

## **Instructor Authenticity in Mediating a Sense of Online Community**

**by**

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*Marco Polo describes a bridge, stone by stone. 'But which is the stone that supports the bridge?' Kublai Khan asks. 'The bridge is not supported by one stone or another,' Marco answers, 'but by the line of the arch that they form.' Kublai Khan remains silent, reflecting. Then he adds: 'Why do you speak to me of the stones? It is only the arch that matters to me.' Polo answers: 'Without stones there is no arch.'*

Calvino (1997, p. 82).

### **Abstract**

Distanced learning poses challenges for all participants. Creation of a sense of learning community in online environments can reduce student isolation, attrition, and sense of disconnect with educational institution. It can also increase motivation, enrich the learning environment, and build social capital. Based on an analysis of the communities of practice literature, it was decided to create a sense of community in an Introduction to Business and Management course (BMGT 110) offered by UMUC Europe. It was also decided to select course structure, pedagogic strategy, and online interaction that allowed the instructor deliver a presentation of self grounded in authenticity. The briefly reviewing the relevant literatures, the paper examines strategies employed in the deliver of the course, and analyzes participant responses to questions about community and instructor authenticity. Findings suggest that instructor authenticity was at least a modifying element in the creation of what students recognized as a sense of community.

### **Introduction**

Distant learning may, in many senses, be regarded as an oxymoron. Distant learning is not simply a displacement of learners; it is the displacement of the learning process – distant learning is always distanced learning, and in that distancing there is always the reduction of social engagement. The construction of knowledge is essentially a social activity requiring language, sociocultural interaction, and ways of making comparative assessments of knowledge gained. While there is obviously a psychological and cogitative interiority, learning is embedded in a social matrix and it is through that matrix that we communicate, share, and makes sense of what has been learned.

In its earliest forms, the term distant learning was applied to contexts when the educational institution operated at a distance from enrolled students: distant referred to geographic displacement. The implied emphasis on displacement between students and institution has more recently shifted as the impact on the educational process in which distant learners is better appreciated. Distant learning is increasingly understood in a more problematically sense, as distanced learners engaged in an isolated process of creating new knowledge. Distanced learners have to create and manage their own

learning environments; distanced learners are displaced from other learners – in time and in space – and such a displacement challenges notions of a community of learning, of a social dimension in the learning process, and of the active co-creation of knowledge.

This article is based on a consideration of the theoretical challenge and personal practice of attempts to create a social dimension, admittedly tenuous – a sense of community – within an online course. The online course is Introduction to Business and Management (BMGT 110), conducted on the WebTycho platform at the UMUC, European Division and this article is written with members of the UMUC distanced education collegiate community in mind: readers familiar with the current version of that platform and familiar with online issues and practice.

If a sense of community within an online learning environment is deemed desirable, then efforts must be made to create that sense among participants. The opportunity and challenge fall initially on the instructor who has the chance to construct, deliver, manage, and evaluate the online environment. The following review of one such attempt to create and sustain community begins with a consideration of different aspects and appreciations of community in learning, with particular regard to the education of business majors and online students. While there are many suggestions regarding the creation of social dynamics in online settings, this paper considers the role of instructor authenticity in initiating a sense of relatedness among participants. After a general discussion of authenticity, there is a description of strategies and techniques used in an online presentation of BMGT 110 to introduce and encourage authentic engagement. Student feedback and comments on sense of community are presented and a review of student feedback is used to underscore remaining challenges, opportunities, and future directions in making the online learning environment one that acknowledges, encourages, and develops a social dimension.

### **Social Learning and Community Benefit**

Social context has often been seen as a uniquely significant factor in the production of knowledge. In the varied, but complementary, works of Albert Bandura (Bandura, 1976), Jean Lave (Lave & Wenger, 1991), and Etienne Wenger (Wenger 1998a, 1998b), social context is identified as one of the primary forces in shaping the way in which learning occurs, in making learning experiences salient, and in reinforcing changed behavior. While such theories isolate and privilege social components, it is clear that there are many other factors that define and sustain learning environments. Certainly, contemporary social theories of learning are more inclusive and sensitive to the non-social factors that shape and moderate learning (Hughes, 2004) and are distinguish from more exclusive theory of social learning that privileges social setting (Wenger, 2004, p. 4).

