

SHARED PERCEPTIONS OF ONLINE ADJUNCT FACULTY IN THE UNITED STATES WHO HAVE A HIGH SENSE OF COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective university. Sense of community was generally defined as feelings of connectedness within the university community. The central question that guided this study was: What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective universities? The research began with the Sense of Community Index, version 2 (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008), an online questionnaire, used to identify potential participants among online adjunct faculty who work for accredited universities in the United States and have a high sense of community. I also included focus groups and interviews conducted via Adobe Connect video conferencing that describe online adjunct faculty member's perceptions of sense of community in the workplace. Using Moustakas's (1994) approach, the data analysis focused on identifying shared themes experienced by online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community. An analysis of the data revealed that online adjuncts with a high sense of community initiate collaborative dialogue with other faculty members in order to ensure they are able to clearly support their students, but they often see that leadership's role is to initiate the connections online.

Keywords: adjunct faculty, online education, sense of community, motivation, training, connectedness, collaboration, communication

INTRODUCTION

The surge in distance education (DE) due to technological advances has encouraged many postsecondary institutions, both public and private, to offer online courses for their students. The focus of DE is on students having easy access to their education while allowing universities to increase capacity beyond their constraints of classroom time or space. The term distance education includes all types of alternative education forums, such as correspondence courses, satellite campuses (which are face-to-face experiences), and online learning (Gannon-Cook, 2010), which is learning

in a virtual world. According to Allen and Seaman (2014), in 2013 a total of 1,731 postsecondary public institutions in the United States offered online courses compared with only 20 postsecondary public institutions in the United States that did not have any online offerings. Whether people support online education or not, institutions across the United States have spent the last several years building their programs to include an online forum with support for students. In doing so, the jobs of faculty members have begun to shift as the need to facilitate online learning has become part of their responsibilities. The focus of this study was

to understand the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community within their respective university.

BACKGROUND

The research on faculty transitioning to an online setting highlights their challenges with training (Bower, 2001; Gomez, 2015; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane, 2013; Maguire, 2005; Orr, Williams, & Pennington, 2009; Puzziferro-Schnitzer & Kissinger, 2005; Wolf, 2006). Additional research encompasses the student experience in the online setting and the obstacles that must be overcome in online learning (Heiberger & Harper, 2008; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Throughout the research, the need for students to overcome isolation and cultivate a sense of community in an online environment is acknowledged (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai, Wighting, & Liu, 2005). The research indirectly highlights feelings of isolation that online faculty experience, but little is understood about how online faculty can cultivate a sense of community in the virtual world. McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined community as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (p. 9). Since adjunct faculty within universities make up the majority of faculty today (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2014) and their experiences are different when compared to full-time faculty, the focus of this research was on the experiences of adjunct faculty who only teach online. In addition, it focused on those with a high sense of community to make aware what people are doing to positively cultivate community in the virtual world and overcome feelings of isolation and disconnectedness. The literature on online faculty emphasizes isolation, disconnectedness, and a need for community (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin, Valley, Welch, VuTran, & Lowenstein., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd, Byrne, & McCoy, 2012; Lodhi, Razza, & Dilshad, 2013; Mann, Varey, & Button, 2000; Marshall, Michaels, & Mulki, 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). By focusing on a high sense of community, I hoped to add to the literature by positively reporting on how

some faculty are connecting with their university and other faculty in the online environment. Thus, I hoped to fill the gap in the literature with this research by helping to understand how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense of community in the online work environment.

Sense of Community

McMillan and Chavis (1986) solidified the sense of community theory by examining how groups of people foster a sense of community in their environment, which includes feelings of belonging, significance, shared faith, and commitment. The significance of a sense of community is that those who have it have a more clearly defined purpose and feel empowered to accomplish what needs to be accomplished (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). In relation to student achievement and retention, a few researchers have examined how students perform in the online environment and acknowledge that a sense of community is not as natural when compared to a more traditional face-to-face learning environment (Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). In one study (N = 279), using multivariate statistical analyses, Rovai et al. (2005) determined “that online students feel a weaker sense of connectedness and belonging in both classroom and school-wide communities than on-campus students who attend face-to-face classes” (p. 1). While researchers have looked at the effect of students moving into the online world of education, little has been done to help faculty transition to the online world of teaching.

Faculty

In order to support the growing number of students who are enrolled in online courses, the number of online faculty has also increased significantly over the last several years, although no recent statistics could be located. These faculty members have frequently identified problems transitioning into the online environment that include a lack of training, training that was not applicable to their online teaching, or training that was not hands-on (Bower, 2001; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Gomez, 2015; Helms & Raiszadeh, 2002; Hewett & Powers, 2007; Kang, 2012; Kurland & Bailey, 1999; Lee & Busch, 2005; Lesane, 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Orr et al., 2009; Richlin, Wentzell, & Cox, 2014; Wolf, 2006). Further frustrations for online faculty include

technology barriers or failures and inadequate compensation for their workload in an online environment (Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013). Another common theme addressed in studies is a lack of connectedness and community for online faculty (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005).

PROBLEM STATEMENT

The rise in online education has shifted student learning from just face-to-face environments to include the option of online learning. According to Allen and Seaman (2013), “There were 572,000 more online students in fall 2011 than in fall 2010 for a new total of 6.7 million students taking at least one online course” (p. 17). To serve the increasing online student population, more adjunct faculty were hired to help support the growth of the student population.

