).

When asked to define the difference between participation and engagement, the participants in this study offered perspectives that closely parallel the above. Generally, participation is described by them as doing the minimum amount of work to meet the obligations of the course, while engagement is expending additional effort to go beyond the minimum requirements, where one is interested enough in the concepts presented to pursue additional research or discussion. As one participant described it, participation is providing the answer "just out of the textbook" while engagement is "more how do you apply it to your life"; in other words, taking the time and effort to determine the extent to which the learning is applicable to one's life (individual conversation, February 11, 2010). For the purpose of this paper I will follow my participants' definition. Engagement will be considered to be an attitude of interest in course materials or concepts which, for the learner, goes beyond what s/he considers to be obligatory for the course.

The question then becomes how to facilitate this engagement. While many adult learners can bring an individual motivation to their studies, arguably this can be more difficult to sustain in the perceived isolation of online course work. As well, some research indicates younger adult learners achieve better results in traditional classroom settings (Bates & Poole, 2003; Sitzmann, Kraiger, Stewart & Wisher, 2006), or the learners themselves indicate a preference for face-to-face versus online, citing a lack of motivation necessary to apply themselves to online courses.

Given my previous experience, I believe group work can be a way to engage the learner with the course work, through engaging the learner with fellow learners. In a small group, a dynamic co-construction of knowledge can occur, in some ways in a freer exchange than in a traditional classroom, thus contributing positively to the learning process. In this paper, I will define the small group as being what the participants and I have experienced, as a group of three to seven, with the most usual size comprised of four to six learners, who support each other in the completion of a task. In their meta-analysis of small group research from 1980 to 1989, Levine and Moreland (1990) cite McPherson's (1983) research, which discovered 70 per cent of voluntary associations people made contained fewer than 10 members, and a notable characteristic was homogeneity, with groups forming "among similar people" (Levine & Moreland, 1990, p. 597).

This has implications for group work in educational institutions. While the instructor can make group projects part of the curriculum and assign learners to groups, this does not mean a collaborative learning environment has been created. Learners must be willing to engage with each other, which means a degree of group cohesion is an important factor in group, and consequently learner, success.

Here it is important to distinguish between cooperative groups and collaborative groups. For example, Henri and Rigault (as cited in Paulus, 2005) consider group members who divide tasks and complete them individually to be working cooperatively together, whereas groups who use dialogue to accomplish the work are working collaboratively. Cooperative learning allows for task specialization, and group composition is often determined by the instructor. Schrage (1990) says collaborative learning is a coordinated approach to gain a shared understanding of a problem; group members are self-directed yet "are interacting to create a shared understanding

that none had previously possessed or could have come to on their own" (as cited in Paulus, 2005, p. 113). Paulus considers dialogue as "critical to collaboration … as multiple perspectives are shared through discussion" (ibid). According to Prince (2004), collaborative learning can include "any instructional method in which students work together in small groups toward a common goal" (p. 223). For Prince this would include cooperative learning; what turns cooperative into collaborative "is the emphasis on student interactions" (ibid).

While learners may be assigned to a group by an instructor to work cooperatively on an assignment or project, or learners who form their own group may decide to tackle a project cooperatively as opposed to collaboratively, my view is that dialogue, as noted by Schrage and Paulus, is an essential part of knowledge construction. Here, I align my conception of group work with Prince as I believe groups that cannot communicate cannot function, much less learn. Further, dialogue can lead to group cohesion and thus learner engagement.

However, for meaningful dialogue and thus effective sharing of knowledge to occur, a certain level of perceived commonality must be present in order to create the necessary trust to permit learners to engage with each other. My belief is that by sharing narratives through dialogue learners can develop an online social presence, enabling them to perceive each other as individuals as opposed to simply an email address. This personification through narrative helps create interpersonal awareness, or a sense of social presence, online. In turn this would promote the engagement necessary for effective group work and collaborative learning to occur. My research question is: How does the sharing of narratives potentially build social presence online, and therefore cohesion, amongst online learners? A subset of this question is to explore whether group work can be a way to more effectively share narratives and thus create a more collaborative learning experience.

Background

My own personal experience as an online learner and instructor has made me realize the importance of social presence in online learning environments. As well, my belief that knowledge is socially constructed, i.e. we do not learn in isolation, has led me to consider group work as a natural way for us to learn. Therefore, the use of narrative in online education, combined with group work, may be an especially relevant way to personalize the perceived isolation of online learning, thus engaging the learner.

Little examination overall has been given to identifying and incorporating specific social elements as a way of promoting cohesion and thus collaboration, particularly within online groups, even though the importance of attending to both the social and the task in group work has long been recognized (Bales, 1950). In an educational setting groups are often a heterogeneous collection of near strangers who then must collaborate in a learning environment. There is little time for group members to engage with each other before being thrust into tasks. If group cohesion occurs it is by happenstance, however, lack of group cohesion can result in a dysfunctional group that has difficulty in completing assignments.

While there has been work done in the area of the social dimensions of online communication and interaction, it is a relatively new research area and most research to date has not examined it specifically from an educational perspective (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Fahy, 2007; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Yoon & Johnson, 2008). Initially conceived by Short, Williams and Christie in 1976, social presence theory examined the degree of social presence in terms of awareness of the other person in a communication interaction (as cited by Gunawardena, 1995; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999). Although created to investigate the communicative abilities of technology relative to face-to-face interaction, social presence can be

gauged as the ability of learners to engage "socially and affectively into a community of inquiry" (Rourke et al., 1999, ¶ 1) and "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151). Narrative (i.e. sharing stories) in an online environment is one way to develop social presence and may well be key to student engagement.

Method

In order to examine the role narrative plays in establishing online relationships, my research project involved online learners in a narrative inquiry. Situating my project in the highly qualitative ground of narrative inquiry has certain advantages. As social presence and the sense of cohesion are themselves subjective in nature, a subjective approach is more suited to uncovering learners' beliefs and personal experiences. As a methodology, narrative inquiry seems an especially appropriate approach given my belief that through sharing narratives with each other, a form of social presence can be established amongst learners which will enhance group cohesion and thus learning. Narrative is then both phenomenon and methodology.

While Connelly and Clandinin (Clandinin, Pushor & Murray Orr, 2007) acknowledge similarities between narrative inquiry and ethnography, or phenomenology's use of story, there are important differences. Narrative inquiry elicits information through the sharing of stories as a way to understand lived experiences. It is a relatively new approach in educational research. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly established narrative inquiry as an educational research methodology, applying it to their study of an inner-city school in 1990, building on educational pioneer John Dewey's construct that life itself is education, and that both are inextricably entwined (Clandinin et al., 2007). As a research methodology, narrative inquiry brings "theoretical ideas about the nature of human life as lived to bear on educational experience as

lived" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 3). This ties in with Dewey's belief "that a person is never an individual only … a person is a dialectic blend of the individual and the social" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 8).

There are no research subjects in narrative enquiry; all, including the researcher, are participating in the co-creation of knowledge. This in itself reflects constructivist learning, the way we naturally learn in collective, social ways (Fay, 1987). Thus unlike phenomenological research, I do not set aside my own experiences (Creswell, 2009). And while ethnography seeks to observe and interview (ibid), narrative inquiry's focus is almost exclusively on storytelling. Participants are asked to share their thoughts on a topic and the stories told are then examined for emerging threads. The stories are re-constructed by the researcher, who adds his or her own narrative interpretation. This work is then reviewed by the participants to ensure their voices and stories are "re-presented … in resonant ways" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 30). This can result in revisions and reinterpretations, necessitating more time. However, each revision can be viewed as an opportunity to revisit the topic and deepen our shared understanding of it. Ultimately, through an iterative process of storytelling, writing, re-telling and re-writing, a sense of narrative's place in the online learning process will be shaped.

As there is little research on what makes for an engaging online learning experience, narrative inquiry will allow participants to share insights free from the implication of preconceived beliefs about online learning. In this way the lived experiences of the participants are the focus; it is their stories which drive the questions and ultimately the research results. This approach does not hypothesize a belief and then test the assumption through research. Instead, the data is examined as it evolves and thus dictates the theory.

Although questions can be used as a starting point in the inquiry and as a way to continue the dialogic exchange, the researcher-participant is free to inject his or her own point of view (for this project, that would be asking participants about the use of narrative as a way to create cohesion amongst group members). Essentially, narrative inquiry allows all participants to share their experiences, opening the door to new perspectives. Silverman would refer to this as an "emotionalist model" in that it "prioritises the study of perceptions, meanings and emotions" (2005, p. 10).

However, Clandinin et al. caution "narrative inquiry is much more than the telling of stories", adding it "requires particular kinds of wakefulness" (2007, p. 21). By wakefulness they mean the researcher-participant must be constantly vigilant to ensure stories adhere to the "three commonplaces of narrative inquiry – temporality, sociality, and place" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 23). *Temporality* refers to narrative as process. Narrative is by nature transitory as we are in a constant process of living our lives. Our stories are in a state of flux, amended and retold with each new experience. *Sociality* is the effect of personal conditions, and wider societal conditions, on participants "that form each individual's context" (ibid). Added to this is the relationship that must develop between researcher and participant. In narrative inquiry the perspective the researcher brings is acknowledged, even expected. *Place* is where the events unfold. Traditionally, narrative inquiry used in educational research has taken place in educational institutions. The surroundings and artefacts are part of the narrative. As my research is concerned with online learning, "place" becomes virtual. However, as this experience is part of a participant's ongoing narrative of life, it will be interesting to see where it is "placed". What the narrative researcher must also acknowledge is s/he is writing for an audience which includes both fellow participants and fellow academics. Thus not only appropriate theory must be

included, but "the justification, the reasons why the study is important" (Clandinin et al., 2007, p. 24) must be kept at the forefront by the researcher throughout the inquiry.

The presence of the researcher-participant in narrative inquiry could be considered problematic. While I am permitted to include my perceptions as part of the research, it could be argued that my own experience as an online learner leads to assumptions on my part. I may frame the discussions in a way that reflects my experiences, assuming others will have similar perceptions. Although my perceptions are as valid as those of any other participant, I must be careful to encourage all stories to be told. The trick will be in finding the balance between revealing my own experiences as an online learner in order to encourage storytelling, as opposed to smothering the participants' voices with my own. If the balance can be struck then ideally what will occur is co-construction of knowledge.

If care is taken to ensure all voices, including my own, are given equal weight, then narrative inquiry frees the researcher from the fear of injecting bias. One can argue that in fact no research is without bias, even quantitative research which strives to be stringently neutral in its approach. Researchers exhibit bias in determining what phenomenon to study, what theory to apply, and how the results will be measured and described. While both qualitative and quantitative endeavour to be as fair as possible, "the real goal of science is to achieve understanding; the basic product is ideas" (Singleton & Straits, 2005, p. 15). Narrative inquiry brings an awareness that what is discovered is at best a temporal snapshot of specific perceptions and experiences. However, the salience of this research lies in its social significance and how it can be connected to other research literature. As Silverman (2005) tells us, research is seldom about uncovering startling facts. Rather, a "finding is usually to be assessed in relation to the theoretical perspective from which it derives and to which it may contribute" (Silverman, 2005,

p. 96). As a research method, narrative inquiry follows in this vein as it is "less a matter of the application of a scholarly technique to understanding phenomenon than it is a matter of 'entering into' the phenomena and partaking of them" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1989, p. 3).

However, I must acknowledge that the collaborative approach, of creating research *with* learners rather than *on* learners, is a situation to be strived for, and there are doubts as to whether it can be fully achieved. I am mindful that while I am trying to create research partnerships with fellow online learners, that a power differential may still exist in the minds of the participants, and in fact, in my own mind. After all, I am the one leading the conversations and making the final interpretations in this paper. Regardless of how much I personally subscribe to a post-modernist view that all input is equally valid, there is a necessity for me to impose a grounded theory lens through which to analyze this qualitative data, to determine what "fits" in terms of answering my research question, and what doesn't.

Procedure

Through my workplace, Camosun College in Victoria, B.C., I approached nine instructors via email who were scheduled to teach a total of 12 online courses in the Winter 2010 semester. The names of the instructors and the online courses they teach were listed on Camosun's publicly-available online registration website, Camlink. Five instructors responded to my initial email inquiry and said they would post my request for research volunteers on their online course sites. Potential participants had the option of contacting me directly either via phone or through my University of Alberta email account, to ensure all communication was conducted "off-site" from the college, preserving anonymity. In this way participants "self-selected" to be part of the study.

Three students responded, all from one course that the instructor had allowed me to address personally during their mandatory face-to-face orientation session. Although they were drawn from the same course, fortunately these participants were able to offer a range of prior and current experiences with other online learning courses, including both blended and completely online. Ages ranged from early twenties to mid forties, allowing me to examine online learning from a perspective of different life experiences. All participants were female.

Due to the intensive nature of narrative inquiry and the amount of transcription and review that is involved, I did not intend to have more than five participants in addition to myself, so having fewer was not detrimental to my research results. Narrative inquiry can successfully produce valid information with only a few participants, and in some cases just the researcher-participant (Wright, 2009).

Pseudonyms were used in place of the real names of the participants. However, as each are individually contributing to the research, participants are identified in terms of gender, general previous experiences with online learning where applicable, and general course subject area, i.e. identifying the course as an arts and science or a business course, but not by specific subject area, section or instructor.

