Case Study: Evaluative Scottish practitioner action-research of SoB

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Overview

This case describes the activities and findings of an action-research team exploring SoB for online learners in a mixed methods study, without additional resourcing. The team comprised three tutors and a retired educational researcher who volunteered their time out of interest in the research. The tutors were each engaging in facilitating learning in online courses, and had a keen interest in SoB. They wished to learn their online learners' conception of what a Sense of Belonging (SoB) meant for them. They also wondered if having SoB had been relevant or not for these learners, or not; and, if so, what it did or did not promote for them at the course and institution level. Naturally they wished to learn about the role that they as tutors had played in promoting SoB for these learners, and how important peers were in that process. They planned and carried out their small action research project accordingly.

Description

The study was undertaken at a small, niche university in Scotland, whose 5,000 students take predominantly professional programmes in Health Sciences, Arts, Social Sciences and Management. This institution has an emergent online provision for all modules, that features a collaborative approach to learning. In this study, tutors asked for assistance from learners from three online modules which had been run for several years, and had consistently received significantly positive learner feedback.

The team approached two groups of learners. The first (N =50) were taking two modules part-time in the *MSc in Professional and Higher Education.* Their first module - Education in Action - is

typically an initial experience for the learners; the second - An Introduction to Learning and Technologies - is the fourth module of the programme, and usually followed in the second or third year of study. Both modules embody a strong collaborative, community-based approach. Learners, having been introduced to materials through a variety of videos, narrated PowerPoints and online journals, are then expected to participate on a weekly basis in individual and group activities. The online discussions are the core of the modular study; learners are therefore introduced at an early stage to their roles and responsibilities within the online community. In the regular synchronous sessions, learners meet with others in small break-out rooms, and identify and develop questions to be posed to the wider community. Space for learners to discuss their studies with the module tutors or the programme leaders is provided in drop-in synchronous sessions .

The second group of learners to be approached (N = 10) were studying Fundamentals of Dispute Resolution in the part-time online *MSc in Dispute Resolution*. Most learners here are busy professionals who work in complaint handling. This module tends to be the first that they take on the MSc, and so it includes a number of activities that relate to induction to their wider programme. As in the other two modules featured above, a structured collaborative approach to learning is taken, founded on the use of narrated PowerPoints, videos and online journals, clustered around five core learning topics. Learners are expected to participate in weekly discussion board activities, where their engagement in four of these five topics partly contributes to their assessment. For two of the activities learners are paired, and are expected to use Skype or phone to discuss the tasks in hand. Two synchronous discussion sessions were held, but with varying success. One-to-one sessions with the tutor via phone or Skype were also available at two points.

With ethical approval from the University, the team recruited learners on the three selected modules through announcements and discussion postings in the university's Virtual Learning Environment. Volunteers were initially being invited to contribute to an anonymous online survey comprising eight open-ended questions. This survey tool had already been piloted with two learners who had previously completed modules in the *MSc in Professional and Higher Education*. Their feedback was particularly valuable in the fine-tuning the wording of the instrument. The survey questions asked respondents to explain what SoB meant to them, and to provide specific examples of incidents that had had a positive or a negative effect on their SoB. Other questions explored the possible impact on SoB of peers as well as that of the tutor and the learner's family. In a closing item, respondents were invited to participate in a voluntary telephone interview.

The data provided by 12 respondents to the survey (18.5% of the cohort) were collated by the visiting researcher and used after consultation with the team as the basis for the key questions of the telephone interviews. The unfortunate paucity of responses was a consequence of a delay in implementing the research. Only two learners had then volunteered to be interviewed, so a further invitation was sent to the other respondents, but with no reaction. The semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted by the visiting researcher. Transcripts of the interviews was shared with these participants, to ensure they were in agreement with the record. No changes ensued or were requested from this checking.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Cresswell, 2014) was applied both the qualitative responses returned in the survey and the transcripts of the semi-structured telephone interviews which added welcome depth and

detail to the results of the survey. The questionnaire responses for each question in the survey were first grouped under meaningful sub-headings. The analysis of questionnaire returns followed this procedure:

- Assemble quotes under the questionnaire questions, as main headings
- Sub-divide under sub-headings featuring a significant word or concept in the quotes
- Re-arrange the quotes under sub-headings in an order relating to a story line
- Omit nothing; use all the available text except the odd conjunction
- Add nothing other than in describing what the sub-headings entail; strictly refrain from editing
- Anonymise completely to ensure confidentiality.