From fall 1991 to fall 2011, the number of instructional faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 84 percent. The number of full-time faculty in degree-granting postsecondary institutions increased by 42 percent (from 536,000 to 762,000) from 1991 to 2011, compared with an increase of 162 percent (from 291,000 to 762,000) in the number of part-time faculty. (NCES, 2014, p. 1)

The UDL Factor

Thus, because of the rapid increase in adjunct positions, it is evident that adjunct faculty have a significant influence on student learning. While the adjunct faculty experience is different than the full-time residential faculty experience, the online adjunct faculty experience is even more different and may negatively affect student outcomes. For the purposes of this study, when the term adjunct is used, it refers to part-time online faculty. In one study (N = 7,011), student learning outcomes—including completion of a class, their grade in a class, continued enrollment after the class, and satisfaction with their online experience—showed higher achievement when the faculty member was full-time online versus when the faculty

member was a part-time online adjunct (Mueller, Mandernach, & Sanderson, 2013). Examining student (N = 314) experiences in online learning, Rovai (2002) found a connection between student’s perception of their own cognitive learning and a stronger sense of community. If students perceive their own learning as being better when they are connected to a community, it is possible that faculty who work in an online environment have a similar experience in their workplace. Understanding what influences online adjunct faculty to excel and connect may help university administrators motivate faculty to be more effective (Wolf, 2011). Researchers note that online faculty long for connectedness to their peers and their schools (Dolan, 2011; Green, Alejandro, & Brown, 2009; Jeswani & Dave, 2012; Portugal, 2013; Sutton, 2014; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). However, there is no research giving a voice to online adjunct faculty’s experiences of their perceived high sense of community in the online work environment, which is necessary to help understand how people positively connect in the virtual world.

PURPOSE STATEMENT

The purpose of this transcendental phenomenological study was to understand how online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community cultivated their sense of community. Sense of community was generally defined as feelings of connectedness within the university community. The theories guiding this study are McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory and Herzberg’s (1968) motivation-hygiene theory. McMillan and Chavis’ sense of community theory suggests that a sense of community is a powerful force that embodies four elements: membership, influence, reinforcement of needs, and shared emotional connection. Herzberg’s motivation hygiene theory identifies guiding principles for why people are motivated to work. These two theories work together to help understand how online adjunct faculty perceive community and how they are motivated to work when face-to-face encounters do not occur regularly. Participants included online adjunct faculty members who work in accredited universities in the United States.

DESIGN

Transcendental phenomenology was the approach for this study because it provides procedures for a researcher to bracket out his or her experiences, which was necessary for me because I have experiences and assumptions from being a former part-time online adjunct faculty member that may have interfered with the research. As I engaged in this research, I practiced epoche as described by Moustakas (1994). I set aside my experiences as a former online adjunct faculty member and listened to the coresearchers and their experiences of cultivating a high sense of community and thought about their experiences without prejudging their experiences. Bracketing my own experiences ensures that the focus of the research is on the “topic and question” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97) and not on the emotions of the researcher. Transcendental phenomenology looks to analyze themes to help the researcher gain a greater understanding of the phenomenon, which is why I chose it as my approach.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Through the proposed research, I sought to describe the experiences of online adjunct faculty with a high sense of community in the workplace. Each of the questions were identified to understand the overall experiences of adjunct faculty with a high sense of community, the ways they were encouraged to have stronger community, the obstacles or challenges that may have been in their way, and how they thought others could be positively influenced to grow in their own sense of community. The following questions guided the study:

1. What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities? (primary question)
2. In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted (or influenced) by a high sense of community?
3. What challenges (or difficulties) do online adjunct faculty experience?
4. What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?

5. From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?

SETTING

The setting for this study included online adjunct faculty members who do not engage with students in a traditional face-to-face classroom environment. The final setting included two universities that have an online component where students and faculty do not engage in face-to-face learning but learn online over the Internet. It is particularly important that the faculty in this study do not also engage in face-to-face learning environments, which enables them to collaborate with other faculty in the face-to-face setting. Faculty who have face-to-face interactions with other faculty on a regular basis may have different experiences with sense of community when compared to those who are purely online, which is why this study focuses on online universities.

PROCEDURES

Specific procedures were followed as the research was conducted for this study. Guidelines for the Institutional Review Board (IRB) from the University I attended were strictly adhered to. IRB approval was obtained before any research was conducted. The first step after receiving IRB approval was to conduct a pilot study with four individuals who would not be included within the study. The purpose of the pilot study was to practice my interview skills, see if the study is viable, and unearth any unseen problems that may arise in the data collection process (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). Once the pilot study was completed and the adjustments were made, I began to recruit potential participants,

Data Collection

Triangulation is a vital part of data collection in qualitative research in order to validate information that is not easily quantifiable (Creswell, 2013). In this research, I used a questionnaire that included descriptive information to provide background information of the potential participants as well as the SCI-2, which was created and validated by Chavis et al. (2008). The Sense of Community Index was developed from McMillan and Chavis’

(1986) sense of community theory and focused on their four elements of sense of community: membership, influence, meeting needs, and a shared emotional connection (Chavis et al., 2008). The SCI-2 was found reliable (coefficient alpha = .94) within a survey of 1800 people and the subscales (reinforcement of needs, membership, influence, and shared emotional connection) were also proven reliable (coefficient alpha scores of .79 to .86; Chavis et al., 2008). Potential participants were gathered initially through a convenience sample. I began with faculty that I already knew within my current and past institutions. In addition, I used my Facebook account and message boards to recruit additional potential participants, and then I used the snowball technique for additional participants. Forty-five adjunct faculty agreed to participate in this study and completed an online questionnaire. After collecting the online questionnaires, 21 faculty members who met the demographic criteria of online adjunct faculty and had the highest sense of community were invited to participate in the focus groups and interviews.