As a research methodology, narrative inquiry presents certain ethical dilemmas. Unlike some other research methods which do not deal with people, or there is complete anonymity between researcher and subject, I not only know the identity of my participants but we are sharing information. This reciprocal reveal can inspire a sense of trust, with the result that occasionally in the course of conversation participants revealed personal information with regards to relationship status, opinions of other learners and instructors, and so on. Although each participant had the opportunity to read and comment on her own individual transcripts after

each conversation, and none asked to me to change or leave out any specific information, as a researcher I must make the decision as to what is essential to my research. Yet I also have an obligation to guard my participants from any potential harm as a result of this research. This created a tension whereby I found myself questioning the extent of personal information to include in order to describe my research findings. For example, I felt it was necessary to reveal that one learner lived outside of Victoria, because her lack of opportunity for face-to-face interaction with her classmates informed her experiences as a learner, and understanding her experiences in this context creates a specific perspective from which to view the research findings. I also included learners' approximate ages as this informed their perceptions of their learning experiences. Overall, I attempted to respect the privacy of each participant and if the information shared did not constitute a significant contribution to understanding the research, I omitted it. Any potentially identifying information that remained was disguised as much as possible.

I conducted a series of meetings with each participant individually to listen to their stories to try to understand the online learning environment as understood by current Camosun College learners. Although the participants' stories drive the inquiry, I used a list of themes to initiate the discussion with each participant (Appendix A). Our conversations from these meetings were audio-recorded to ensure veracity. After transcribing their narratives and examining them for common threads, I followed up with each participant individually to pursue specific threads. The duration and number of the subsequent interviews varied depending on the information I discovered. Some commonalities were immediately apparent and necessitated little follow-up. Other, more divergent, information required additional discussion. The results of our conversations are presented below in the "Research Findings" section.

Why this is important

Given the increasing demand for flexible (i.e. online) learning in an ever-expanding mobile society, finding strategies to enhance the online learning experience will benefit learners. This in turn can benefit society as a whole as there is a shift from a definition of work predicated on skills where workers are seen as Taylorist cogs, to one defined as the interrelation of roles and relationships (Guile & Young, 1998; Hirschhorn, Gilmore & Newell, 1989). Businesses are becoming learning organizations and are encouraging employees to become lifelong learners in order to compete in the new knowledge economy. Bereiter believes the "ability to work with ideas [is] the defining characteristic of knowledge work" (2003, p. 84). This work with ideas in turn leads to "collaborative knowledge building" (Bereiter, 2003, p. 85). Bates adds that e-learning proponents feel online learning, which allows learners to work and learn in groups, is better "for teaching the kind of learning outcomes needed in a knowledge-based society" (2006, p. 12).

Wenger considered knowledge, including workplace knowledge, to be socially constructed through communities of practice (1998). Wilson interprets this to mean that learning and cognition are "produced by and through communicative processes as people interact with each other in specific communities … they are not individual mental activities" (2005, p. 26). This concept of constructivist learning, i.e. learning that is socially constructed through communication with others, is particularly relevant given the rapidly changing post-industrial knowledge economy. We are constantly learning in a variety of settings, or "communities of practice … informal groups of people who interact regularly to use collective learning and shared expertise to solve mutually engaging problems" (Hill, 2005, p. 122). Hall (2006) takes this further, arguing that collective knowledge creates a body of reciprocal knowledge greater than

the sum of its individual learners. According to Coleman, Perry and Schwen (1997), that "because the fundamental notion is that knowledge is a social construction, collaboration is essential" (p. 276). The capability of online learning to capitalize on the social construction of knowledge is further discussed in the section on Andragogy, but here I will focus on how online learning is perceived as valuable in other ways.

Increasingly, post-secondary institutions are recognizing web-based delivery as a viable way to provide additional instruction and as a way of reducing the lack of interaction, or "transactional distance" inherently present in a large enrolment teaching-learning situation (Fahy, 2004, p. 150). For example, podcasting has been used successfully as a blended learning strategy in a large (500-600 students) first-year course at the University of Hawaii (Ogawa & Nickles, 2006). Students had "improved perceptions of the course content" when podcasts were provided as a complement to the often inconsistent learning and inadequate interaction of a large-enrolment course (Ogawa & Nickles, 2006, p. 4). These students also appreciated being able to "enjoy learning when and where they wanted to," and they appreciated being able to "skip over those concepts they were already proficient in" (Ogawa & Nickles, 2006, p. 3). According to the instructor, students who supplemented their learning with online materials "asked much more detailed questions during the extra credit … workshops" than students who did not (Ogawa & Nickles, 2006, p. 4).

Work by Fischer (1997) indicates learning retention can be up to 50 per cent higher with technology-based instruction as opposed to face-to-face (cited in Fahy, 2004, p. 151). Generally, learners receiving computer-based instruction performed better on exams than conventionally-taught students, and had more positive attitudes toward their course subjects (Kulik & Kulik, 1991). An important development since 1991, however, has been the emergence of what has

been termed Web 2.0. Sometimes referred to as the "semantic web", this iteration of the web permits more user control in the form of developing and sharing content (i.e. YouTube), and in harnessing a collective intelligence through sites such as Wikipedia where ideas can be built on collaboratively through a community of users (O'Reilly, 2005). It is a web predicated on user participation. Web users can produce, share and tag content to suit individual preferences. We control how information is ordered. Arguably, the web is a much more dynamic place even better suited to collaborative learning that it was at the time of Kulik and Kulik's research.

As Corbeil and Corbeil (2007) note, online learning will "demand new pedagogies" (p. 54) as "educators will have to shift from being transmitters of knowledge to facilitators of learning in order to create new learning pathways that are more situated, personal, collaborative and long term" (p. 55). Online has the potential to obsolesce the time-consuming and inefficient need for physical presence in order to acquire information or learn new skills, along with greatly expanding the educational space beyond the traditional classroom. "Because online media are by definition linked to networks of external resources, they can provide access to people, ideas, and information beyond those found in the classroom" (Fahy, 2004, p. 149), a view echoed by Kukulska-Hulme in which she considers online as having the ability to "link different resource elements within and across learning contexts" (2007, p. 5).

Thus online learning can answer strategic concerns by allowing learners greater flexibility and access, and its ability to personalize the learning experience, particularly in large-enrolment classes, can address pedagogical needs. As well, online learning can model the collaborative learning necessary in a knowledge economy. By melding participants' stories with what is known about online presence, group formation, and pedagogical theory, this project has the potential to make a contribution to the currently under-researched area of online engagement.

Given the increasing prevalence of online work not only in educational but also business settings, the applicability of this research could be extensive.

Andragogy

Distance educator Patrick Fahy called for "an attitude of concern for how students experience our offerings, and an appreciation of the differences technology might make", not least of which are the new relationships and roles that are created between learners, and learners and instructors (2001, p. 9). Online learning frees the learner and the instructor from the constriction of place, and can be a powerful tool "for group communication and co-operative learning", the basis for constructivist learning (Fahy, 2001, p. 10). Online learning will create "greater interaction and user control", essentially empowering the learner (Fahy, 2001, p. 11). "Overall, the online environment should offer the learner more *options* – for content, access, interaction and expression" (ibid, emphasis original).

The ubiquitousness of digital technology means online learning is here to stay. It's easy to get caught up in the technology, but at its most basic level we can view the technology as only a tool, a delivery mechanism. Distance education in the past (and to a certain extent even today) meant text-based learning materials delivered via post. From there, distance learning has evolved to include media tools, such as audio cassettes and videotapes. In the late 1980s and early 1990s computer-based instruction (CBI), also known as computer-assisted instruction (CAI), meant the use of computers and floppy disks or drives, not the internet and the instant and global connectivity of the World Wide Web. And here is where the perception still remains for some instructors and learners, that online learning via computers is simply a method of delivery, i.e. the same materials that could be accessed in a classroom but delivered via the web, rather than to see online learning as a different way of learning entirely. Bates (2006) reminds us that as

instructors we need to know as much about how people learn, as about technologies per se. He does acknowledge online learning leads "to great flexibility and convenience for both learners and teachers, and probably more effective use of time on task, therefore enabling more effective learning" (Bates, 2006, p. 147). However, he adds that the "main pedagogical advantage [of online learning] is the opportunity provided for high quality student-student interaction, and in particular the opportunity for discussion and dialogue between students" (2006, p. 150). According to Bates (2006), such online discussions are the "core" of constructivist learning (p. 151), and permit a shift "from an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge to the social construction of knowledge" (p. 11).

When we think about education we often think about a school with children sitting in a classroom while the teacher stands at the front conducting the class. Freire decried this type of teaching activity, describing it as "banking", where the teacher deposits the gift of knowledge upon those who do not know anything (2009, p. 72). Vygotsky developed his learning theory as one based on the premise that learning is a social activity and includes interaction with other learners and with learning tasks (Shih & Mills, 2007). Recent research agrees with Freire and Vygotsky, indicating a constructivist approach – wherein the individual is understood as playing the central role in building knowledge based on experience – provides a richer learning environment (Campbell, 2005). Mayer's (2001) work on how the mind processes information, asserts "true learning is more a process of knowledge construction than information acquisition"; he differentiates "deep learning" as incorporating "retention *and* transfer" as opposed to the more superficial rote learning (as cited in Fahy, 2005, p. 13, italics original). This results in building on a base of knowledge to construct new knowledge that is experiential and relevant.

With information available at the click of a mouse, the traditional "teacher-centred" approach no longer works in an information-rich society, not only for children in the K-12 environment, but particularly for adult learners. The nature of digital technology contributes to this by enabling us to be on-demand consumers of information, when and where we want it. As well, many occupations require ongoing training to ensure staff knowledge is current, an increasingly common undertaking in the shift to the knowledge society and the conversion of businesses to "learning organizations" (Daft, 2007). Convenient online modules that can be made available to staff at their computer workstations, thus minimizing disruption to work schedules, are a preferred way to upgrade skills and knowledge. Many adult learners utilize online courses as a way to update skills or acquire credentials without having to take a leave from their career.

Malcolm Knowles wrote extensively on adult education issues, and following Dewey, emphasized that effective learning for adults (andragogy) builds on their life experiences and applies that knowledge to their experience as learners. While Knowles' work has received some criticism in recent years for not acknowledging issues of gender and culture, or that children can learn from experience as well as can adults, his central premise that the best learning is relational and contextual whether it takes place in the classroom or online, is still salient. While it can be argued that *all* learners could benefit from a more collaborative and participatory learning process as opposed to a "banking" system of learning (Freire, 2009), this is a particularly useful way to reach adult learners.

Thus learning is not done in isolation, it is relational, situational and socially constructed; a collaboration with others. As Engestrom (1993, 1995) tells us, there is more to learning than "the circulation of existing knowledge", it is the creation of "knowledgeability", the ability to understand knowledge in context and to create new knowledge (as cited in Guile & Young,

1998, p. 184). The real test of knowledge is being able to apply it, not in a predictable situation, but to a new one. A teacher-centric "narrow transmission" model of decontextualized knowledge is not conducive to the way we naturally learn in social settings (Fay, 1987). Knowledge is not neatly packaged in linear bits with a beginning and an end, nor is it a "cause and effect" behaviourist model postulating discrete learning and discrete skills. While there is nothing wrong with regurgitated knowledge in some contexts, we are as a species innately wired to learn by doing and to learn in relation to others in our many communities of practice, beginning with our families (Alcock, 1996). According to Schön (as cited in Coleman et al., 1997, p. 281), applying a "technical rationality" to "the problems of real-world practice" is not the best way to deal with these invariably "messy, indeterminate situations". Thus constructivism "explicitly accommodates this notion of multiple frameworks or ways of seeing a situation" (Coleman et al., 1997, p. 282).

While it can be argued that online enables us to learn with, and from others, there is also research pointing to higher achievement by online learners versus traditional classroom learners. A 1999 study at York University compared the results of students who had taken an online version of a course to students who had been taught in a classroom. A total of 14 courses were examined, and online grades were as good or better than those of face-to-face learners; both groups scored better than traditional (i.e. paper-based) correspondence students (Fahy, 2001). Another study of 200 undergraduate economics students showed those enrolled in the distance (online) section of the course "scored 15% higher, regardless of factors such as gender, race, computer skills or academic aptitude" than those who received their instruction in a classroom (Fahy, 2001, p. 12). In their meta-analysis of 96 research studies from 1996-2005 comparing online learning with traditional classroom-based instruction, Sitzmann et al.'s (2006) aggregate

findings note participants who self-select into web-based courses are generally more positive about the learning experience. While this could indicate a pre-existing positive perception of the value of online learning even before the course begins, and might explain why participants achieve higher results in their online courses, the expectation must have been met as the students in these various studies were still positive about the experience after the courses ended. Regardless, Fahy notes "the key is how well the student is able to manage his or her own learning"; a direct function of how well the online environment allows students to take "personal responsibility" for their learning (2001, p. 14). Sitzmann et al. (2006) echo this, noting that the research they examined in which the online courses studied employed a variety of instructional methods, students mastered the content better and more quickly than classroom instruction alone, generally because the content required students to be more "active" learners, i.e. more responsible for their own learning.

This begs the question as to the value or usefulness of online to the learner who is more passive, or who has been conditioned to not take initiative, other than showing up to a classroom. It is instructive to note that traditional correspondence courses have a low completion rate amongst its primarily younger, i.e. typically high-school aged students, as successful completion requires "high motivation, self-discipline and encouragement [feedback]" (Montgomerie, King & Dropko, 2003, ¶ 2).

Bates and Poole note "First and second year students straight from high school are likely to require more support and help studying at a university or college level. They are likely to be less independent as learners, and therefore it may be dangerous to expect them to be able to study entirely through the use of technology" (2003, p. 81). This is a view which I discovered seems to be shared by these younger learners themselves. Bates and Poole argue older learners will be

more successful with online learning, as they "have already developed successful study skills, will have their own community and family life, and will welcome the flexibility of studying this way" (ibid).