For example, having been asked if a SoB is important for online learners, all respondents had replied "Yes." They then gave a short rationale, as requested. These reasons suggested suitable sub-headings: Benefit, Motivation, Connections, Supportive interactions, and Need (which included isolation and socialisation).

The telephone interviews were structured around half a dozen opening questions based upon significant questionnaire responses. Questions and responses were transcribed by the visiting researcher, eliminating any repetitions, pauses or terms such as 'umm'. Sections that would cause identification of the interviewee were carefully redacted, with their approval. Otherwise the content was retained without editing or selection. The materials were ordered in relation to the survey themes, with the re-ordered transcripts being reviewed by the interested research team who then sought useful and deeper meanings from the responses.

The semi-structured interview transcripts were thematically analysed using a concept mapping approach (Kane and Trochim 2007) to identify main and sub-concepts. The sub-headings from the survey were also concept mapped, with each set of emergent concepts being reviewed in terms of the entire set of responses. The veracity of the concepts was confirmed in an independent mapping exercise by a member of the programme team who had not been involved in the research.

The three main emergent concepts were:

- Engagement
- Culture of learning
- Support

Findings

This action-research aimed to establish the meaning of SoB for these online learners, and to identify what aspects of their learning experience had contributed to its development. The concepts derived from analysis of the data are amplified below, together with quotations from the survey responses and the interviews, included to ensure that the learners' voices are heard directly.

All 12 respondents claimed that SoB was important to them as an online learner, as it could prevent isolation. One noted that while SoB is essential for *all* learners, it is more so for *online* learners who are remote and lack the regular meetings and socialization of face-to-face situations. Respondents variously described SoB as a "feeling"; of being part of a community, of belonging to a group of learners with a common goal; of having a sense of engagement with learning materials and other learners and tutors.

Engagement

This concept featured in all survey responses and was related to engagement of both tutors and learners. Some identified tutors as being initiators of the development of SoB, in comments such as "*tutors are the glue that bring it together*." Respondents specifically identified how the attitude and approach of the tutor set the tone of the learning and the development of SoB. They did so by safeguarding learners' behaviour, through their friendliness, helpfulness and enthusiasm, and by maintaining contact in discussions and by announcements and posts - all of which assisted in reinforcing SoB. Learners noted that tutors

– *had an impact on my sense of belonging by their openness and honesty.*

– *by having a continual presence during on-line discussions and through the short videos which brings the tutors right into my dining room!*

One respondent described "*the glue*" as

– *the quality of the learning materials put together, the guided reading and many references, the encouragement and feedback. These are all intrinsic to feeling valued and supported and key in sustaining that overall sense of belonging.*

Learner involvement and interaction were also identified as critical factors in maintaining SoB. This featured mostly in the nature and depth of discussion posts, together with engagement in group work and activities. The introductory element of getting to know each other was regarded as crucial:

– *the encouragement to share information about ourselves and our histories made me feel a sense of belonging and connectedness with other students.*

– *through the discussion boards I get to know my peers and therefore feel a sense of belonging.*

This idea was amplified in the interviews, wherein one respondent explained that

– *although you have never met them physically face to face….. it's amazing how you do get glimpses of people's personality from the sort of on-line interactions going on.*

Another interviewee suggested the possible relationship of some of the SoB to personal situation or context. This learner had moved to a new job on commencing their studies, was very isolated and felt something had been 'lost'; thus

– *that's when I really had the sense of belonging to a community on line because I was physically so far away from everyone.*

Group-work and paired activities were seen as contributing strongly to developing SoB, as learners collaborated with their co-learners to achieve an end goal by a specified time:

– *In group tasks we have been able to help each other out by taking on a bit extra here and there at various times.*

– *It's good to have someone to help and make you feel like you are together in a class.*

Learners identified the online discussions as a strength in developing their SoB, highlighting the importance of engaging with the discussion. Offering feedback and other views to the discussions was seen as a positive way of supporting and encouraging each other.