Social connectivity and an emerging sense of community are enhanced significantly by participant interaction and by the length of engagement, which is characteristically short for an academic course whether face-to-face and distanced. Before examining how

social interaction and a sense of community can be enhanced, it is necessary to stress the positive and useful outcomes generally attributed to learning within a social sense. These include an enrichment of the learning environment; a reduction of student isolation effects and consequences; a sense of legitimate peripheral participation for those who are looking towards professional or career trajectories; and, the creation and refinement of social and human capital.

#### *Enriched learning environments*

A social component of the learning process can provide learners with an enriched environment for exploration of newly gained knowledge (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004), experimentation with communication (Nagda, 2006), coping with personal doubt and subject matter ambiguity, consideration of deep learning approaches (Chapman, Ramondt & Smiley, 2005), elaboration of theoretical and personal narratives, and inclusion in a broader sense-making discourse (Wiessner, Chapman, Berardinelli & Jones, 2006). Learning environments are made potentially more interesting, more engaging, and more accessible to participants. Such environments are also more open to diversity and creativity when they contain a social element that allows participants to feel connected with others (Conrad, 2002).

#### *Reduction of isolation effects*

Distanced learners are often isolated and solitary learners. For some, this is a preferred way of learning; for others it is perceived as a difficulty. As adult learners, online students have to demonstrate commitment to learning objectives and the ability to manage time, effort, and motivation in achieving those learning goals. This can be difficult and stressful for many. Perceived social inclusion can reduce the sense of isolation and detachment often experienced by distanced and isolated learners, many of whom might be first time college students, returning to college after a long absence, or seriously conflicted about the utility of higher education and fear of failing (Lee & Chan, 2007). Perceived communal inclusion may also provide students with mutual support; increased self-esteem; serve to reevaluate educational goals; stimulate in-group comparisons; reduce stress and anxiety; and increased levels of motivation (Aragon, 2003). At the macro level, reduced isolation and a developing communal sense is most likely a significant factor in decreasing course attrition and increasing overall student retention rate (DiRamio & Wolverton, 2006).

#### *Legitimate peripheral participation*

Social contexts in academic settings may also emphasize possible bridges between current study and anticipated future, especially where that future is considered to be organizational membership or professional, or vocational, engagement (Wenger 1998a, 1998b). Distanced learners are distanced not only from the academic community of their institute of higher learning: they are also distanced from those who are engaged in communities of practice. This is particularly so with business students, who strive to acquire competencies but need the reassurance that such competencies are a legitimate

part of their future community of professional practice. Participants may come to appreciate that they are being initiated into knowledge that will extend beyond the college into future professional interest and practice. They may also come to appreciate that they are connected through this pathway with their peers.

### *Social and human capital creation*

Social context provides the matrix for the creation of social and human capital (Portes, 1998). Social capital has proved a popular, albeit somewhat illusive, concept. While its nature and function might differ contextually, Coleman (1990) notes two characteristics common to all forms of social capital: "... they all consist of some aspect of social structure, and they facilitate certain actions of individuals who are within the structure (p. 303)."

Social capital refers to the mutual trust, norms of reciprocity, and access to human capital that potentially come into play within social networks. These attributes are recognized and valued by students and alumni as evidenced in their use of social and professional networking, mutual association, and patterns of exchange that take place within these networks. Social capital can be created among students and faculty when they sense that there is a common commitment to teaching and learning (Cheng, 2004). Encouraging social and human capital formation in undergraduate learning systems may well predispose students to develop productive networks in subsequent professions and careers. Distanced students are challenged to belong to such networks not because of a lack of technical connectivity but by the absence of a sense that such networks can extend beyond the purely recreational or superficially social.