The meta-analysis of online research by Sitzmann et al. supports this, stating "Research also indicates trainees in their late 20s and 30s are more motivated, have more positive attitudes towards [learning], are less anxious, and focus more on achieving specific learning outcomes than younger trainees" (2006, p. 630). Sitzmann et al. discovered a direct correlation between age and online success: "The extent to which Web-based [students] outperformed classroom [students] increased as the age of online [students] increased and the age of classroom [students] decreased" (2006, p. 649). Overall, online learners excelled compared to their classroom counterparts when they had control over their learning, and they were able to apply their knowledge and receive feedback (Sitzmann et al., 2006).

This would tie in with work done by Knowles in which older learners seem more able to succeed in autonomous learning situations where they can exert more control. This indicates younger learners require the structure, and perhaps the opportunities for feedback, inherent in a face-to-face setting. However, establishing online social presence and receiving support and feedback from a group might replicate this for younger learners. In the absence of internal motivation and a sense of discipline, implementing an external form of this through accountability to peers, by using an online group or cohort that moved beyond an "anonymous" email address or computer screen, could be an effective substitute for the pressure exerted by being a visible member of a face-to-face class.

Bates says that "We do know that interaction between learners and instructors, and interaction between a student and other students, are critical to successful distance learning"

(2006, p. 187), adding that "According to Jonassen (1999), learning is more effective when it is undertaken with other learners rather than as a singular, solitary activity" (Bates, 2006, p. 188). Following on Freire and others, Kearsley (1998) tells us "Online classes emphasize social interaction among the participants and nullify the authoritarian role of the teacher or subject matter expert" (as cited in Firdyiwek, 1999, p. 29). To me, this means an engagement with each other (learners with learners, learners with instructor, with the role of the latter as being more that of a guide) is key.

Online courses, with their ability to tap into a variety of sources from all over the web and to offer various multimedia learning objects online, are uniquely suited to this purpose. Yet this is not always how online courses are delivered. Sometimes they just replicate poor face-to-face instruction. Learners "show up" online as they would in a classroom, read the lecture notes instead of hearing the instructor talk, and hand in their assignments via a dropbox. This is Freire's "banking" model of education where knowledge is delivered top-down, but simply through a different transmission channel than the classroom. The advantage to the learner is to not have to travel to class and in having a sense of control over the time and place that instruction occurs. In this model there is a perceived need for greater "motivation" on the part of the learner. By not having to show up physically to class, students feel they need a greater self-discipline to get their online course work done. Yet this replication of a traditional model of instruction, albeit one delivered online, only serves to maintain control of the learning experience with the instructor and the institution. The online experience is more that of an FTP (file transfer protocol) of sending and receiving files than of a truly interactive, collaborative learning environment. This has helped sustain the belief that online learning lacks the interactivity of the

classroom, and that it isn't as suitable for younger, less-disciplined learners because the online experience is less engaging.

Yet just because instruction takes place in person, in a classroom, one cannot assume any meaningful interaction is occurring, or that it is somehow inherently "better" than online, mediated instruction. Fahy poses the question as to whether classroom instruction "really provide[s] more interaction and tutor-learner contact than does well designed distance learning?" (2008), particularly when one considers the lack of interactivity present in large-enrolment classes. Rather than trying to replicate poor teacher-centric "sage on the stage" face-to-face technique, more effective constructivist-based techniques tailored to the potentially collaborative nature of online learning can be developed.

However, this is not to denigrate good classroom experiences. Not all "traditional" classroom lectures are necessarily one-way. Often there is a degree of interactivity in face-to-face learning – from feedback in observing student engagement all the way to hands-on interactive workshops – that can be absent with learning mediated by technology. In a study done with Duke University students who received online instruction via podcasting, attendance in class was not negatively affected as students said they felt they still needed to go to class for opportunities to discuss and interact, and to ask questions (Cummings, 2006). This example of "blended learning" demonstrates why it is often perceived by educators as offering the best of both worlds, the "personal interaction and facilitated instruction" of the classroom together with online self-study (Sitzmann et al., 2006, p. 629), in which materials are "pushed" out to the students from a computer-based software system, allowing the student a sense of desired control over the time and place learning occurs. But what if that experience of classroom-based

"personal interaction" was able to be created online? I can only imagine how much more effective online learning would be.

Narrative and social presence

The lack of affective, social and contextual cues normally afforded by face-to-face communication can lead to asocial online interaction and a perception that online is somehow depersonalizing. According to Gunawardena (1995), even social presence theory considered face-to-face interaction to represent the highest degree of awareness of others in a communication exchange. This belief that mediated communication is somehow inferior to in-person exchanges has helped justify the use of online as an asynchronous information delivery mechanism as opposed to a tool that can encourage interpersonal sharing and as a way to engage learners in collaborative knowledge construction.

Some research has indicated that richer communication media (i.e. voice, video) can help transmit some of the context missing in purely text-based interaction. However, despite digital convergence which has created a proliferation of media devices (i.e. video- , camera- and web-enabled phones), these richer communication channels are not always possible or feasible to have. And simply having multimedia channels available does not always guarantee these will aid interaction; indeed some will hinder it (Berge, 1995, and Mayer, 2001; as cited by Fahy, 2005). Again, we must remind ourselves that these technologies are tools which can present or deliver material but are not necessarily a way to promote interaction in and of themselves. Here it is easy to conflate a type of media technology with the message, or desired outcome.

True, technologies can be a tool for communication and interaction to reduce the isolation felt by online learners, "by creating presence and, ultimately, interrelationships among the parties involved" (Fahy, 2001, p. 7). While Anderson offers the observation that interaction is essential

"in the development and support of participants' sense of social presence" (2005, p. 2), Fahy stops short of offering insights as to how this presence and these relationships develop. This is not surprising as investigating social dimensions of online communication and interaction is a relatively new research area (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; Yoon & Johnson, 2008), despite the fact "social presence is correlated with student satisfaction and higher scores on learning outcomes" (Anderson, 2005, p. 2). As noted earlier, student satisfaction is linked to engagement.

Bjørn and Ngwenyama (2009) acknowledge that social cues need to be visible, or translucent, amongst online participants in order to ensure communication and thus collaboration. However their advice is limited to recommending a common language in order for participants to construct meaning, and a vague exhortation to employ "technology" to transmit "invisible or tacit knowledge at the cultural level" (p. 251). In contrast, Harvard business professor Richard Hackman isn't convinced that completely online teams *can* be effective, despite the fact that some members are so dispersed as to make this unreasonable (Coutu & Beschloss, 2009). However, his belief that online teams can't function "if we don't know who's on the team" through face-to-face meetings, particularly "a launch meeting with everyone present", serves to underscore the need for virtual groups to establish online social presence (Coutu & Beschloss, 2009, p. 104).

Narrative, i.e. sharing stories, is one way to develop social presence. Regardless of whether distributed via text, voice or image, in person or online, narrative and storytelling are timeless techniques ingrained in our psyche. Giddens tells us we are socially constructed selfs, based on a multitude of narratives (Moores, 2000). Because our identities "are the heterogeneous construction of a multitude of discursive practices" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 79), many of our narratives overlap with others. We can go to the same elementary school or share the same

experience with others as members of a soccer team, but how each individual brings their identities to these narratives can be very different. As a way of making sense of our world, narrative's importance cannot be overstated: "narratives and storytelling have been regarded as the basic organizing principle of human cognition" (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; as cited in Tourish & Robson, 2006, p. 717).

Sharing narratives in an online environment may well be key to student engagement. While they did not identify sharing narratives explicitly, Beuchot and Bullen's research supported "meaningful interpersonal connections [by virtual community members] before they are asked to engage in cognitive tasks … by building in additional time to foster such interpersonal connections" (2005, p. 83). Fahy (2007) examined the use of stories by online participants and its effect on interaction, but not as a way to study social presence and thus group cohesion and collaboration, leaving the door open for more specific research in this area.

Not only would the sharing of narratives help to personalize online learners to each other, presumably there would be an increased level of communicative interaction overall, leading to positive learning outcomes. Sitzmann et al. note studies which indicate "higher levels of interaction between instructors and learners or among learners result in greater learner motivation, more positive attitudes toward learning or the instructional process, and improved learning outcomes" (2006, p. 632). Such outcomes can be defined as engagement. As well, "verbal behaviours (e.g. text messaging) that establish immediacy are associated with greater participant learning … human interaction decreases the likelihood [of learner isolation online] and can help [learners] remain motivated" (ibid). Bates and Poole (2003) contend most learning theory suggests that effective learning is "active" as opposed to passive learning; "the learner must respond in some way to the learning material" (p. 98), adding, "interaction is an essential

part of learning" (p. 102). They also note the emphasis that is placed on academic discourse: "Many professors consider that the skills of academic discourse are best learned through small group discussions led by an experienced academic" (Bates & Poole, 2003, p. 100), something they believe can be facilitated asynchronously online.

Despite the demonstrated benefits of interaction in online learning situations, and the possibility of narrative's role in helping to personalize online learners thus creating more satisfying interactions, there still seems to be a disconnect in seeing online education as a place for social exchanges. This divide is most obvious in the younger learners, the ones who feel they lack the motivation to succeed online. Yet these same individuals are among the most assiduous users of texting and social networking sites such as Facebook to maintain relationships. Why do these learners keep their social networking life separate from their schoolwork, leading to a division between social and task? I believe it is because online learners do not see their classmates as relational others.

In a 2006 study, Ellison, Steinfield and Lampe (2007) found almost all Facebook connections amongst Michigan State University students were grounded in offline relationships. College Facebook users are more likely to search for people with whom they already have an offline connection than for complete strangers, a finding supported by Caruso and Salaway who discovered the most common use of social networking sites amongst students (96.8 per cent) was to stay in touch with friends (2008, p. 9). In this way, online and offline connections are closely coupled, and Facebook was being used as a communication device to maintain these pre-existing relationships. In other words, the sociability must already be present. In this way, Facebook may not be *creating* a community, but *maintaining* one that already exists offline. Narrative can be a way to replicate a sense of community in an educational environment amongst virtual strangers.

Group work

To consider group work as a component of learning is not new. As noted in the preceding sections, many theorists believe learning is socially constructed, i.e. we create knowledge through our interactions with others.

While research exists on how groups (either dispersed or collocated) within organizations can work together collaboratively, and there is acknowledgement of the usefulness of group work in educational settings, there is limited research from an educational perspective in terms of using groups to improve the online experience for learners. As group work would seem to be a natural progression of the constructivist beliefs of the benefit of learning with others in socially constructed communities of practice, this is an area of focus for me.

I have found that some of my best online learning experiences have come when I have worked with others in groups. The question becomes, how can group membership be composed so that group members can obtain the maximum learning benefit? As a corollary to this, once groups are composed, how can learners in these groups create trusting and supportive relationships to enable learning? What strategies or techniques can be employed to create individual social presence within such a group, thereby enhancing each member's ability to collaboratively learn through completing tasks and solving problems?

Bales (1950) laid the groundwork for considering both social and task elements as necessary for group members to work effectively together. Tuckman identified task-activity and interpersonal as realms of group behaviour (Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). Recently, work comparing similarities between face-to-face and virtual groups applying Bales' Interaction Process Analysis method discovered online group communication was similar to that of the face-to-face groups studied by Bales (Fahy, 2005). However, Fahy's research did not look at the

extent to which these interactions contributed to the development of a supportive sense of online community amongst learners.

In his survey on transformative learning research, Taylor (1997) identifies the presence of trusting and supportive relationships as having the strongest impact in learning, while Rogers (2003) notes that the transfer of ideas occurs most frequently between homophilous individuals. However, such trusting relationships and transference can be difficult to obtain as group members are usually not homogeneous, resulting in a lack of trust leading to "interactional distortions" (Hart, 1990, p. 132). Bjørn and Ngwenyama (2009) believe "team members need to develop a shared meaning context and common language for making sense of each other's actions" (p. 228). Although establishing this common ground can be a time-consuming process, "failure to establish and maintain such a context can result in serious breakdowns in collaboration" (ibid). Although Bjørn and Ngwenyama wrote from an organizational perspective, Sitzmann et al. echo their observations as it applies to online learning, noting, "One of the demonstrated advantages of [online learning] is the opportunity to develop collaborative learning communities … but it takes learners time to build and benefit from collaborative contexts" (2006, p. 650).

Much of the literature on effective groups is from a business or management perspective, and assumes group members are assigned and the group leader appointed. Thus the leader is responsible for managing the team, including ensuring group cohesion (Coutu & Beschloss, 2009; Cramton, 2002; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977). In an educational setting, students are either assigned randomly or intentionally to groups by the instructor, or self-select into groups. Unlike employees, there is often little information available on individual students at the beginning of a course to ensure the formation of groups balanced in terms of skills, attitudes and values. The

result is often a heterogeneous group of near strangers functioning without an externally appointed leader who then must collaborate in a learning environment. Given that learning is expected to occur in post-secondary institutions within the 10 to 14 week timeframe of a typical credit course, this does not give group members much time to deal with social formation and to engage with each other before being thrust into tasks. The social is either overlooked, or dealt with ad hoc as problems occur.

The organizational perspective in much of the research on collaborative team work means there has been a focus on strategies to enable teams (either collocated or dispersed) to function more effectively to complete tasks (Cramton, 2002; Daft, 2007). This has led to an emphasis on communication strategies that are more engaged with outcomes, i.e. task-oriented, as opposed to the social such as resolving interpersonal issues, or with examining how members may learn within a work group. Additionally, much of the research in educational settings has focussed on online learning by graduate level students, meaning more research is needed at the undergraduate level, the age range of younger learners who are considered to be less able or less motivated to learn online (Hostetter & Busch, 2006).