– *I think the discussion boards were helpful in this respect (peer impact on sense of belonging) as it meant getting to know other students and acted as an on-going conversation albeit not in real time.*

However one respondent identified online discussions as having a more negative impact on their feelings of SoB.

– *If I feel disconnected it is invariably because my own work commitments have taken over and I have missed out on on-line discussion or distanced myself from the learning materials.*

In concurring with these written views, interview responses provided more detail. Interviewees had noted that interactions associated with group activities were mainly initiated by learners who had a shared purpose of wishing to do well, and supported each other in achieving that. Most discussion interactions were certainly triggered by a tutor-designed task or thread for discussion in accordance with the aims of the module; thereafter, however, learner engagement was individually driven.

Culture of learning.

This concept emerged in accounts of incidents that had had either a positive or negative impact on learners' SoB. The culture within the modules' learning groups was perceived to have affected learners' SoB through the module structure, the tutors' behaviours and the materials, and consequent learner behaviours.

The positive development of SoB was firmly associated with the notion of sharing and with the online learning materials remaining accessible over time. In these circumstances, responses suggested

that these learners' sharing of challenges and anxieties in discussion groups had had a powerful impact on the development of SoB:

> – *when I first started the module I was very stressed and anxious with the platform and the material and everything else. Despite the tutor's reassurance, it was only when I saw similar concerns being posted on the discussion hub that I felt slightly at ease that I was not alone in trying to figure out how everything works . it was quite a relief!!!*

In offering advice for forthcoming learners regarding developing SoB, respondents stressed the value of online discussions in promoting the flexibility of the thinking intrinsic to transformative learning. For example, they had profitably encouraged their peers to challenge/question/disagree with each other without hesitation, since such interactions enhanced the quality of the discussion content.

Tutors' contributions to the discussion boards were seen as promoting SoB, with learners feeling a tutor's own views related to the subject matter established the tutors rather more as human. Learners also valued tutor feedback and knowing that the tutor was 'present' regularly online:

> – *Be visible, be present and offer as much @live' feedback as possible…. It makes the connection more obvious*
> – *Put up your own views on things relating to the subject matter, so they can get to know you a bit more.*

The continued availability of materials and discussions in online modules as studies progressed was seen as supportive:

– Due to illness I was unable to complete unit 3 of work for the module in year xxxx. I have only been able to reconnect with this after everyone else has completed and submitted their assessment. Despite this, being able to access the on-line discussions/thoughts still makes me feel part of this learning community.

Not all aspects of the culture of their online learning had been found to nurture respondents' SoB. Some specific aspects of feedback, or lack of it, were aired as having had negative impact on SoB. The occurrence of off-putting behaviour was mentioned; specific behaviours such as people not posting any comment on discussion threads, cancelling an arranged group session and then not responding to efforts to rearrange the time; and misunderstandings of feedback during group work activities or in discussions were all described as detrimental to SoB:

– providing feedback on a peers' work is therefore a minefield in terms of how it will be interpreted. This occurred once when a student wrote that another student's work "suffered from spelling errors". Cue a really long thread about hurt, support, female solidarity etc etc

Online groupwork online can embody many pitfalls:

– if people write back and/or offer feedback in a derogatory manner that lessens your sense of belonging.