Following the initial questionnaire, four focus groups were formed that included two to five coresearchers each. In transcendental phenomenological research, the term coresearcher is used to signify a collaboration of the participants with the main researcher in gathering research (Fraeich, 1989; Moustakas, 1994). The purpose of the focus groups within this study was to have faculty from several different universities engage in a video conference call via Adobe Connect to discuss ways they have experienced community within their institution including how their leadership has or has not fostered community in the virtual environment. The video conference call was recorded within the Adobe Connect program and a backup recording was saved with my iPad. Coresearchers were notified with a letter via e-mail to affirm that they were chosen as coresearchers for the focus groups and interviews. The questions for the focus group concentrated on their feelings of isolation, motivation in a virtual environment and job performance, institutional or management support, and training. Then, personal interviews took place with a semistructured format. The goal of the personal interviews within this study was to uncover additional insight as to how online adjunct faculty experience a high sense

of community in the virtual workplace. These personal interviews also took place through Adobe Connect video conferencing and were recorded within the program. Additionally, I again used my iPad to create a backup recording. The questions were semistructured and focused on individual experiences and were crafted to parallel further development of the focus group questions. The questions were open-ended and by asking them, I hoped to learn how the coresearchers overcame feelings of isolation to increase job satisfaction and performance. Finally, I asked the questions in order to uncover the importance of community for the faculty member and to understand how a sense of community connects to their experience as an online adjunct faculty member.

DATA ANALYSIS

The analysis of the questionnaire included calculating points based on the scoring of each question and allowed me to differentiate those who are engaged with a strong sense of community and those who have a weak sense of community in the online environment. By using the SCI-2, I was able to differentiate those that have a high sense of community in the online workplace from those who do not. Using the questionnaire also allowed me to eliminate any faculty members who were full-time employees at their university. For the focus groups and the interviews, I created thick descriptions of the information provided by the participants.

Moustakas's (1994) process of analyzing data was carefully followed throughout the focus groups and personal interviews. I began by listening to the coresearchers describe their experiences and then immersed myself in their stories and experiences. The reason I followed Moustakas's (1994) process was to understand what was the adjunct faculty sense of community online and how they experienced it. I then made sure that I gave equal credence to each aspect of the experience that is described by the coresearchers. I also took reflective notes during each of the focus groups and personal interviews. I repeatedly reviewed the information conveyed through the transcripts as well as all my reflective notes. I set aside time for active "reflective mediation" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89) on the information conveyed. Finally, I ensured that I was receptive to the truths that were conveyed by the coresearchers and set aside any personal

bias. The data gathered from the focus groups were classified into codes and themes. Atlas.ti, a qualitative analysis software program, was used to manage the data gathered. The data was interpreted by what happened and how the online adjunct faculty members experienced community in their work environment.

I considered horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994) as I looked for themes from the focus groups and personal interviews and treated each statement with equal value. From the horizons I clustered and grouped the themes into common categories with the use of Atlas.ti. From these categories I developed “textural descriptions of the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 118) provided by the coresearchers. Structural descriptions were incorporated to foster meaning that described the essence of the phenomenon of a high sense of community that online adjunct faculty members have in the workplace.

PARTICIPANTS

Of the 21 study participants selected, 14 agreed to participate in focus groups and personal interviews as coresearchers over the course of three weeks. The participants’ experience ranged from working online for one and a half years to twelve years. The mean, median, and mode for their years of experiences was 6.21 years, 7 years, and 3 years respectively. Of the 14 coresearchers, 13 participated in one of the four focus groups. Lucy (pseudonyms were used for the names of all participants) was unable to make one of the focus groups due to a scheduling conflict. Lucy was still able to add valuable insight through the personal interview, so I have included her in the results. Thirteen people were also individually interviewed. Rebecca, could not make an interview due to time constraints, but her participation in the focus group was valuable and so her information is included in the results.

RESULTS OF FOCUS GROUPS AND PERSONAL INTERVIEWS

Of the 21 study participants selected, 14 coresearchers participated in one of the four focus groups and personal interviews. During this phase of the data collection, 12 themes were identified that answered the five research questions (See Appendix). The following sections reveal how the research questions were answered through the

shared experiences of the 14 coresearchers.

Research Question One

The first research question, “What are the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have a high sense of community with their respective universities?” was designed to understand the stories of those who are working online and connected to their university. This question brought out two themes: supported and safe.

Supported. Throughout the focus groups and interviews, the importance of support from the university or leadership was readily apparent. In fact, all 14 coresearchers identified support at one point as a significant factor leading to their sense of community in the online workplace. Patricia reflected,

It helps when you feel that the administration is supporting you because there are a lot of online students at [University] like 90,000. So when you have a lot of students you have a lot more complaints than when you have 10,000 students. And I feel that [University] really keeps us informed and they ask for our side of the story if they get a complaint, they don't assume the student is right. It is important for the administration to listen to us and then support us. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

Of course, being supported is not always about going beyond the workplace, but it is also being able to successfully accomplish what needs to be done on the job. David realized that he was supported through his intentionally seeking help. David said,

I think I was supported, um, of course I tend to be the kind of person if I have a question I am not gonna let it keep festering. I am going to find out who I need to ask to help me with whatever might be occurring. So I either get assistance outright or I go looking for it. But I felt like I was supported in my efforts. (David, Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

While not everyone intentionally seeks out connections at work, whether online or not, the ability to feel confident looking for help and being supported were common to all coresearchers.

Safe. Another critical part of the coresearchers’ experience was the feeling that they had a safe place

to ask questions or find answers. The coresearchers all experienced administrative support, which allowed for a safe place as they grew in their position. Jennifer reflected, “When I need anything I ask. Everyone is always helpful. When I felt lost and overwhelmed I asked someone and they are helpful” (Personal Interview, May 4, 2016). While working in a new position can be intimidating in any venue, the online workplace can be particularly isolating. Ensuring that adjuncts still had a safe place to ask questions and do their job was of particular importance for the coresearchers. Amy felt that the strength of the community then trickled beyond and into her personal life:

I feel like that community, too, and the positive structure at [University] has really continued to my personal life. It has made my personal life so much better.... Through my [Instant Messenger] at [University]. We support each other a lot through personal things. (Amy, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While not face-to-face in the traditional sense, it is clear that the online world can still have a positive personal influence on a person as well as foster a community that helps employees connect with others in the workplace.