Yet this generation of students now entering college are referred to by Prensky as “digital natives”, comfortable with technology (2005, ¶ 7). These students are accustomed to web-based delivery of information and multitasking (Campbell, 2005; Corbeil & Corbeil, 2007). They are interested in collaborating with others, as evidenced by the use of social or collective intelligence applications such as social bookmarking and tagging (i.e. Del.icio.us). Social software has allowed us to create new patterns of interconnectivity and new spaces to engage in interaction with one another, from the organization of politically-motivated flash mobs to updating one’s photo gallery on Flickr. Arguably this reflects a post-modernist collective social action by many

people, pooling our single contributions into a greater whole, bypassing knowledge disseminated by a single (i.e. teacher-centric) authority. In other words, community is negotiated between participants and from this, dialogue and engagement occurs. It is not simply one-way communication.

Thus we have a natural tendency to collaborate, and through this dialogue we can create a collective intelligence that can be a powerful way to learn. To achieve effective dialogue, though, we must first feel we are able to freely exchange ideas and insights. In other words, a trusting relationship built on some sense of commonality must be developed. The application of a method such as sharing narratives would allow virtual group members to develop an online social presence enabling them to relate to each other as individuals; this would promote the engagement necessary for effective group work and thus learning to occur.

Research findings

In my experience over the past six years as an online learner and instructor, I have felt the most engaged and accountable in my course work when working closely with others. Whether this feedback came in the form of communication from my instructor, or my fellow learners, or through interaction with my own students, it lessened the sense of working alone.

Group work gave me the opportunity to share experiences with others. I was able to learn from others' experiences, and hopefully I was able to offer insights in return, and the actual process of working together gave us a common experience that we could draw on collectively while we collaborated on assignments. This helped to bind us together more closely, helping us to develop relationships, even a feeling of community, with each other.

Online as depersonalizing

Yet online can be a way to keep people at a remove, and if one is seen only an email address, it can be depersonalizing. I learned how easy it is to ignore others online while trying to recruit participants for this study. Four of the nine instructors I contacted via email did not respond to me. I don't know if any of them posted my request to their classes or not. Of the five instructors who did respond to say they would post my request, I received no response from students in four of the classes. The only class in which students did respond was the class where I was allowed to address the students in person during their on-campus orientation. In other words, I was able to appear as a person to them. I received no response from classes where my only "contact" with students was through a text-based request on the online course discussion board. The lack of response to my formal, proscribed research approach underscores the importance of going "beyond the computer screen" and getting to know others as people as opposed to simply a name appended to text.

Because the students in the mandatory face-to-face orientation session could see me in person or through a live video feed (putting a face to a name) and hear how I spoke about the research project (with enthusiasm and perhaps by injecting some of my personality into what I said, something I could not do with the text-based approach), they could perceive me as a person, a person requesting their assistance for something that mattered to her.

I thought of this experience when I was speaking with Eleanor, a student in her second year at Camosun. Like the other two students, Jo-anne and Caitlyn, who shared their stories with me, Eleanor is enrolled in an online business class. She tells me about finding out there was a late addition to her group of five, which had already met face-to-face for an hour in the mandatory orientation session prior to the start of their online course.

> And when we got back we found out that one person, Maggie, Margaret, actually I want to start with Margaret – was added to our group. Now Margaret didn't come to class that day, but was put in our group. So right away there's a bit of, um, unfairness, in my mind, and I'm sure in the minds of several of my team mates. Like, 'why did we come [for] eight hours on a Saturday, when Margaret gets to stay at home?' So Margaret logs on to the system and we're able to chat with her. So we've got five of us at school and Margaret at home in her pyjamas. So we go to do our role play and Margaret doesn't have the textbook. So Margaret doesn't know what she's supposed to be doing. So this is making it much, much worse for Margaret. We have no picture of Margaret, we have no idea what she looks like. We've already bonded in our group, Margaret was added after the fact, doesn't have the textbook. So, we just make do. She watches, she witnesses. And then, Tuesday night was our first online group. We're all supposed to be online, we're all supposed to do the role play. She sends in an email message to the instructor, as well as us, that morning, 'Oh I'm sorry, I don't have the textbook'. Still. And this is over a week later. She doesn't have the textbook and she's in [another place]. So I ended up scanning a couple pages of mine, so she could do the role play this time. But not until she sent her introduction email, which she signed Maggie, did it even occur to me to even be nice to the situation. Like at that point she was Margaret, added, [and] we're resentful. She didn't do some of the things that she was supposed to (individual conversation, January 14, 2010).

Until Margaret sent her introduction email, signed Maggie, it didn't occur to Eleanor to "even be nice to the situation", to think of Margaret as a person who called herself "Maggie". Prior to that, Margaret was a late addition, a resented inconvenience who required extra work to allow her to function as part of the group. It wasn't until Eleanor got to know Maggie a little bit that she was able to personalize her, instead of seeing her as a depersonalized email address. Additionally, Eleanor wonders if Maggie would have been accepted by the group more quickly if she had appeared in person to introduce herself, allowing her to supply additional non-verbal cues. "The thing is, if she had she said that in person, maybe she would have grimaced a bit, and apologized. It's hard to say what she would have said had this happened in person. Or how we would have reacted" (ibid).

Online exchanges can be more difficult, particularly with strangers. The non-verbal cues are missing and care must be taken to convey the correct tone. For instance, business student Caitlyn finds communicating with others she doesn't know well to be difficult:

> … online it's harder to tell them to hurry up, when if you see them in class you can be like 'hey guys, I have this, I have to do this and I'm just wondering if you could post it faster'. But if you send it through an email or through a message it kind of sounds very hostile, and like, you're getting mad at them when I'm really not meaning it like that but I just, you know, need to do my work (individual conversation, January 12, 2010).

While Caitlyn, who is in her early twenties, is of a generation that seems to have no problem communicating with others online as a matter of course (i.e. Facebook, texting), to me the difference here is in the level of familiarity with the other, further exacerbated because the focus of the communication is task rather than social thus the exchange is intrinsically more formalized. Unless there is a social element to it, online communication by itself can be depersonalizing. In communication exchanges with known others, the individual is already personalized through pre-existing social contact, and online is simply a communication device. This could be why communicating solely for the purpose of task makes interaction seem "hostile" to Caitlyn.

Here, if the social isn't established before you get to the task, the result is a lack of common ground and a potential inability to communicate effectively to complete the task. As noted by Bales and Fahy, both social and task elements need to be addressed regardless of whether the group is in-person or online. Caitlyn believes making her request in person would be easier, presumably because she could modify her interaction while she was speaking, responding to the non-verbal cues from the other, perhaps softening her message by smiling. This follows on Eleanor's experience with Maggie, where she wonders if Maggie would have been accepted, and forgiven, more quickly had she appeared late in person rather than online. This belief that spatial proximity makes communication easier seems to be an accepted truism, and it is a thread I will explore a little further on, but this did leave me wondering whether face-to-face is really superior in all ways for interpersonal interaction, and particularly, for learning. After all, while learners in

blended classes or online learners who attend other courses in person on-campus may have the opportunity to meet others face-to-face, truly online learners do not.

As a remote (i.e. off-campus) distance learner, Jo-anne understands the potential for messages to be misinterpreted when your only mode of communication is text and words, so she takes time to craft her responses. “I don’t know about other learners, but I’m always very careful, I’m usually retyping things, about how I’ve said it, because I’m always worried about how somebody might read it. How it comes across, in text” (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). Without the richness of a face-to-face channel of communication, we do lose non-verbal cues to moderate our interactions. We can’t see if our messages are being received and understood in the way we intended. But the ability to deliver a message in person isn’t necessarily enough to ensure effective communication occurs. If we don’t “know” the other or share some commonality, even face-to-face messages can be misinterpreted.

This underscores why we need to attend to the social, particularly with those whom we don’t yet know, and particularly in situations where we have to work with these others. For Eleanor and Caitlyn the importance of knowing the other is demonstrated in their preference to go to others with whom they had a pre-existing relationship if they were experiencing difficulties with online coursework. Both said their first choice would be to ask “a friend” in the online course; Caitlyn said she arranged to take an online arts and science course with known others: “I happen to have one or two friends that we decided to take it together, so only because of that do I have anyone I know” (individual conversation, January 12, 2010) which suggests that by ensuring members of a previously-known circle are her “known” online group members she has a safety net she can count on.

Knowing the others – commonality and accountability

While Eleanor downplayed the need for social interaction in any course (and said the lack of face-to-face social interaction was what appealed to her in online courses), Caitlyn looked to pre-existing friendships as her resource for online interaction. In her arts and science class, her "friends" are the only ones she seems to "know", or care to know, in that class and with them in place she has little incentive to get to know others online. In her online business class, she already knows many of the students from previous face-to-face classes, and admits a preference for groups predicated on commonality:

> … we're all human resource management and business students in my group, while the public administration students are all in their groups together … there is more accountability that way because you know we are all in business school together, they will see us eventually in another class and all that type of stuff. While if we were with the public administration students that would never see us again, I'm almost hesitant to say that they might not be as accountable for us or we even wouldn't be with them, because we're not going to see them (individual conversation, January 12, 2010).

Caitlyn sees groups based on commonalities as being more accountable because of relationships, both pre-existing and potential future ones. I found this with my Athabasca courses as there was no cohort and almost no group work. There was little similarity in our backgrounds (these were nursing practitioners to my communication and media studies) and little chance to get to know each other beyond our differences. Postings and discussion online were limited. I wasn't going to see those people again, either.

I pursued the idea of accountability further with Caitlyn, particularly from the perspective of group work, and the idea that if a group of students has to present work to fellow classmates, it increases the sense of a "peer pressure" amongst them to do well. By creating an atmosphere of accountability to a community (group, cohort, class) of others. Caitlyn agreed there is more pressure to do well with an audience of those you know, but "I find, again with having different students in the class you may never see again, it reduces it" (ibid). She added that accountability

would be increased if business students shared even more similar characteristics, for instance if they were

> … of the same year, maybe, in the same group so that either they know each other already, or at least they feel accountable to those students, because they're with them, right? Instead of like I said, the public administration versus the business students – I wouldn't feel as accountable to them and even though I want to do well I could see it not being as easy to get myself going and that type of stuff. Right now I'm in a group with students that I know I'm going to see again, and I know that I want to do my best for them as well as I expect them to do the best for me (ibid).

For Caitlyn, accountability comes from "knowing the people", and for her, that is through pre-existing relationships. As the youngest participant in this narrative inquiry, her pre-existing relationships are an important online life preserver. She is reluctant to engage with those whom she doesn't "know", and feels the only people she can actually rely on are those she already does know:

> You know you get very, very different people and with having assigned groups it's almost hard. We had teachers actually that you got to pick one person to be with and then the group was built on that so at least you had one connection that you knew and then you kind of grew with other connections but if your group fell through at least you had someone there to help you through it. And it happened that our group ending up falling through and the two of us carried the rest of the group. And it becomes problematic but it's better than me just having to carry the group through to get my grade that I want. And online's tough that way, just not knowing your group, and not knowing who you're going to get or that type of stuff (ibid).

While this story shows that Caitlyn's pre-existing contact was ultimately the one person she could rely on, this also to me underscores the importance of getting to know everyone in a group. I wonder if this group "fell through" because the other members did not know each other very well, leading to less commitment to the other group members and thus less accountability, resulting in less "reliability". If the social had been attended to, i.e. if all group members were able to feel they were on a similar footing to Caitlyn and her friend, there may have been more positive "peer pressure" to contribute and be relied on to do well, much in the way Caitlyn

describes above, feeling that she has a stronger bond with business program students with whom she already knows and will meet again. Later in our conversation, Caitlyn did say she thought students introducing themselves online through the discussion page helped to create more accountability.

> It's just nice to know backgrounds of people so if these people are in six classes, three jobs, this, that and the other, then I know that they're probably not going to be there as much. But they have a reason. Unlike the people who don't have a job, are in three or four classes and, you know, why aren't you online? Why aren't you here? And it's just nice to know people, whether you're in the class or not (ibid).

When I observed these introductions were people telling stories about themselves, online, at the beginning of the class, Caitlyn agreed, saying, "It just helps you to understand their life, right?" (ibid). By understanding their lives, and contrasting them to your own, it can help develop some shared commonalities. In turn, the knowledge of what others are dealing with can lead to empathy, and for remote off-campus distance learners like Jo-anne, an essential sense of connection.

Unlike Eleanor and Caitlyn, Jo-anne doesn't have the option of working online with those with whom she has a pre-existing face-to-face relationship. Although she is now taking her sixth course towards her credential and has developed an ongoing relationship with fellow learners who have taken the same courses with her, she has never met any of them. For Jo-anne, her only knowledge of her classmates is through the narratives and then the experiences they share online. Despite the fact she is only working with text as a communication tool, she is able to develop what she calls "rapport", which she describes as being able to "immediately connect" with others (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

> And there's that rapport back and forth, and they're always going to respond to your posts, and you generally are always going to respond to theirs. And then there are those that you don't connect with, and I don't know why. But it's just the communication and the rapport back and forth isn't as easy as it is with others (ibid).

I wondered how this rapport developed. Was it based on some commonality of experience, a narrative unity where your story dovetails with another person's? Jo-anne thought that could be it.

> When you're doing online learning and it's all typing and it's all the words that you're seeing, you're not seeing any of the non-verbal communication at all. And I think just the words that people use, and how they put them together, and you do pick up on who they are, and kind of their personality a bit (ibid).