However, the sense of achievement by the group of a common overall goal generally seemed to outweigh any negative aspects of feedback:

> – *during the group tasks things got a bit fraught where there were some occasional misunderstandings of the on-line feedback – but these queries were swiftly cleared up as the overall goal of completing the task took over and by the end the sense of achievement had obliterated any temporary individual 'difference of opinion.*

Support

The notion of support was interwoven throughout the questionnaire responses, covering the sharing of issues, offering advice and views on aspects of the module, module design and family support.

Support and constructive connections were specifically reported in peer group interactions assisting in resolving learning difficulties. Help and feedback from peers and tutors through the discussion groups proved valuable to stressed learners, helping them to construct and develop their learning, and offering them the opportunity to 'check things out'. Informal connections with other learners proved distinctly supportive, generating the feeling that the learner was not alone in their struggles.

> – *I was happy to see that other people were having similar difficulties which in turn significantly reduced my anxiety over the summative submission.*
> – *In forum discussion, peers provide much needed guidance when there is some issue that needs to be further explored or revisited but also to bounce ideas off.*

The survey responses showed clearly how the module design and the accompanying tutor engagement were critical in the development of SoB. The provision of engagement activities from the very start was important in developing connections between tutor and learners, and also between learners

and learners. Preferring multiple-media aspects to a full text base registered featured positively as maintaining SoB, just as did short videos, activities of differing sorts and all forms of interaction beyond the Virtual Learning Environment. There were differing views of mandatory assessed work to promote engagement ("the stick approach"|) versus engagement in working to learn ("the carrot approach"). Similar views were expressed in respect of discussion board contributions:

- *assessed discussion boards means everyone contributes and the conversation continues*
- *try to apply peer pressure in group projects, by having some sort of (recorded) tele-meetings (or log books or other) in order for all members of the group to equally participate and contribute.*

The 'live' interaction and immediacy of discussion and commentary in Online Collaborate sessions were highly valued. Updates, interesting articles and similar inputs in emailed tutor posts or via the Virtual Learning Environment with were also rated as supportive, with learners feeling that the tutor was always there for them. Learners also valued the creation and use of private spaces within which they could provide assistance to each other in elucidating requirements and content of which formative activity they did not wish their tutors to be aware.

The value of interactive and engaging online activities was summed up by an interviewee in comparing their current online learning experience with a previous one:

- *I had started an on-line TEFL course but this simply consisted of reading text online and completing activities related to it. There were no audio-visual materials, no interaction with other people on the course………..I found it hard to motivate myself to complete the course and gave up.*

Discussions

This emergent study confirmed that the learners definitely believed that a strong SoB had been essential for them and especially so since they were never physically present in the institution. This finding concurs with those reported by Thomas et al. (2014) in increasing the likelihood of learners remaining, and providing them with extra resilience in times of stress or anxiety or simply when coping with issues such as limited access to expected resources like journals or inaccurate, limited or late feedback.

As Carruthers Thomas suggests, SoB is "*negotiated in the momentary, the imaginary and the private* " (2019, p.76). This work identifies the complexity of the 'SoB feeling' as being multi-faceted, fluctuating, ephemeral in nature and differing for learners according to context of studies, individual need and self-efficacy. This was particularly evident to the researchers than when one interviewee reported two acute examples of lack of support and direction in the initial enrolment, and academic mismanagement of assessment. Yet the overall tenor of the interview was of a distinctly positive course experience and a strong overall SoB.

This study identified that interactions with tutors and peers and professional services is critical in the development and maintenance of SoB. Learners value being known by their tutors "*as individuals rather than reference numbers*" and to have a relationship with them. The tutor guides learners through their studies and signposts potential routes forward for them. These interactions help learners to feel that they matter, that their presence would be missed and that they are valued. Consequently, learners with a strong SoB were forgiving of problems since they had formed the impression of a close knit community with a strong inherent SoB. This echoes O'Keeffe's (2013) finding with campus-based learners that "*the*

creation of a caring, supportive and welcoming environment within the university is critical in creating a sense of belonging." (p.605)