Research Question Two

The second research question, “In what ways are online adjunct faculty impacted (or influenced) by a high sense of community?,” was written to understand how people who are connected to their university are changed by the experience. Throughout the focus groups and personal interviews, four major themes were identified: ask questions and seek help, engage with others, loyalty and pride, and student success.

Ask questions and seek help. All 14 coresearchers identified at one point the importance of asking questions or finding help. The coresearchers with a high sense of community were empowered to intentionally look and find answers to their questions or find help in a difficult situation. This is in stark contrast with the previous literature where online adjuncts felt isolated (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005). Because these

coresearchers cultivated community, they were able to find answers to their questions so they could execute their job responsibilities in the best way possible.

When asked during the personal interviews what advice they would give to someone beginning a career in the online world, the importance of not being afraid to ask questions was repeated from one coresearcher to the next. Emily shared,

Don't be afraid to reach out and to still ask those questions. A lot of times in the more traditional environment you are learning by asking 100 questions. Don't be afraid to still ask those 100 questions. You can find people to point you in the right direction to build that career and the right relationships with people who can then hopefully guide you throughout. (Personal Interview, April 29, 2016)

Regardless of where people work, people need help as they are learning a new position and this is still true online. In order to overcome feelings of isolation, online adjuncts must be connected to people who can help answer questions and guide them forward in supporting students.

Engage with others. Once again, all 14 coresearchers agreed that an online adjunct must connect with other faculty in some fashion. While all of the coresearchers believed in the importance of engagement, how they were engaged differed, as highlighted by Emily:

I think one of the biggest things is to find a way to become engaged. I think that goes back to what Maggie said about having different ways to reach out and engage yourself in whatever is most comfortable for you. (Emily, Focus Group, April 26, 2016)

While faculty may initially connect and engage with other faculty to support their students, a benefit from these connections is a sense of loyalty and pride.

Loyalty and pride. As a result of the connection found within a sense of community, the coresearchers felt a loyalty or sense of pride towards their university. This loyalty and pride also led to their desire to do the best they could in all

they were doing for the students. Lucy said it most succinctly when she said,

I don't think that I would have continued for seven years if I didn't have that connection or loyalty.... If I weren't apart of this online community, I would feel even more isolated and distant from the university. I don't think my heart would be in it as much as it is. I don't think I would work quite as hard as I do. I don't think I would care as much as I care. It just promotes a deep loyalty. (Lucy, Personal Interview, May 5, 2016)

The sense of pride also strengthens the ability to perform job responsibilities to support student success. As faculty grow in their personal connections and loyalty to the university, they are empowered to ensure that their students succeed.

Student success. Throughout each of the focus groups and personal interviews, the coresearchers consistently demonstrated a strong passion for the well-being and success of their students. Ultimately, the reason the coresearchers connected directly with their students related to their desire to provide support for them. Thus, one way the coresearchers were influenced by their own sense of community was their ability to provide appropriate guidance, support, and direction to the students. David said, "Um. If you want students to be successful, then you need to create that sense of community" (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016). Stuart shared his values as they relate to cultivating community online, "I do the best I can for my students. That is the main thing" (Personal Interview, May 2, 2016). Student success was clearly at the heart of these 14 coresearchers who cultivated a high sense of community in the online workplace. Their desire to ensure their students could be successful in their experience clearly motivated them to connect and collaborate with others and provided evidence of their performance as an online professor and their level of job satisfaction.

Research Question Three

The third research question, "What challenges do online adjunct faculty experience?" sought to directly address the challenges that were discussed throughout the literature review to see if the challenges were the same. I identified two themes from this research question. The first challenge was focused on understanding expectations and

technology so that faculty can perform their job responsibilities. The second challenge was busyness.

Understanding expectations and technology. The coresearchers identified a challenge in knowing and understanding what was expected of them in their role as an online adjunct. The coresearchers also acknowledged that using the technological tools available to them was a challenge. The greatest challenges seem to stem from the ability to know where to ask questions or seek help because the online workplace can be isolating. Amy discussed the challenge of determining what to do when people do not respond to questions or understanding what a person may mean in an electronic message:

I think another one is people are not responding to emails or [Instant Messenger]. That can be real hard because there is not a whole lot you can do about it because you cannot knock on their office door. And then there are some times when just reading an email I wish I could see their body language. Are they upset? It leaves a bit of wondering the intent, but not too often. The challenges of responding to the huge amounts of emails. (Amy, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While knowing and understanding job expectations was addressed as well as ensuring the intent was understood in asynchronous electronic communication, the challenge of understanding how to use the available technology to ensure that the needs of the students are all met was also discussed in relation to connecting with students.

If you are not adept at using technology, you are going to have a whole lot of difficulty making those connections.... You really need someone that is there that can guide you on what you should do if you use a video and just communicating over and over will help you develop that sense of community. (David, Focus Group, April 30, 2016)

While understanding the expectations and technological tools available to ensure students have what they need, busyness was also a major challenge for online adjunct who often were

working multiple jobs.

Busyness. Several of the 14 coresearchers identified busyness or a time crunch as a challenge with working online. The nature of adjunct teaching is that many adjuncts often have other jobs or responsibilities that take up much of their time and they often feel constrained by what they can accomplish in the time allotted. Also, other responsibilities within the adjunct role, such as answering emails from students, tends to utilize time that could be devoted to fostering community with colleagues. Rebecca reflected, “I think time is the biggest factor for me. In my head I have some really good intentions. Sometimes it actually works out and other times it doesn’t” (Focus Group, April 27, 2016).