As Jo-anne points out, the words, in the form of text-based email or chatting, are really all a distance learner has to go on to determine whether someone has the same outlook on life as you. "So you look beyond the words, and you look to the people who are behind those words" to discover this rapport (ibid).

The question becomes, how do you get to a place of rapport in order to learn in a collaborative way? But first, is it even important to these online learners to learn in this constructivist way? Here some different stories emerge.

The importance of rapport and interaction – implications for andragogy

All three learners described themselves as strongly motivated and self-directed, therefore disciplined enough to study online. For Eleanor, online permits her to take more courses than she can timetable. There are no course conflicts with online courses and she can work at her own pace, without having to be held back by slower learners in a classroom. "It helps being able to take a higher course load. But I still think the number one reason is I just don't want to waste my time" (individual conversation, January 14, 2010). She adds that a benefit is to not have to be pinned down by synchronous communication, or even place, noting she can print out her readings and read them in the bathtub, if she wants: "It's just complete freedom. I don't have to sit down for three hours at a time, ever" (ibid). She highly values being able to learn when she feels she wants to, saying,

> I have those moments in which I feel like reading my textbooks, or I feel like going and answering quizzes, or there's a specific time in which I want to answer discussions, and this might not be 10:30 to 12:20 on a Wednesday (ibid).

She feels also she is getting a more beneficial learning experience: "after I read the textbook and spend three power hours studying, that's much more beneficial to me than a week's worth of classes" (ibid). She has taken a number of blended and some fully online courses and admits she intentionally seeks out these sorts of courses. She cites an early success with a traditional correspondence distance course in high school as an example of how she proved to herself and to others that she can learn on her own.

Eleanor stories herself as an organized, self-sufficient and self-motivated person who is able to learn from static materials, and who doesn't place a high value on interpersonal interaction. For her, this is one reason she prefers online as she doesn't have to interact with others in person and actually doesn't miss the non-verbal cues online, citing her good written communication skills. In person Eleanor says "I get off topic, and stutter, and (pause) long spaces" (ibid). Later in our conversation she says online interaction suits her as she is shy.

Other than feeling comfortable interacting with others in person, Caitlyn shares many of Eleanor's reasons for taking online courses, particularly the flexibility as to when and where she learns. For her, it is a time management tool that permits her to multitask, taking six courses and juggling two jobs. When I commented that she seems self-reliant she responds by saying, "I'm just so busy, I need to be self-reliant" (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). In fact, Caitlyn's self-reliance extends to the point where she feels she teaches herself online, and according to her, instructors in online courses

> … don't do any of the teaching. They provide us with the material and what we have to do but if I don't want to work with them, I can find my own means of teaching myself, or a tutor, and I don't have to sit through their lectures and try and understand or anything like that (ibid).

Thus for Caitlyn, online means there is no teacher and no need to show up at a specific time for class, which she prefers

> … because I have a hard time learning with some teachers' styles. And so having just an online class for me allows me to teach myself, my own way, or get assistance from a tutor or someone that I know I can work through, instead of having to try and work with a teacher that I can't learn from or is difficult or doesn't like me (ibid).

In this way, Caitlyn is seeing online as more a convenient way to access static course materials, a form of FTP delivery of content. She then interacts with the course materials and if necessary, a known compatible relational other, rather than with unknown others (instructors or classmates).

Unlike Caitlyn and Eleanor, Jo-anne's initial reason for choosing online courses was simply because for her, the courses she needed to take for certification in her field were only available online. But as a mid-career learner she soon learned to appreciate the flexibility of online learning because it allowed her to continue working and raising a family. "When you can go on at 11:30 at night and do some course work that's a huge benefit as opposed to having to be in a classroom at two in the afternoon" (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). Jo-anne's perception of online changed from it being her only option to move forward in her career, to appreciating the temporal and spatial benefits afforded by online learning. However, she echoed the common thread noted by Eleanor and Caitlyn, that with online learning,

> You're only going to get out of it what you put into it. So I think it's important if you're going to do online learning that you, let's face it, you have to be motivated and you have to have the discipline to sit yourself down and do the work, because nobody's going to be there to tell you, you have to (ibid).

As noted in these stories, online learning provides learners with desired control over the learning situation. Yet this flexibility creates a shared belief amongst these learners that online is more suited to self-motivated, self-directed learners like themselves whose desire to learn is

enough to ensure their engagement. The learners I talked to cited a distinct preference for the flexibility online learning offered as a way to achieve their goals.

However, even with such highly self-directed learners, they acknowledged that an awareness of others online, particularly when it came to group work, seemed to heighten cohesiveness and engagement with assignments. In my experience this is true. My level of engagement with other learners was markedly less in the Athabasca courses, with its lack of cohort and group work, than with my Royal Roads or University of Alberta courses. Athabasca also presented itself as a more traditional distance course – our readings came to us in large binders by post, along with our textbooks. Online work seemed almost incidental; engagement was with the materials rather than with each other. Although Royal Roads still had lecture notes for most courses, at least these were online. It and the University of Alberta incorporated more of the active learning elements that online can support, including multimedia learning objects and group discussion and projects.

As a mature learner engagement with only course materials didn't adversely affect my motivation. However, I appreciated opportunities to discuss the content and explore ideas online with other learners in the sense of academic discourse. Where group assignments were a part of the curriculum I was able to work closely with members of my cohort, learning from them. This would support Bates' (2006) observations that the flexibility and convenience of online learning can result in a more effective use of time for learners and instructors, but that the primary pedagogical advantage of online learning is its interaction, resulting in a social construction of knowledge.

While I appreciated Bates' first point about the flexibility online offered me – like Jo-anne, I was able to complete my studies while working and raising a family – I was perplexed by

the emphasis placed by some instructors and learners on learning from static materials as opposed to the more active (and to me, more engaging) process of learning from others. I wondered if geographic distance, which precluded any face-to-face interaction and thus made one truly a distance learner, created an increased engagement with online classmates. When you are at a complete remove from your campus you simply do not have the option of meeting your classmates in person, therefore you have no choice but to interact online. In comparing the similarity of my experience with Jo-anne's, this would seem to be true. Jo-anne lives in a different geographic region and cannot meet her instructor "for a coffee in downtown Victoria" to solve any problems that might arise online (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). She is restricted to online communication, therefore she acknowledges the importance of creating and maintaining relationships online, and I was reminded of her description of developing rapport. I feel a similar impetus to be accountable to my online classmates as I don't have the recourse of meeting them in person.

Eleanor and Caitlyn's apparent lack of motivation to create online relationships would seem to support this. This could be because they still attend a number of classes on campus in addition to learning online. In this way, their online learning could be sustained through pre-existing face-to-face relationships, lessening the need to form friendships with other online learners. Eleanor notes she would ask a friend if she needed help online, as would Caitlyn. Caitlyn even arranged to take an online class "with a couple of friends" (individual conversation, January 12, 2010).

Yet all these stories underscored the need for strong relationships with others online, regardless of whether this connection comes from a pre-existing friendship or through class

experience. With increasing numbers of online courses there is more likelihood that online learners may initially be strangers to each other.

Perhaps because we are both remote distance learners, and have been in online courses where there is an emphasis placed on group work, I think Jo-anne and I embrace the constructivist tendencies inherent in online courses, where the collaborative, and the more social and interactive nature of online learning with others is emphasized. This is using online to its capability, in my opinion, to not only communicate, but also then to synthesize what you've learned and put it out there for feedback from others, creating or tapping into some community of practice. For true learning to occur, it has to be interactive. As Jo-anne says,

> Maybe it's just my learning style, but I need interaction, I need to discuss the material with people, to really internalize it and learn it. You can read it, but the retention is not going to be as great as if you can actually enter into those discussions, whether it's online, or whether it's verbally. I just think that interaction, it has to be there if you're going to have successful learning (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

Thus it is not surprising that Jo-anne places "huge" value on interaction and dialogue (ibid), saying,

> I think that whole interaction piece – without it, you just wouldn't learn the material in the course, I don't think. I mean, you can pick up the textbook and read it, but that's not where I learn it. I read it, but by discussing it, and having those interactions, that's when it actually becomes part of my thought process (ibid).

Not only do I place that same value on the educational benefit of interactive learning as Jo-anne does, but I also found that having online exchanges with other students made me feel like I wasn't working in isolation. If the exchanges centred on specific topics or projects the responses seemed to be more frequent and more meaningful. At the very least having some introductory comments about each other, to tell some stories about yourself to find some common ground at the beginning of the course can help with ongoing dialogue, and to know others online. However, I am a strong believer in the value of group work. Not only does this

help to focus the discussion as you work on your project or task together, but it provides you with some shared experience from which stronger relationships can be built. When group work is part of the learning process knowing others becomes unavoidable, and as a way to help establish common ground to work together, desirable. If you work in a group, you can't help but begin to know others, as Eleanor did with Maggie, discovering that despite her poor first impression online, Maggie was working part time and taking five courses while living outside of Victoria. I have found in my groups details about the others creep in to our conversations, from relating other experiences that could help the project at hand, to offering personal insights into one's life, i.e. being unable to participate in a synchronous discussion at a specific time due to a conflict with a child's soccer game. As these bits and pieces of life as lived are revealed, the narrative for that person is further expanded, opening the door for a deeper relationship based on an increased opportunity to note shared commonalities.

As much as Caitlyn and Eleanor seemed to minimize the importance of online interaction by emphasizing their preferences to engage with the course material where and when they wanted, they did notice when interaction was missing. Caitlyn tells of an instructor who disappeared online and how it made her feel less engaged. Without feedback, she

> … had no accountability to anybody and I didn't care. I didn't even have accountability to the teacher, I didn't like [instructor], I didn't like what I was doing, so it was tough, getting myself through that course. And my grades suffered from it because I didn't feel accountable to anybody (individual conversation, January 12, 2010).

To me, this illustrates that even a student who feels she is highly motivated still needs interaction, at least from her instructor. Despite storying herself as someone who was self-sufficient to the point where she believes she teaches herself, Caitlyn discovered course materials alone do not provide enough engagement:

> If you're not getting anything from the course then it's really tough to keep going. Even just knowing if I'm spending enough time on the course website to get what I need out of it, or even if it's like, you know, I think your comments are good, or you know, I think you need to put more into your comments, or that kind of stuff would have been really nice. But we got none of it (ibid).

Caitlyn said it took five weeks before she received feedback from an essay. The feedback came just one week before her next essay was due, which made it difficult to incorporate it.

> We all got crappy marks on the first one so now we want to know if the second one was going to be better or worse and then where to go from there for your last one, right? And [instructor] just didn't make us feel like we wanted to be there or [work] in that class or want to do good work at all even (ibid).

This last comment highlights the importance for learners, no matter how self-directed they feel they are, to receive motivation and incentive from an external (human) source. The lack of feedback created less motivation for Caitlyn to learn, or even do her best. And she believes the online environment contributed to the instructor's lack of accountability, making it easier for the instructor to disappear. If the class had taken place in a classroom, the instructor would

> … have to look us in the face at least once a week. And you know, after that second week we would have all been like, 'where is our stuff?' instead of us sending emails and [instructor] just going delete, delete, delete, right? (ibid).

Caitlyn noted that no one in her class heard from the instructor until everybody was emailed three weeks after the essays had been submitted, to say they weren't marked yet.

While Caitlyn did not explicitly connect a lack of interactivity with her inability to succeed online, Jo-anne believes instructor feedback, presence and interaction online is "crucial" (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

> Because you're not in the classroom, and the instructor's not nodding their head, a positive [reinforcement], or [saying to the student] 'you should probably be in a different field'. By not having that instructor feedback, you move onto the next [assignment] and you don't know if you're on the right track , if you're missing something. And by the time you end up at the end of the course, you don't want to be at a point where 'gees, you know, I've messed them all up, you know, and there weren't any grades posted and I had no idea that I was doing so poorly'. And that certainly was the case in the last one I did is that you had

> no idea where you were at, until you were maybe two or three past that one. To me, that just doesn't work, I don't think (ibid).

While instructor feedback is crucial, group members can provide essential feedback and a richer learning experience. It's interesting to note that in Caitlyn's story above, the course she was taking had no group component to it, and she had no friends in the course with her. She felt completely alone and adrift with no one to support her. Here, the materials are simply not enough to ensure engagement, she "had no accountability to anybody and I didn't care" to the point where she wound up doing poorly in the course because of this (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). Her experience was the opposite of engagement, "a host of desired outcomes, including high grades, student satisfaction, and persistence" (Chen, Gonyea & Kuh, 2008, ¶ 2).

Creating a learning community through group work – combining the social and the task

Given that all three students ultimately realized they valued interaction and feedback online, with instructor feedback seen as essential, how can peer feedback be incorporated? This brings us back to the question posed earlier, as to whether it was important for online learners to learn in a constructivist way. At the very least, the instructor needs to be present online, and accountable as he or she would be in a face-to-face class. But beyond the instructor's feedback, interaction with known others online can provide essential support. And as previously discussed, group work can be a way to do this. However, just assigning students into groups, whether face-to-face or online, does not ensure learning, or even communication, will occur. Here, attempting to ensure students share some commonality helps to create cohesiveness.

Jo-anne sees the group experience as being most valuable when the instructor matches learners with similar careers in online groups. Jo-anne says this means when "you have your discussions and your chats and you're interacting, you can really relate to where the other one's

coming from, and understand" (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). Jo-anne says that when attention is not paid to group composition, as occurred in a previous online course,

> … it was very disjointed as to where we were all from and what we did. So you couldn't get that feedback, because you know if I talked about [my job], there were people in my group who didn't even have an idea what [it] was (ibid).