The researchers expected to confirm the contribution to the development of a strong sense of SoB of tutors' planning for and facilitating of structured activities, but were somewhat surprised by the substantial influence of peers on SoB. Comments such as "*If I do not feel I know the other learners I do not feel I belong*" were common. There was a strong belief that having relationships with others following the same programme, being part of a community, helped understandings about the programme and provided a better learning experience. As one learner explained, "*peers are the community that I am working within and therefore all interaction with them provides the belonging*". This finding aligns with Koole & Parchoma's (2013) description of belonging in online learning communities as an iterative process of dialogue and exchange with other members; but it is contrary to the findings of Australian researchers in Australia who reported that many online learners expected to be 'lone wolves' working individually and in isolation from their peers (Brown et al., 2015).

The ethos of the provided online space clearly impacted on learners' SoB. For instance, as identified by participants in Thomas et al.'s study in 2014, synchronous meetings, were particularly popular in fostering a connection with others. Online interactions were seen as levelling the playing field, as they minimised differences in culture/gender/discipline which can inhibit group activities and SoB. As one student noted:

— *it was possible to feel a sense of belonging and community in both the larger and smaller group, regardless of culture, professional status or professional backgrounds.*

Unsurprisingly, the level, timeliness and quality of support was judged essential in promoting SoB. Brief and friendly interactions, and guidance from tutors and peers, helped learners feel more

comfortable in the online space and more confident in their abilities. Learners described tutors as being "*a continual presence during online discussions and through short videos*", helping to make the alien environment less impersonal and a welcoming place to go for help and guidance.

Recommendations for tutors

The study's final supplementary research question concerned the role of the tutor in promoting an online learner's SoB. It emerged that a supportive, facilitative tutor will certainly help learners to develop and maintain a SoB throughout their studies. Other researchers have noted the importance in traditional settings of a tutor who is caring, enthusiastic and can be trusted (Hoffman et al. 2002-2003, Strayhorn, 2012) all of which was emphasised particularly by the online learners in this study. The early introductions to the programme team through short videos and later in synchronous sessions seem to have been essential in building bridges and developing trusting, nurturing relationships.

Community and peers were key features in developing SoB for the participants. The early opportunities in online discussions for learners to introduce themselves and to share relevant experiences and reasons for undertaking this study promoted group formation and the development of peer support networks. Collaborative activities in which learners worked, for example, to develop an artefact linked closely to the assessment, developed peer relationships and promoted feelings of being accepted, mattering and being valued.

Limitations of this Study

This report presents findings from the first stages of an on-going study into SoB. The work involved a small sample in particular circumstances. However, the early findings have already helped the

authors to gain and provide sufficient insights into SoB in their online educational space to inform their next action research studies. The combined data-collection tools - a survey followed by an interview - have worked well in the quality of the data generated and led to the identification of three themes. The volunteer interviewees provided in 45-minute interviews a depth of insight of some of the matters already identified in more general terms in the questionnaire responses.

Although the findings have shown the importance of context, all data generated has been linked to particular modules and tutors. This action-researching work now needs to be taken forward to researched comparisons with learners in contrasting subjects in different cultures, to ascertain if there are aspects of the SoB in these settings which share common features, and also of course if there are significant and hence thought-provoking differences.

Conclusions

Little is known in detail about the impact on learning SoB on the part of online learners who are engaging in collaborative, community-based learning; and even less about how institutions and tutors promote it. Much published work has understandably dwelt on the importance of SoB for learners who are considered to be at risk of non-completion (O'Keefe, 2013). The next priority is surely to identify its impact on online learning and the learning experience. For online learners in a new and potentially alienating environment, remote from the physical campus and separated physically from their peers, would seem to be especially in need of SoB. The students in this study certainly valued tutors who attempted to create SoB in their studies. It would seem that, for some at least, SoB may create more resilience, more connection to their studies, their peers and their tutors and assist online learners to stay the course and indeed to flourish.

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