Patricia responded,

I agree Rebecca. First, let me say. I am so thankful that I have this job. I love this job. It does not pay enough though to be my first job, it is my second job. The time factor like you said, Rebecca, like I am working two jobs, I don’t have time to make two connections.... I think if teaching the course is all I did then I would have more time, but I already spent two hours responding

to emails. I think if all I did was teach then I would have time to make the connections, but teaching is only about half of what I do. (Focus Group, April 27, 2016)

While many online adjunct faculty members may want to connect with their colleagues, the greatest challenge is finding the time to connect, which may be why many of their connections relate to providing help to their students.

Research Question Four

Research question four, “What resources or practices do online adjunct faculty see as valuable to overcome challenges?,” was designed to provide insight into how faculty may positively overcome the challenges that they experience online so they can still connect with others. Collaboration and dialogue was the major theme identified to answer how online adjunct faculty overcome the challenges in their workplace. Communication was a second theme that helped online adjunct faculty overcome challenges. Communication was equally popular with the desire for multiple ways to communicate, including recreating face-to-face interaction with video conferencing tools.

Collaboration and dialogue. Collaboration and

Figure 1: Pedagogy-UDL Interconnectivity

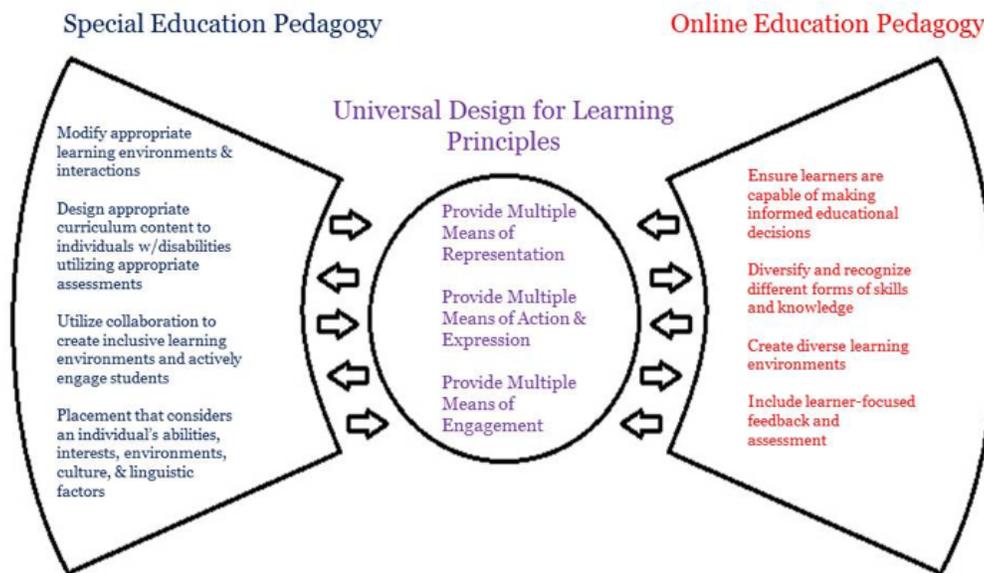


Figure 1: Adapted from *CEC Initial Level Special Educator Preparation Standards*, by the Council for Exceptional Children, 2012; *Personalisation and Digital Technologies*, by H. Green, K. Facer, T. Rudd, P. Dillon, and P. Humphreys, 2006, Bristol: Futurelab; and *Universal Design for Learning Guidelines Version 1.0*, by the Center for Applied Special Technology, 2008.

dialogue was identified by all 14 coresearchers as something they had in the workplace but wanted more of. The benefits for collaboration and dialogue mainly surrounded helping students and growing professionally. David reflected on the benefits to collaborating with colleagues when he said,

I feel like I am better able to assist students. There are times that students may ask me questions and I can't remember what the policy may be on that, but I can find it in a document somewhere. But then there are times a student might ask me something and I really need to speak with someone. An individual. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

Other coresearchers reflected on the significance of collaborating through more intentional means like meetings and discussion boards. Brenda shared, “Our meetings were built around that and it was how I grew professionally—having contact with other people” (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016). Victoria agreed, “I know that when there are online discussion forums, it really helps to connect with your teammates” (Focus Group, April 28, 2016). Carol stated, “I would love some of the things that you are saying to have that forum with colleagues that are not at [University]. Best practices, what are they doing as far as meeting the demands?” (Focus Group, April 26, 2016). Regardless of the venue, it is clear that online adjuncts would like to at least have the option to connect and professionally collaborate and dialogue on some best practices to meet the needs of their students.

Communication. Enjoying communication and identifying ways they could do more to communicate with colleagues and leadership was an equally popular theme during the focus groups and personal interviews with all 14 coresearchers. Much of the conversation with regard to communication focused on the desire for multiple ways to communicate with students and colleagues and the significance of recreating face-to-face interaction with video conferencing tools. Carol shared, “I guess one is the importance for communication. Especially as some new professors come on board, that has not been in the online environment” (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016). While the importance of communication was identified by Carol, both John and Rebecca highlighted the need

to conference with video conferencing tools. “I had one very good instructional mentor that used video conferencing. A regular video conferencing which is such a common tool that should be part of our toolkit” (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016). Rebecca also reflected, “I love Sarah’s idea that they have monthly meetings online. I think that is a great idea. Especially things and connectedness like this Adobe Connect, it is awesome because you can put a name with the face” (Focus Group, April 27, 2016).

Amy and John both agreed that encouraging faculty to communicate and talk with each other is something that some faculty will have to be required to do lest the busyness of the days provide an excuse not to. Amy said, “Somehow set something up where you are encouraging [Faculty] to talk with each other” (Amy, Personal Interview, May 7, 2016) and John emphasized, “There probably should be a forum for faculty, and it probably should be a required forum. I think a forum for faculty based on best practices alone” (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016). Regardless of the means, it is clear that communicating between colleagues and leadership is vital to creating a positive sense of community in the online workplace.