This meant that even before the sharing of stories through introductory emails, the homophilous makeup of the group ensured there was common ground.

Not only should group membership represent a shared experience, but groups should be a manageable size of five to six students. In an online course Jo-anne took at another institution, there were no groups, just a single class of all 27 students. By the second day she had 250 posts to read through, from students almost right out of high school to people with life experience equivalent to hers.

> I could tell by some of the responses I'd get from my posts that some of the other students who maybe were, 19, [the] first, second course they're doing at university, very rosy-coloured glasses, not a lot of life experience in what we're talking about, they just couldn't relate to what I was saying, because they don't have that past life experience (ibid).

Eventually, to counteract the overwhelming number of posts and to get the most out of the online experience Jo-anne says, "I finally got to the point where I just kind of tagged a few of the students that were probably on the same wavelength as me, and could enter into some really good discussions about issues" (ibid). Jo-anne created her own group to ensure closer interaction and more meaningful feedback, not to mention a more manageable workload.

While homophilous groups can encourage trust and sharing, shared experiences can create a sense of homophily even in heterogeneous groups. Eleanor echoes this, citing the development of a face-to-face group in which disparate individuals bonded together over shared activity in order to complete assignments, in this case the Integrated Business Case (IBC):

> So at Camosun, your term one, day one, you start off on the IBC. And the people that were in my group, we see each other in the halls and we actually even have each other on Facebook and whatnot, and we became really, really good friends. And we're extremely different. There's absolutely no way that we would become friends in the real world. Just these people that we would never, ever be with. But we went through so many things with. I was not a fan of the cohort option when it started, but now, you know, eighteen months later, I really miss it (individual conversation, January 14, 2010).

Despite their apparent initial differences, Eleanor and her group created strong bonds with each other. This demonstrates that if enough time is devoted to develop some common ground or narrative unity, through shared stories prior to and/or during task completion, relationships can be strengthened and a sense of knowing the other can be developed. This attention to social and task creates a functional group.

One could argue that the reason Eleanor's group did well was because it was face-to-face. Yes, such interaction can be richer as it allows for non-verbal cues, but it doesn't necessarily follow that all interpersonal communication is better in person. Jo-anne says she said she found online more rewarding than face-to-face:

> It's kind of odd saying that, you know? But the truth is, I think there's more pressure that we put on ourselves, that we feel from others in a face-to-face situation, both with the instructor and with classmates. When you're online, all of the perceptions, the visual perceptions, of each other are gone. And you're left with the words. I don't know, maybe it's a safer environment to express yourself, than it is in a classroom where 27 people are looking at you, when you're speaking. I've found that that has been kind of different for me, some people enjoy public speaking, standing up in front of a classroom, but I never have. And sometimes I think you have a better opportunity with the interaction online to formulate your thoughts when you're typing them, than you do when you have 27 pairs of eyes on you, formulating that thought (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

Jo-anne's insight might seem like intuitive common sense, but research supports online communication can be a richer, and less intimidating, experience for learners because they can take the time to craft and compose what they want to say. Students who might feel shy about speaking up in class feel they can communicate better online, as Eleanor does. To illustrate her

point, Jo-anne tells me about her experience at college as a 19-year-old, feeling intimidated in class.

> When I think back to being in college and there's times that I'd speak up and say something and you get a negative response from the instructor. And it's like, 'OK, that's the last time I'm saying anything.' Now, 46, I look back but I was 19 then, right? And it made a huge impact on my learning by not necessarily wanting to speak up because I did have an instructor who was very abrupt and if it wasn't the way she thought, she let you know. And it could be very embarrassing in a room full of 30 people (ibid).

Here is an example of how the richer, non-verbal cues that can presumably enhance communication are actually stifling it, creating a negative face-to-face situation. Even though she defines herself as "a people person" Jo-anne feels the online environment is "safer" than the classroom (ibid). Jo-anne also believes online peers can be more supportive, and are quick to offer feedback, including praise.

> You know, it's just a lot of support, right? Where in a classroom, I don't ever remember being in a classroom where, you know, I made a statement or talked about something and four or five people stood up and went, 'hey, that is a really good job'. I don't think the same supports are in the classroom as you get when you're online, when it comes to your peers (individual conversation, February 8, 2010).

To further illustrate that spatial and temporal proximity does not necessarily guarantee a better, or more satisfying, communication exchange, Eleanor offered a story in contrast to her successful IBC group, about a "failed" group experience in another face-to-face class (individual conversation, January 14, 2010). In this instance, students were assigned randomly into groups, and Eleanor did not know any of her group members nor was there apparently any attempt to know each other; the focus was on the task which the group as a whole did poorly on, achieving only 40 per cent on their group assignments. Unlike her IBC group, "I never talked to them again, ever. I see them around, but there was never any bond, so I don't speak with them" (ibid). Eleanor felt it was because there was no common ground amongst group members, nor was any sought. She says no narratives were shared. At first, she gave two reasons for this, the fact that

the course workload precluded any opportunity for social interaction, but also "we were just all so different" (ibid). Yet she described her successful IBC group members as all being "extremely different", and this group became "one of the most successful IBC groups ever", according to Eleanor (ibid). And unlike the failed group, to whom she never speaks, her IBC group seemed to successfully attend to both the social and the task: "We had everything done first, we were all accommodating when needing to be, we were compromising, if somebody felt strongly about something, you know, we'd let them go with it. Like we were all very reasonable people" (ibid). The relationships that developed with the IBC group created a social bond that has carried on beyond the group experience where the people in her group acknowledge each other in the halls and "we actually even have each other on Facebook and whatnot, and we became really, really good friends" (ibid).

In analyzing that experience, Eleanor admits the social aspects were not attended to, "probably in that failed group is when we only concentrated on the task" (ibid). With the failed group, Eleanor notes that there was little investment either in the task (as it was not worth many marks) or in the social. Group members did not feel committed to the task, or to each other, as there was no attempt to get to know the other. Yet the IBC group, also a face-to-face group, seemed wildly successful in accomplishing both social and task outcomes. Both groups were composed of disparate, 20-something individuals, but one failed where the other excelled. One possibility is there was more at stake in terms of task reward with the IBC group, hence the group worked more closely together and the increased interaction resulted in closer social bonds.

Yet having a group assignment worth more marks does not in itself guarantee more buy-in by group members, nor more satisfaction with the outcome. Eleanor described another group assignment in a face-to-face class in which she came up with the idea for the presentation and

directed all the tasks. While this was a face-to-face class, she says all the group work was done online. She in fact never knew who her group members were, despite attending class with them, until they met to prepare for their final presentation just prior to the end of term. While this group also did well with a project worth a significant number of marks, and accepted Eleanor's delegation of all tasks, she admits she "didn't have the buy-in I thought I would have with having chosen the topic" and controlling all aspects of the project (individual conversation, February 17, 2010). Although Eleanor was unable to provide an insight as to why this might be, to me this indicates that successful task completion in itself is not enough to ensure a satisfying and engaging experience. While the assignment was completed with individuals working on specific tasks in a cooperative group manner, the lack of interaction and dialogue, i.e. a collaborative learning experience, ultimately created an unsatisfying outcome. Thus an emphasis on fostering social relationships may make students more inclined to work *with* each other; the feedback and interaction (and hopefully learning) becomes as much of a reward as the successful completion of the assignment. In this way a form of positive peer pressure, a sense of accountability and thus "buy-in" that Eleanor felt was lacking in this group, is developed.

Eleanor's experiences would seem to underscore Bales' social interaction theory that both the social and the task must be attended to. Where both are attended to the result is positive social and task outcomes, as in Eleanor's IBC group. In discussing that group, she does directly link the amount of time the group spent together as being an important factor in its success, noting, "the amount of buy-in, or the amount that you want to actually even impress the people because they simply know your name, definitely encourages people to do a better job" (ibid).

Developing online social presence and student engagement

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the success of Eleanor's IBC group was because the members could meet face-to-face and so develop a strong social bond, as opposed to her other group which completed tasks online and the group members were unknown to each other. After all, as Eleanor's experiences with her failed group shows, face-to-face in itself does not ensure social or task success. Here, Jo-anne's story illustrates that a strong working relationship need not be predicated on meeting others in person.

> This last course was the last one [for the certificate]. The first one, I'd taken a couple of years ago, there was this gentleman in the class, and he was in our group and we had a great time doing that course. And the last course, I hadn't really looked at the class list much and the second or third day, lo and behold I have a post saying, 'hey, I haven't been in any other classes with you this last year, so how's it been going', that kind of thing. So even though you don't know each other face-to-face, you go through this experience together and once you do it once, you say, 'hey, how'd that last course go for you' or 'hey, glad that you're in my group'. You do develop those relationships (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

In this way a shared experience = shared story = creation of an ongoing relationship. Jo-anne feels her online relationships are indistinguishable from her face-to-face relationships, noting "if you walked into a coffee shop you could all sit down and have coffee for three hours, and do the same thing as what we're doing online" (ibid). For her the relationship is the same whether it's in person or online.

Drawing on my own experience as an online learner, and the stories above, it would seem that group work, especially when attention is paid to constructing groups with common experiences and allowing opportunities for social relationships to develop, would be key. When groups aren't constructed this way, learners resort to creating their own, as Jo-anne did, or as Caitlyn does, by ensuring she has friends in classes with her, thus relying on pre-existing face-to-face relationships.

But online learners, especially remote or off-campus learners like Jo-anne and I, can't necessarily rely on pre-existing relationships, nor can any learner rely on instructors taking the care to create groups based on commonality. And as Eleanor's experience with her failed group shows, we can't assume that face-to-face automatically ensures effective groups, or that it equates to learners "knowing" one another simply because they look each other in the eye. Nor can we assume that successful completion of a task on its own will ensure engagement or learner satisfaction. Despite sharing a common, intense experience in completing a task as described in Eleanor's latter example, there was little shared history to draw on, partly because group members did not attempt to get to know each other by sharing narratives to determine commonality and to develop social bonds, and partly because the task was completed in a cooperative rather than a collaborative way resulting in less need for interaction and therefore dialogue. This underscores the importance of getting to know others online. So how can we get to know others online? I asked each of the participants this question.

Eleanor relies on the 30-second introductions, the narratives told by each student as way to get to know each other. She also tells me about an "ice-breaker" strategy where each student relates three characteristics about themselves, in which two are true and one is false. She really likes these, and uses them as a way to recognize these people in her other classes, saying

> … it was a neat way to introduce ourselves. I think it made us remember a bit more because everybody would try to pick things that sounded outrageous but really were actually true, like trying to trick people into which could be the false one. It was just a good way to get to know each other (individual conversation, January 14, 2010).

This seemed to me that "you're not necessarily putting a face to a name online, but you're putting a characteristic to a name" (ibid). Eleanor agreed: "That is definitely it, as well as giving yourself an opening to talk to other people outside of the class as well" (ibid). Characteristics are how we identify the others as persons – we tend to be friends with someone because of their

characteristics, not their face – so arguably learning about other's characteristics would be helpful, perhaps even more so than "putting a face to a name", ultimately forming part of an ongoing narrative that would lead to a better basis for cohesive group work. This seemed to be the case for Eleanor when it came to Maggie. Learning more about Maggie's situation made her become a person to Eleanor.

Caitlyn says she has difficulty forming relationships with others online. Although online courses "work best" for her, allowing her to multitask, she says it's "tough" for her to get to know others online (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). Caitlyn has been able to get by in almost all her online courses by being able to tap into known others, and to not have to rely on making friends of strangers. In her arts and science class where she knew no-one and her instructor disappeared for a few weeks, she had to rely on herself but with nearly disastrous results. In a subsequent conversation, Caitlyn realized the importance of a "social element" in her classes (individual conversation, February 11, 2010).

But this is difficult for Caitlyn to achieve when she knows no one in her class and sees her other online classmates as little more than email addresses. She sees some benefit in having mandatory face-to-face orientation classes before going online, "having the face to the name it just helps me see them, you know, they're not just a computer screen to me, I do have a person at the other end of this but you still don't know them very well" (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). A little later on in our conversation she acknowledges how difficult it is for her to get to know others: "I find that if you can't put a face to a name, then you can't get to know the person" (ibid). In a subsequent conversation, Caitlyn described what she means by this, that it isn't simply meeting her classmates and getting to see their faces. Like Eleanor, she is equating "face" with "personality", which for her is "get[ting] to know people" (individual conversation,

February 11, 2010). Without this, she feels she is unable to engage with them socially; essentially the other is depersonalized. As shown in Eleanor's examples, and in Jo-anne's perception of a lack of targeted feedback from those with whom she doesn't share a common background, "knowing" the other is important.

I asked Caitlyn if she could see the value of sharing narratives with others as a way to get to know them. On reflection she could see how her arts and science class might have benefited from more interaction, perhaps not in the form of group work but at least by engaging with her classmates through discussing course content it would have provided some feedback when the instructor disappeared. When I suggested to Caitlyn that a requirement to post something every week, and then having those postings develop into exchanges with other students so it would made you feel like you weren't working in isolation, she agreed.

> With the business course we're taking we do the chat [a role play], but then being able to go into the discussion and be yourself and say what you thought, because in the role play you might be doing something that you don't believe or you don't actually agree with but it's part of your role play and part of your character. So then going from that and then into the discussion and learning what everyone thinks about, and you do, you feel social and you feel you're having almost a conversation with somebody face-to-face but you don't have to be there [in person] (individual conversation, January 12, 2010).

To me this means there can be a social element to online discussion; the social and the task (learning) need not be mutually exclusive.