Research Question Five

The final research question, “From the online adjunct faculty’s perspective, how do universities offering DE degrees cultivate a sense of community with online adjunct faculty only teaching online courses?,” was designed to understand the influence leadership could offer to those who were not connecting in the virtual workplace. Intentional leadership and opportunities to connect were two themes that arose from the focus groups and personal interviews.

Intentional leadership. Intentional leadership, the idea that those in leadership positions should intentionally connect with their virtual employees to create community, was the major theme identified from the focus groups and the personal interviews. Due to the nature of the virtual workplace, many of the coresearchers acknowledged that university leadership needed to at least initiate or establish options to cultivate community with online adjunct faculty. While referencing those in leadership or mentoring positions designed to help support adjunct faculty, David suggested,

Other than just mandating office meetings periodically; virtual office meetings periodically. You would just have to say I am available should you have any questions. Constantly remind individuals of that. Then you could do the periodic webinars as it relates to maybe grading issues or communication issues where [faculty] could log in at their leisure but then you could have it recorded so that if I couldn't make the live session, I could see the recording. I think that would create a greater sense of I belong to [University]. I belong to this work. (Personal Interview, May 7, 2016)

Maggie also reflected on the importance of intentional leadership. “Just like new students, adjuncts need a lot of monitoring so they don’t fall off the grid. So almost a schedule of regular check-ins at the beginning until they know what they need or know how to ask” (Maggie, Personal Interview, April 28, 2016). Another coresearcher, John, also saw the significance of intentionally leading online adjunct not only to connect, but to do so in a simulated face-to-face manner.

I think there are so many opportunities there to add things that are personal, poetic. I think we can do that. I think if it becomes the intentionality of our communication and not just transactions.... Instead of doing some of these professional development, is there any way you can demand personal contact with other faculty members? Make it mandatory. Buddy us up and make us talk to each other. I have really enjoyed this talking with you. I enjoy seeing your smile. (John, Personal Interview, May 2, 2016)

The significance cannot be overlooked in reaching out and connecting online, particularly for Brenda who felt that she would not have stayed at the university without someone intentionally connecting with her in the virtual workplace; however, if the leadership does not intentionally guide the connections, it will be difficult, particularly for newer adjuncts, to find ways to connect naturally. Thus, without the intentional leadership guiding the community online, it will be difficult for online adjunct faculty to successfully cultivate community simply due to the nature of the online workplace.

Opportunities to connect. A strong desire for

Figure 2: Course Navigation Screenshot



Table 1: Online Course Sections & Content Delivery Methods

<i>Course Section</i>	<i>Content</i>
About the Instructor	The section introduces the instructor. This can include a brief biography, and also the contact information and office hours.
Announcements	This section provides up-to-the-minute updates regarding the course. Announcements are also emailed to all the students when the page updates.
Course Goals & Objectives	Lists not only the CEC standards, but the goals that each student are expected to meet throughout the semester.
Course Calendar	A week-by-week breakdown of the assignments, their due dates, and point values for the entire course.
External Links & Resources	Links for the online gradebook, email, file drop, cloud storage, and webliography.
Grading Expectations, Evaluation & Assessment	Detailed overviews of each assignment, how each are graded, and how the point values are distributed through the course.
Policies & Procedures	Policies and procedures as mandated by the university.
Resources	A listing of required texts, required articles, suggested texts, and suggested articles, with links and downloads when applicable.
Technical Assistance	Information regarding getting help form the staff technician regarding the online course. Also includes minimum system requirements to run the website.
Weeks 1-12	Where the lectures, discussions, and weekly learning outcomes are housed. Microunits vary in length depending on whether a 10-week or 12-week course.
Sitemap	Listing of all the above components of the course for ease of access.

leadership to provide opportunities to connect was another theme identified from the focus groups and personal interviews. While the coresearchers unanimously agreed that community must start with the leadership, several coresearchers shared their desire for the leadership to provide multiple ways online faculty could connect with one another to overcome a one-size-fits-all mentality. When asked what recommendations she would share with leadership, Lucy replied,

I would advise them to offer more opportunities for collaboration between the teachers of the same courses. I think

that is the one thing that is missing, the one element that would be helpful. I know we can do it alone and I have done it alone, but I do think it would be helpful to have someone besides the supervisor to help me with the answers. (Personal Interview, May 5, 2016)

Brenda also suggested, “Just to look. Provide some opportunities for that [community]. I think that Victoria said that nicely in the focus group, it really does have to start with those in charge” (Personal Interview, May 3, 2016).

Maggie also shared,

I think it has to be a combination so that it is a variety. While having the cameras on and this is very engaging, I don't know that the synchronous nature of it really fits so that again you have to have the short and quick drop-ins so that people have a safety net

so that people who are really really busy, four jobs busy... Almost having a landing zone, a page or space, where people can connect at a more consistent basis where people can connect if they chose to without judgment. (April 26, 2016)

Table 2: Online Course Design with UDL

<p>I. Provide Multiple Means of Representation</p>	<p>1. Provide Options for Perception</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that customize the display of information Options that provide alternatives for auditory and visual information <p><i>Example:</i> Video/audio and slide presentations that the professor shows and that the students develop include transcripts for diverse learners and reinforce UDL concepts</p>	<p>2. Provide Options for Language & Symbols</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that define the vocabulary and symbols Options that illustrate key concepts non-linguistically <p><i>Example:</i> To introduce students to new technologies over the course of the semester, every assignment can be completed using a different type of tool (ex. virtual avatars, vlogs, audio recordings) to narrate & explain graphical concepts</p>	<p>3. Provide Options for Comprehension</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that highlight critical features, ideas, and relationships Options that support memory and transfer <p><i>Example:</i> Instructors highlight key elements using text, graphics, and diagrams, while providing a brief checklist of core concepts on the side of the website via navigation bar</p>
<p>II. Provide Multiple Means of Action & Expression</p>	<p>4. Provide Options for Physical Action</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options for accessing tools & assistive technologies Options in the means of navigation Options in the mode of physical responses <p><i>Example:</i> Courses utilize Google Sites as a framework by which we provide information and literature that is accessible via multiple technological and physical mediums (assigned textbooks, PDF files, and websites that can be accessed via traditional and technological means)</p>	<p>5. Provide Options for Expressive Skills & Fluency</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options in media for communication Options in tools for composition & problem solving Options in the scaffolds for practice & performance <p><i>Example:</i> Discussion assignments task students with the opportunity to choose what kind of presentation (Powerpoint, Voki, oral report, etc.) to demonstrate mastery of materials, share it within the discussion boards, and challenge other students with questions they have developed based on their understanding of the material</p>	<p>6. Provide Options for Executive Functions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that guide goal-setting Options that support planning & strategy development Options that enhance capacity for monitoring progress <p><i>Example:</i> In addition to the discussion boards, additional boards are set up for in-class groups to engage in discussions with each other regarding assignments, as well as a space for the entire class to get feedback from the professor and teaching assistant(s)</p>
<p>III. Provide Multiple Means of Engagement</p>	<p>7. Provide Options for Recruiting Interest</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that increase individual choice, & autonomy Options that enhance relevance, value, & authenticity <p><i>Example:</i> Students will write a case position paper regarding a court case on a topic (ex. LRE, evaluation, eligibility) that describes the facts, issues, and findings of the order; students themselves get to choose both the topic and a case that interests them</p>	<p>8. Provide Options for Sustaining Effort & Persistence</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options that vary levels of challenge & support Options that foster collaboration & communication <p><i>Example:</i> Working together in groups of 2-3, students will develop a team teaching lesson plan for a grade 6-12 class utilizing UDL techniques. Students will also collaborate to create a brief visual presentation that also meet UDL standards</p>	<p>9. Provide Options for Self-Regulation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Options to guide personal goal-setting & expectations Options that develop self-assessment & reflections <p><i>Example:</i> Each site has a section devoted to grading expectations, evaluation, & assessment, where students can see the point values and determine the expectations of the course. Students are also encouraged to reflect on the materials via weekly discussions</p>

Adapted from CAST (2011). Universal Design for Learning Guidelines version 2.0. Wakefield, MA: Author

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Through the questionnaire, focus groups, and personal interviews, each of the 14 coresearchers who participated in the study shared their experiences of working as an online adjunct, which provided answers to the five research questions. Also, it was clear that there were three additional types of responses the coresearchers provided. The coresearchers who participated in this study all shared things they did, acknowledged what people did for them, and shared desires for what they want in the future.

Each of the coresearchers, whether they considered themselves an extrovert or introvert, all did things to overcome the tendency to be isolated in the online workplace. All 14 coresearchers acknowledged they were motivated to help their students succeed, which fostered their sense of community with other faculty within their university as they reached out and asked questions to provide support to their students. Because these faculty members were able to cultivate a sense of community online, not only were they able to help students succeed but they also improved as an online professor and increased their job satisfaction. These coresearchers, who had a high sense of community, did not necessarily rely on leadership to guide them to the answers to their questions. Instead, they sought out the help they needed to ensure their success as an online adjunct. Thus, they were all very comfortable seeking the help they needed and found that they were not worried about asking dumb questions if it meant helping their students. The coresearchers all felt empowered by a safe environment and helpful colleagues, which also suggests an increase in job satisfaction.

Not only did each of the 14 coresearchers do things to help cultivate their community, they all had people in their network that helped create those connections. More than half (8 of 14) of the coresearchers had a previous connection with the university where they are currently employed, either as a student or working with someone in a previous face-to-face environment. This previous connection helped establish a baseline of community that developed further as time progressed. For those who did not have a previous connection, they were quickly connected by someone, whether it was someone in leadership or a colleague, who helped them find the answers they would need

as they began the new position. Regardless of previous experience, all 14 coresearchers had one or more person who quickly reached out to them to establish new connections and create a safe, supportive environment for collaboration.

While all 14 coresearchers have established a strong sense of community in the online environment, it was obvious that they desired more synchronous meetings or places to collaborate and dialogue. While the coresearchers acknowledged they were able to attain some of this asynchronously, they felt that something more could be attained if there were options for real-time connections that simulated face-to-face interactions, such as using video conferencing technology. Finally, they also shared a need to create a network of faculty, which would be more than just a list of people who work for the university. This network would intentionally connect faculty with others who could support each other in achieving their goals for the students. A by-product of this would be an increase in the performance of online professors and their job satisfaction, because they would be able to meet the needs of the students.

DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to advance the understanding of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Rovai, 2002) in the online education environment by understanding the experiences of online adjunct faculty who have cultivated a high sense of community. As online education continues to grow at a rapid pace, it is essential for universities to provide the best support possible to online adjunct faculty who are working virtually. Through the voices of the coresearchers of this study, it is clear that those who have a high sense of community feel connected to their university through membership and pride and are empowered to influence colleagues and students. Further, the coresearchers in this study with a high sense of community acknowledged they were motivated to continue working for the university and felt they were part of something greater than themselves.