In a subsequent conversation, Caitlyn revealed an additional appreciation for these synchronous discussions with a small group of peers, noting it helps her understand the concepts she's learning: "just people's comments can either make something look different or you can see a different side of the coin" through "sharing your experiences with others, as well as just reflecting on it yourself" (individual conversation, February 11, 2010). In this way Caitlyn is

receiving structured support in her learning, along with the opportunity for a double dose of reflection, her own and that of her group members.

Jo-anne pointed out another benefit of online learning, "[a] one-on-one focus" (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). You're not being distracted by looking at someone and you can concentrate on what they're saying more easily. Online allows for richer focus on the content, as the other cues are not there to distract. Simply having multimedia channels available does not always guarantee these extra cues will aid interaction; indeed some will hinder it, by drawing our attention away from the actual content (Berge, 1995, and Mayer, 2001; as cited in Fahy, 2005). As well, richer feedback that happens to be negative can have quite a powerful opposite effect in the creation of a learning environment; Jo-anne's recollection of being shut down in her face-to-face class as a young learner illustrates this. Thus proximity doesn't necessarily ensure a superior, in the sense of a more positive and enriching, interpersonal or learning experience.

More interactive, engaged dialogue replicating class discussion with both students and the instructor online would have helped with engagement in Caitlyn's previous class and would have encouraged everyone to know one another a bit more. By increasing the opportunity to interact online then the level of social knowing of the other can increase and with it, perhaps the commitment to the course and to each other. More accountability in the class could have resulted in less acrimony.

Perceived differences can be overcome if the social is attended to, i.e. characteristics and stories are shared and through doing so, commonalities are discovered, helping to overshadow the perception of otherness. Faces, in the form of characteristics, can be put to names. In this way relationships can be developed and classmates, previously strangers, can be seen as friends even if there is no pre-existing face-to-face relationship. These relationships can provide support, and

collaborative group work can supply that incubus to strengthen the bond through concentrated interaction with a few (hopefully) like-minded souls, including completing projects and assignments together to create shared experiences helping to further strengthen the relationship. Additionally, the group work can provide learning that is relational and contextual.

Learning from others in social ways – a generational divide, or a failure to create well-designed online courses?

Perhaps because we are mid-career learners accustomed to the community of practice in the workplace, Jo-anne and I more readily see the advantage of learning from others online, even to the point of developing offline working relationships with those whose careers are similar to ours. However, as a result of working collaboratively with her business course group, Caitlyn can now see the value of interactive learning, which provides her with additional reflection and insights from her fellow group members, although she does not yet seem to be taking the group interaction to the level of developing relationships as Jo-anne and I have. And interestingly, Eleanor sees little value in group work. She assumes instructors use groups as a tool to force "unmotivated" students to participate in assignments (individual conversation, February 17, 2010). Does that mean that Knowles and Dewey are speaking of relational learning only in the context of more mature learners? And that Wenger's community of practice is limited to mid-career learners who can apply these concepts to their workplaces?

Jo-anne and I both welcome the opportunity to take our learning beyond the course and apply it to real-life examples. For Jo-anne, working in a homogeneous group was

> … very beneficial. Because you had an understanding of where the others were coming from, based on what they did on a day-to-day basis. We understood some of the challenges that they would face in their real work life, because so much of what we do, we apply in our discussions. You're applying things that have occurred, that you're working with in your daily work life (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

Eventually she finds the discussion can shift from the application of work examples to course concepts, to relying on others for help, advice and support on workplace problems because of the strong bonds that have developed in these online relationships.

> And a couple of them, they're doing similar work that I am, and I wouldn't hesitate right now to pick up the phone and say, 'you know what? I've got this problem and can you help me with it?' It's in my job, not in the course, it's related to what I'm doing on a day-to-day basis. And I feel that they would do the same thing (ibid).

For Jo-anne, her online course relationships have evolved into reciprocal relationships that transcend course boundaries, creating a community of practice where learners who rely on each other to accomplish course projects also rely on each other to deal with situations in their respective workplaces. For Jo-anne, the reliance and level of "comfort" with fellow learners is linked. "I think that comfort level comes from getting to know each other on a social basis, you just learn better, and you get so much more out of it" (ibid).

At first blush, Caitlyn and Eleanor would seem to be using online courses more as a FTP delivery system, in which they interact more with the course materials than constructing knowledge with other learners (or even the instructor in Caitlyn's previous example), unless there is a pre-existing social relationship with them. While all three do value the on-demand function of online, allowing them to learn where and when they want, Eleanor and Caitlyn seem to place less significance on learning with or from others. Yet Eleanor seems to prize her successful IBC group experience and Caitlyn found when she did not have interaction in her arts and science class her sense of engagement with the course dropped and her grades suffered. In contrast, she values the interaction with her group members in her current business class.

While Eleanor accepts group work as part of the landscape in a business program, she often peppered her conversation with references to preferring to study on her own and to work alone outside of a structured class, and perceived other students as potentially slowing her down.

Eleanor also mentions feeling she does not learn much from other students and in fact prefers not to learn from them, saying "one of my concerns from learning from other students is that I might not be learning the right things. And what I'm paying for is [my instructor's] comment[s]" (individual conversation, January 14, 2010). She gave a difference in age and experience between her and the other students as reasons why she feels she can't learn from them. Before she enrolled in Camosun as a full-time student, she had been in the workforce for several years. She describes herself as someone who "come[s] from a pretty solid work experience background and I have noticed, with the exception of some individuals, a lot of people here are straight from high school" (ibid). However, elsewhere she says she seeks friends for online help, and has had valuable group and cohort experiences. While she did not make an explicit connection between the group experience and possibly learning at some level from her fellow group members, she found working with her IBC group was very personally rewarding and academically successful. In other words, Eleanor experienced Bales' positive social and task outcomes.

In our first conversation, Caitlyn echoed this lack of learning from others, but a reference she made to the group work she does in virtually all her business classes intrigued me: "it almost gives me a break up to a point, you know, I'm not doing this whole project by myself but I'm still getting the full understanding of it" (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). Even though she is not doing all the work she still feels she is learning. To me, this means she's getting some insight and feedback from relying on the work and knowledge of fellow group members. And as noted previously, Caitlyn confirms in a subsequent conversation she is gaining a deeper understanding of concepts in her current course from her own reflection and from the shared reflections of others.

Jo-anne, a mid-career learner similar in age to me, shares my outlook that valuable and powerful learning can occur in our interactions with fellow online learners. “You learn so much from each other. We do the work that we need to do but quite often we’ll get into further discussion about particular situations that we have” (individual conversation, January 19, 2010). Jo-anne pursued this thread of online exchanges continuing beyond the classroom, mentioning she felt she could pick up the phone to ask advice of her online classmates for work-related problems. For her, a sense of community develops, perhaps not with the class as a whole, but certainly within her group, as group membership is based on shared backgrounds and work experiences. For her the community means being accountable:

> You have to rely on each other to get through this course because if one of you isn’t going to pull their own weight and do their part, then the rest of you aren’t going to necessarily excel in that one particular week, or whatever, right? So you really do rely on each other and you do develop relationships (ibid).

Again, revisiting the concept of rapport, Jo-anne says that a reciprocal sharing of personal information helps to take the relationships and thus the reliance on others to a deeper level in a definite acknowledgement of the social, what I describe as a sort of reciprocal reveal. According to Jo-anne, “If one is to share certain things that are of a more personal nature, you yourself feel more comfortable to do the same thing” (individual conversation, February 8, 2010). As noted by others in subsequent conversations and in research (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009; Sitzmann et al, 2006), the development of such relationships takes time. As Jo-anne says, “the rapport gets greater and greater as you go along” (individual conversation, February 8, 2010).

Is learning from others more apparent to older learners, because we are mid-career learners with many insights to share? Or maybe the younger learners don’t perceive any value in what fellow, younger learners have to offer? Or, perhaps they are learning from others at a more subliminal level without realizing it? Or, it could be that some online courses are still simply set

up to replicate a "sage on the stage" information delivery mechanism, as opposed to a true collaborative learning experience. Distance educator Patrick Fahy called for "an attitude of concern for how students experience our offerings, and an appreciation of the differences technology might make", not least of which are the new relationships and roles that are created between learners, and learners and instructors (2001, p. 9). However, sometimes instructors fail to take online's ability to collaborate into account when designing their courses, and students unaccustomed to learning this way (i.e. from others) resist this transition if it is made part of the course.

For instance, Caitlyn's perception of a lack of instructor presence online could be grounded in how the online course itself is presented. It could well be that her arts and science course was designed to be little more than a static FTP delivery tool with little interactivity, thus reinforcing the perception that no instructor is present other than to "provide us with the material" (individual conversation, January 12, 2010). Caitlyn does refer to her online courses as containing links to quizzes or external web content, and one course provided online labs; all could be considered static material requiring little student-instructor interaction. Or, perhaps having come straight from high school to college, Caitlyn is still more accustomed to a traditional classroom narrow transmission teaching style and so fails to recognize the more subtle "guide on the side" hand of the instructor. Despite being an older learner, Eleanor perceives value in her instructor's contributions (it's what she's "paying" for) rather than those from her fellow learners.

Royal Roads University created the BA in Applied Communication (now Professional Communication) in 2003 as a two-year online course. Two years later they added an intensive fulltime, one year, on-campus version, which has proved very popular with younger learners, i.e.

those under 30 years of age. Speaking with some of these younger learners they told me that they chose the on-campus option because they did not believe they had the necessary self-discipline to succeed online. The extent of comfort with familiar classroom learning versus online was not specifically cited, but could be part of the reason for the choice; they knew they could succeed in a traditional classroom setting. Another factor could be that younger learners would find it easier than older learners to devote a year to fulltime study as they are not yet established in careers.

Bates and Poole (2003) observe that younger students not only lack the discipline, but that they are somehow looking to a traditional classroom to fulfill their social life by interacting with peers. Jo-anne, recounting the experience of her own 19-year-old son with distance learning, believes he was unsuccessful due to a lack of discipline, which she tied to age.

> It drove me nuts, trying to get him to commit himself to some of these things, and he wasn't successful at it. I think there are certain age groups that, and I hate to do this to us, but I do believe as you get older, you do become more disciplined through the experiences that you have through work, and that the social aspect, it's not as important as when you were 20. I think when you're younger, the true social interaction is very important (individual conversation, January 19, 2010).

But these same students are able to use online social networking tools as a way to communicate and maintain relationships. If online learners were able to develop enough social presence to create relationships with each other, perhaps that would provide the support necessary to motivate them to complete online coursework, especially if these students are not as motivated by other factors, such as a desire to take more courses than can be timetabled, or to otherwise manage their time, i.e. to maintain a job while doing coursework.

It's very possible that younger students feel their lack of presence will be noted more quickly in a classroom, giving them an external impetus to show up. The structure inherent in a classroom setting, i.e. class begins at a specific time and in a specific place, could be a contributing factor. As Eleanor says, she's

> … more likely to go to classes where I know somebody and I have that peer buy-in and I have that peer support system. If nobody's going to ask me the next day where I was, my desire to actually attend is lower (individual conversation, February 17, 2010).

However, if there is a social engagement with a few other online learners (i.e. group members) through the sharing of narratives, this could create a "peer pressure" which can encourage social and task (i.e. assignment) contributions, ultimately creating a more engaging learning experience. Eleanor and Caitlyn are both under 30 and thus fall within the age range of learners who presumably prefer face-to-face and lack the discipline to successfully complete online courses, yet they both intentionally seek out online courses because they offer convenience and flexibility, and allow them to get the credit they need. Could this be because they see online courses in this instrumentalist way, and it suits their needs as learners? Or are they simply accustomed to this model from K-12? Regardless, any student may find the collaborative nature of online group work, with its attendant necessity of gaining an awareness of others, could be a way to replicate the accountability younger students feel they need. This could be why they prefer the structure of showing up and contributing in the traditional classroom. For younger online learners, group work could be a way to replicate the social presence and provide the sense of structure that is attributed to face-to-face instruction; this could help generate the motivation younger learners lack to succeed online, a sort of positive peer pressure. Careful attention to the social and the task could in turn create engagement with the curriculum.

After all, Caitlyn, currently in a course with synchronous communication and which encourages sharing of experiences amongst group members, now realizes she can learn from others. Eleanor still sees online learning more instrumentally as a time management tool, and group work as something imposed by instructors to make weaker students "actually do the work" (ibid). Yet she found group work more fulfilling and satisfying, in other words, more engaging,

when both social and task elements were present. Even Eleanor, adamant that she did not learn from others in her courses, told me about belonging to an online social community predicated on a commonality. Because of this initial shared experience, Eleanor says that "from there, you form bonds. You have a reason to keep going back" (ibid). It would seem that, in some circumstances at least, Eleanor feels she can bond with and learn from others providing that commonality is established, in other words, a shared narrative is present.

However, Jo-anne's comments about social interaction being very important to younger learners, and Eleanor's engagement with others online socially, made me consider whether these learners typically see a separation between their online social interactions with known others, and their online course work. Is there a perceived barrier between social and task (i.e. school)? Can we help them to cross that line, and benefit educationally from both?

Conclusions

While online delivery of courses can be thought of as simply a delivery mechanism, i.e. a way to transmit and receive files in the sense of a FTP tool, online's real value lies in harnessing the communication abilities and rich resource capabilities of the web to allow learning to occur in social ways. This makes it uniquely suited to the constructivist model of learning with others.

However, for meaningful dialogue and thus effective sharing of knowledge to occur, a certain level of perceived commonality must be present in order to create the necessary trust to permit learners to engage with each other. This development of online social presence, which creates an interpersonal awareness and so permits learners to perceive each other as individuals as opposed to simply an email address, can be fostered through dialogue, specifically by sharing narratives. Through sharing stories with each other, learners will notice where their experiences intersect or overlap, and in this way a narrative unity is developed.

Encouraging the sharing of narratives is the first step. As individuals share information and stories about each other a sense of trust develops, encouraging what I call a "reciprocal reveal". This was defined by Jo-anne as establishing a level of comfort with the other through revealing personal details as a way to discover commonalities and to develop trust: "If one is to share certain things that are of a more personal nature, you yourself feel more comfortable to do the same thing" (individual conversation, February 8, 2010). As noted by Jo-anne, these narrative exchanges help deepen the sense of "rapport" between learners. Online learners usually only have text exchanges on which to base their relationships, and how these communicative exchanges are developed and written, and the information they contain, are how this rapport, a sense of bonding with others, occurs. Creating such a shared meaning through narrative is essential for effective interaction, and with it, a social presence that can precipitate effective collaboration and thus learning. It can also lessen the sense of isolation and increase learner motivation (Sitzmann et al., 2006). However, developing this takes time, as noted by the participants and also by researchers (Bjørn & Ngwenyama, 2009). As Jo-anne says, "the rapport gets greater and greater as you go along" (individual conversation, February 8, 2010).

While as instructors we can initiate this commonality by taking care to construct group membership so as to maintain homogeneity, we must be aware that a certain amount of time and structure is required to ensure learners get to know each other and develop a social presence online before they can successfully undertake any collaborative group task or assignment. It cannot be assumed that learners will know how to share information with others, and participants suggested a variety of ways sharing could be accomplished, through online "icebreakers", to a discussion guided by the instructor, to an online questionnaire or form that could be completed. Jo-anne suggested another method could be sharing narratives during a synchronous discussion

session, so as to replicate a sense of a give-and-take conversation. From these exchanges, learners will perceive commonalities at the points where narratives intersect. These perceived similarities will help develop interpersonal awareness and create social presence, which will result in more cohesive groups. As well, this emphasis on dialogue and interaction will set the stage for collaborative group formation and its more satisfying learning outcomes.

Seeing fellow learners as relational others can increase a sense of motivation to do well, a sort of "positive peer pressure". As noted by the participants, being known by other learners (i.e. establishing a social presence) encourages them to do their best and be reliable and accountable to these others. This creates an effect similar to that of "showing up" in the traditional classroom. If you know no-one in your class and you are not particularly motivated by or engaged with the curriculum, your desire to attend class decreases. As Eleanor says, "If nobody's going to ask me the next day where I was, my desire to actually attend is lower" (individual conversation, February 17, 2010). Knowing others and feeling a sense of accountability to them online can impose a sense of commitment amongst learners, and can provide the structure that is presumably necessary for less mature or less motivated learners to succeed online.

Developing a social presence online through narrative is much easier to accomplish within a small group, particularly one of like others which is more conducive to trust and thus sharing of stories with others in a reciprocal reveal. Groups seem to naturally form amongst like others, and there is a more effective information transfer in homogeneous groups (Levine & Moreland, 1990; Rogers, 2003), so it's not surprising that participants preferred interacting in groups based on commonalities, or with those group members with whom they had a pre-existing social relationship. Younger learners particularly are more inclined to go to people they already know for help, as opposed to online classmates who appear to be strangers. This

underscores the importance of turning strangers into friends. Even if commonalities are not readily apparent, the opportunity to share narratives with each other (which takes time and possibly structure, as noted previously) can help uncover them. Participants described this process of getting to know others as putting faces to names, but they were actually equating the word "face" with personality or characteristics.

Not only do these shared stories help create more cohesive groups, but learner satisfaction, a measure of engagement, seems to be stronger within these groups. This follows on the need to attend to social elements of group formation as per Bales' social interaction theory. In this way groups can provide support to learners, a particularly important factor in increasing success for younger learners, as well as provide "deep learning" (Mayer, as cited in Fahy, 2005, p.13).

It is possible that younger learners' lack of success online is tied to the inherent flexibility of online courses. They are perhaps unaccustomed to this lack of structure as much of their recent experience in the K-12 environment is in traditional classrooms. It could also be because younger learners may see a divide between school (task) and social. While the cause is difficult to ascertain, the assumption that young learners are by definition less successful online is not always a truism. It is interesting to note that two of the three participants in this study are under 30 and thus could be considered younger students, yet they feel they are successful online. However, even for them, the importance of feedback and interaction with other learners and with the instructor cannot be underestimated. Attending to these factors in online courses could increase successful outcomes for all learners, regardless of age.

In this way the desirable attributes of classroom interaction such as discourse and feedback can be replicated online, without the potentially negative bits such as fear of speaking

up in front of others or having the message obscured by other non-verbal cues. It would seem that online personalization through shared narrative and the incorporation of group work to encourage narrative might provide a way for younger learners to develop a social presence and to feel more accountable to others online, thereby internalizing a sense of motivation which could translate into more engagement with online coursework. Narrative, particularly within small groups, can be a way to replicate the support and structure found in traditional face-to-face classrooms. It can be a way to lessen a sense of isolation online and increase student satisfaction and thus engagement. The use of narrative to establish commonality and increase cohesion can lead to collaborative constructivist learning, an interaction with the curriculum that can result in a deeper learning process. It can also be a way increase the immediacy of feedback. After all, online learning is becoming more commonplace whether it is in the workplace or in educational institutions, so strategies need to be discovered and implemented to help *all* learners succeed, not just those who seem to have the motivation and maturity to succeed. Narrative, particularly within the context of small groups, can be an effective virtual social strategy to do this. This would create a supportive online learning community whereby knowledge would be developed, greater than the sum of its parts.

Future directions

This research seems to corroborate previous work indicating older learners were able to get more out of the experience of working with others online, to the extent that relationships with fellow learners developed into professional relationships. However, further study is needed to determine whether this is tied to a sense of greater discipline or motivation for more mature learners, or if this stems from a greater appreciation for the value of group work, possibly from having more experience working with co-workers in the workplace. Having said that, younger learners did perceive value in group work when groups were designed to be collaborative as

opposed to cooperative, and when the course was designed to foster interaction and thus develop a sense of social presence creating an accountability typically found in face-to-face classes. This sort of structure may be a way of engaging younger learners. Following on this, it would be interesting to investigate whether the discomfort felt by some younger learners online could be linked to their experiences in the K-12 school system with learning that is almost exclusively classroom-based, making online learning something out of their comfort zone. As well, these learners could be creating a distinction between online communication for task versus social purposes. They may equate learning, whether it is online or in-person, with task, and thus they view it instrumentally, reserving online social interactions to known relational others.

Or, perhaps lack of success with online courses for younger learners is tied not so much to their age, as noted by others (Bates & Poole, 2003; Sitzmann et al., 2006), but to course design and content. If online curriculum was relational, relevant and applicable (as opposed to a static FTP delivery system), and if supportive collaborative groups which fostered interactive learning through dialogue and social presence through narrative were part of the course design, it would be interesting to see if learners in these sorts of course outperformed other learners in terms of learning outcomes, regardless of age.

I would also be curious to know whether gender is a factor when it comes to successful online learning outcomes. In other words, are female learners predisposed to find value in, and be motivated to learn, in social ways, i.e. through collaborative group work online? As the participants in this study were all female I was unable to pursue this.

Reflections on the process

Narrative inquiry is a fascinating research process. It is easy to assume this is a “freer” process, not quite making it up as you go along, but still a process where the researcher is not confined by a narrow interpretation of what is relevant information and what is not.

As with all things, though, with great freedom comes great responsibility. Being "present" during the conversations is so very important. An alert watchfulness must be cultivated and as a researcher you must be careful to pay attention during the conversation in order to catch what is, or could be, meant by comments as they are made so they can be followed up at the time of the conversation. Attuning your ear to hear what is said as it is being said, and to contrast it in your mind to previous comments made by this participant, or other participants, or one's own firsthand experience, or the research you have done on the subject, creates an acute awareness. Clandinin et al. described this as "wakefulness" (2007, p. 21).

I am fortunate to have spent some years in a journalism career, which helped me hone the art of the interview. The presence required in narrative inquiry conversations closely parallel my experience as a journalist. When interviewing people the journalist must always be listening closely to what is said by each person, and simultaneously analyzing it for discrepancies and what might be left unsaid. While a list of questions can be used, much of the interaction is driven by what is said. An attitude of intentional listening is essential. As a journalist, you may only get one opportunity to speak with someone to gain information about a story. It's important to grasp and follow each thread at that one time. When it came to analyzing the conversations, my journalism background also helped me to see and weave together the common threads, and to identify the disparate ones and ask "why?". Journalism is inspired by curiosity (much like scholarly research) and journalists always want to get at the who, what, where, when, why and how. Journalists want to understand so they can tell the story.

Despite my previous experience conversing with others in order to elicit information, a few threads did slip through the cracks during my conversations, but I managed to pick them up during the transcription process. Transcribing all the conversations myself helped me to notice

threads as I was re-listening to them and then typing them out. It was an onerous process, necessitating several hours of work, but helped deepen my understanding of what was being said.

As a qualitative research method, narrative inquiry allows the researcher to test his or her own perceptions against those of the participants; this helps create a deeper understanding of the subject. This is especially useful for educational research. We can use quantitative methods to "test" whether people agree with certain beliefs or attitudes, or whether they feel their learning experience was "useful" or "good". But what do these statements mean? How or why was it useful or good? Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to get behind the responses and actually hear the voice of the participant and his or her explanation of what actually mattered and why. This follows in the tradition of constructivist knowledge building, in which participants' voices are as important as the researcher's voice.

In this way, I felt more like a learner speaking with fellow online learners than a researcher conducting a study. Revealing my experiences as an online learner helped to establish a basis to create a relationship with the participants, not unlike the reciprocal reveal that creates a trusting environment necessary for sharing knowledge and successful collaboration. While cognizant of the potential for a power imbalance as noted earlier under method, I did not get the sense that any of the research participants were reluctant to speak with me, or felt that I was insisting on a specific answer. I realize that there can be a tendency for agreement, i.e. that we are to an extent naturally wired to be congruent, and that this desire to agree can be stronger for the person who perceives herself to be weaker and thus seeking approval of the person perceived to be more powerful. While this was probably present to some degree, I found the participants seemingly confident enough to disagree with statements and observations I made (Eleanor), to offer their own line of questioning, essentially quizzing me on my perceptions of online learning

(Jo-anne), and to make some personal and painful revelations about online learning that failed (Caitlyn). I believe the participants felt comfortable sharing their experiences with me, and this could be partly due to the reciprocal reveal that took place, with me offering my experiences as a fellow online learner as opposed to approaching the research as a disinterested researcher or observer. In this way, narrative inquiry was an excellent methodology for tackling this research question as it helped to create a more equitable atmosphere conducive to sharing insights. All the participants, myself included, felt motivated to discuss these questions because we all believe in the benefits of online learning and we all want to make it as rewarding an educational experience for as many learners as possible.

Appendix A

Narrative Inquiry Themes

There are two general themes that I want to address in this research project. One is to discover whether sharing narratives with other students increases the sense of social presence for participants in an online environment. In other words, the more one learns about others through sharing stories and life experiences, the more one can relate to, and thus feel accountable to, fellow students in an online course. The second theme follows on the first and it is to explore whether working closely with other students on group projects makes individual students feel more "engaged" or motivated in the online learning environment. Personally I found the learning environment to be richer and more rewarding when I had to work closely with others, something that invariably happens when there are assigned online group projects.

I will tell participants about my experiences with online learning, how it seemed mostly to consist of reading and then writing papers or doing other assignments in isolation. However, when I had to work on a project with other group members and then post it online for the class to view and comment on, it seemed a great motivator to me. I wanted to do the best possible job and I looked forward to seeing what my fellow students would say about it, and what responses we would get to our discussion questions. It certainly heightened my interest in the material we were covering in class.

After relating this, I would encourage participants to comment on what I had just told them. They may some commonality with my experience, or relate a completely different experience.

Other observations I could offer to augment the above:
1) Having exchanges online with other students made it seem that I wasn't working in isolation, by myself. And having the exchanges centred on specific topics or projects made the responses more frequent and meaningful. If you don't have that as a sort of pretext, then people may just make a few general comments, introducing themselves and then that's it, no ongoing sort of dialogue. Sometimes at the beginning of an online course there's a virtual meet and greet The instructor will ask all the students to post a little something about themselves. But not everyone does it and because it's not an assignment, people won't worry about doing it.

2) One way to get to know others is to have everyone meet face-to-face first. I've taken a few courses like that, where there's a three week "residency" before we actually begin the online courses. That's helpful to put names to faces, and understand who all these other people are, to build some sort of relationship with them. But that's not always possible if it's a completely online course. When it's completely online, it's harder to get to know the other people in your class.

3) I found that doing a group project makes it so you have to communicate with other people and you can't help but wind up learning about them. I also found that I learned so much from the others I worked with – they all have such interesting life experiences and insights to share. I've used Skype and MSN chat to meet with my group members online and I found it worked fairly well. One of my last courses we used telephone conferencing, so we could all talk and exchange ideas about the group postings we had to do each week. That was a bit overwhelming because there could be six of us at once on the phone discussing what we needed to do, but you do really get to learn about people. Like, one person can't meet on the weekend because he has to visit his mother in the nursing home, or someone will be out of town on a business trip or something. You have to be adaptable and flexible. But because it's a group project for marks, you find a way to make it work. That's a motivator, too.

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