This study furthers previous research by identifying how faculty have overcome feelings of isolation and disconnectedness in the workplace (Berent & Anderko, 2011; Bucklin et al., 2014; Carlson, 2015; Davis & Benson, 2012; Dolan, 2011; Kang, 2012; Lloyd et al., 2012; Lodhi et al., 2013;

Mann et al., 2000; Marshall et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002; Rovai & Gallien, 2005; Rovai et al., 2005) by intentionally connecting with colleagues and leadership. Additionally, through this research I acknowledge ways those in leadership can positively increase the sense of community of online adjunct faculty by intentionally leading them to connect with colleagues and their institution. Finally, while the importance of collaboration is mentioned in previous research, this study continues to emphasize the need for collaboration among colleagues even when members are physically apart and working in the online environment.

IMPLICATIONS

In my study I sought to understand the experiences of current online adjunct faculty working online with a high sense of community. I also identified ways online adjuncts are influenced by a high sense of community and are empowered to overcome challenges they might experience in the workplace. The results of this study can help guide administrators and trainers to intentionally lead new and veteran online adjunct faculty to positively connect to their university and positively affect the student experience. Through the experiences of the 14 coresearchers, the results of this study encourage both new online adjunct faculty and those who are influential in leadership and administrative roles within the online environment. By developing community in the virtual environment, online adjunct faculty members would positively connect with their colleagues and those in leadership to ensure that they are supported and have the best resources to flourish in the remote environment and support their students.

New Online Adjunct

The results of this research have the potential to encourage new online adjunct faculty who are transitioning online. If new faculty want to avoid feelings of isolation, which can be prevalent and natural in an online environment, they should be encouraged to reach out to other faculty and initiate contact either for answers to specific questions or simply to start creating a network of supporters. As many of the coresearchers suggested, new online faculty must be bold to ask questions to ensure they are best equipped to serve their students. However, ultimately new online adjunct would be best supported if the university's leadership and

administration initiated the contact.

Leadership and Administration

All 14 coresearchers overwhelmingly agreed that leadership and administrators within an online program have the greatest power to positively influence online adjuncts, particularly as new adjuncts transition to the job. The leadership must take action to cultivate an environment where online faculty are supported and have a safe place to ask questions. When faculty have a safe place to seek help, they will be empowered to ask the questions that will ultimately help them grow professionally, which positively affects their job performance. While asking questions is a great place to begin a dialogue, faculty must engage with other faculty if they are going to grow and improve professionally. How people engage is up to the discretion of those involved; however, the coresearchers of this study indicated a desire for more imitation face-to-face time, such as connecting via synchronous video conferences, when true face-to-face time was not an option. One of the benefits of intentionally connecting is the loyalty and pride that may arise in the faculty. The feelings of connectedness, loyalty, and pride can also positively motivate employees in the workplace.

Certainly the most critical reason for leadership to encourage faculty to connect is student success. Faculty must have a safe place to connect, collaborate, and ask the sometimes silly questions so they can grow in their role and ensure they are equipped to support their students. Without the opportunity to dialogue and collaborate, working online is isolating and the role of the adjunct can get stale. Because some adjuncts are busy working several jobs, leadership must provide both synchronous (such as video conferencing) and asynchronous (such as discussion board) opportunities for faculty to connect and dialogue to build community in the online environment, which could also improve adjunct faculty job satisfaction.

LIMITATIONS

There were a few limitations of the study. "Limitations are external conditions that restrict or constrain the study's scope or may affect its outcome" (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2012, p. 8). Due to the nature of qualitative research, the sample size of this study was limited. Although nine universities were represented within the initial questionnaire,

those with the highest sense of community were at only two different universities. The coresearchers resided throughout the United States, but the majority were located in the Southeast. In addition, since this study relied on the potential participants' willingness to engage, the gender split was not equal and only three of the coresearchers were male compared with 11 female coresearchers. Age was also considered a limitation to the study, as the ages of the coresearchers ranged from 36 to over 50 with seven coresearchers in the 51 and over category. When studying the online environment where knowing technology is essential, it is possible that the age of the coresearchers found within the study may limit the information due to differences in life experience with technology.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Much of the research on the online faculty experience is riddled with stories of what is not working in the online environment. The purpose of this research was to provide a positive perspective of how some online adjunct faculty are overcoming isolation and creating a community in spite of the remote environment. I shared the stories of 14 coresearchers who are successfully cultivating community, but more research is needed to add to this study and provide additional participants' experiences beyond these two universities. Another study, which specifically looks to identify the best practices for cultivating community online, would provide support to the growing online community. Future research is also needed to identify if there is a significant difference between male and female faculty members who enjoy community in the online environment and how gender might affect success as an online faculty member.

Future research could also look to those in leadership positions to first determine if they have a strong sense of community. If a strong sense of community is identified, future research could seek to learn how those in leadership have established their community and how it influences those whom they lead. Additional research is needed to then see how adjuncts respond to those in leadership who initiate developing a sense of community online. Finally, another significant future study would look to see how faculty member's high sense of community affects student success in the online environment.

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APPENDIX: ENUMERATION TABLE

Open-Codes	Enumeration of open-code appearance across data sets	Themes
Support	23	Supported
Personal	3	
Common Goals	6	
Encourage	2	
Safe	15	Safe
Trust	7	
Humanness	4	
Ask Questions	26	Ask Questions and Seek Help
Ask for Help	29	
Intentional	25	
Improvement	6	
Engage	4	Engage with Others
Support others	8	
Personal Connection	9	
Previous Connection	9	
Loyalty	5	Loyalty and Pride
Motivated to Work	13	
Student	14	Student Success
Answer Questions	17	
Feedback on Job Performance	3	Expectations and Technology
Understand Expectations	10	
Busyness	9	Busyness
Time to Develop	3	
Collaboration	25	Collaboration and Dialogue
Dialogue	11	
Face-to-Face Interactions	12	
Communication	11	Communication
Immediacy	8	
Intentional Leadership	56	Intentional Leadership
Asynchronous Support	8	
Synchronous Meetings	14	
Collegial Opportunities	3	
Best Practices	8	
Opportunities to Connect	22	Opportunities to Connect