## **Structural and Dynamics of Online Communities**

Much of the understanding of communities in learning contexts has come from individuals entering, learning, and being socialized into informal groupings, professions, and vocations. Such "communities of practice" (Wenger 1998a, 1998b) exist when a novice is seen as having legitimacy to enter into the practice of the group. Originally, communities of practice almost inevitably described situations where novice and practitioner were physically co-located (Seely Brown & Duguid, 1991); however, similar social dynamics can also be seen where group members are physically, or temporally, separated and never meet (Conkar, Noyes & Kimble, 1999). Such virtual communities of practice develop in internationally distributed work teams, where permanently distanced members engage cooperatively on research or innovation problems (Hildreth & Kimble, 2000; and Wiredu, 2007).

The creation of any sense of community is challenged by the degree of common social interaction and the time that the group remains together. In learning situations where a face-to-face delivery mode is employed, there are limits on the nature, degree of authenticity, intensity, and longevity of an emergent sense of community. The result is

seen as a “bounded community” (Wilson et al, 2004. p.2), “learning community within a curriculum framework – bounded by the expectations inducing participation, but also by the timeframe of a typical course.”

Communities of practice and bounded communities have three underpinning dimensions, which must be addressed in any effort to create a community (Wenger, 1998a, p. 73): joint enterprise, shared repertoires, and mutual engagement.

#### *Joint enterprise*

Joint enterprise exists when students recognize a compelling purpose and commonality in the tasks in which they engaged. They perceive interlocking roles and scripts for their actions. They also see possibilities for social engagement rather than for an association with a collectivity of individuals. There is an element of mutual recognition and accountability. While individual participants might be working on specific pieces, they appreciate that these separate parts parallel, or to some extent overlap, the work of other participants.

#### *Shared repertoire*

Participants recognize common access to resources and ways of completing tasks. In a dramaturgical sense, there is open access to roles, scripts, stories, acts, performances, and measures of critical appreciation. Members have shared expectations as to tools, procedures, and anticipated results. They have, in that sense, a commonly understood and articulated language that allows them to communicate and appreciate the presence and contribution of the other.

#### *Mutual engagement*

Participants sense a mutuality not simply in performing roles and producing outcomes but in relating to other participants; in establishing and relying on trust; in maintaining mutual confidence; and, in the recognition and maintenance of social cohesiveness and belonging. Participants recognize that there is something that binds them, however temporarily and however tenuously, apart from the centrality of the designated task.

Based on these elements and the comprehensive analysis of online communities by Stacey Ludwig-Hardman (2003), Wilson et al (2004) formulated a model that identified a set of interlocking components that can serve both to create an online community and to measure the extent to which participants recognize community. Their model identified seven components: shared goals; safe and supportive conditions; community identity; collaboration; respectful inclusion; progressive discourse towards knowledge building; and mutual approbation. These components provide an instructive framework for establishing and analyzing the extent of community perception within an online context.

### **What is Instructor Authenticity?**

In designing an online environment – and hopefully one in which a sense of community can develop – the instructor is inevitably the initial formulator and implementer of a pedagogic strategy. Sometimes that strategy is clearly developed and coherently implemented: sometimes it is not. Sometimes the strategy seeks to create and sustain community: sometimes it ignores or fails to adequately engage with such a challenge or opportunity. In all cases, however, the dynamics that result within a learning environment are a consequence of the instructor's pedagogic strategy, its implementation, subsequent in-process adjustments, and ongoing mediation.

In online environments, behaviors that suggest psychological immediacy and social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) have been associated with increased levels of participant attitude, motivation, and satisfaction (Conway, Easton & Schmidt, 2005; Richmond & McCroskey, 2000). Social presence and psychological immediacy signal to online participants that they have the opportunity to engage with another person using the provided instructional technology: the other is regarded as real and responsive. While attention has often focused on the quantitative measurement of social presence, another critical aspect is its quality. The suggestion in this paper is that participants do not rate social presence in a binary fashion – present or absent – but that they attempt to uncover the nature and quality of the others that constitute social presence, trying to develop a sense of the psychological dimensions of the other.

It seems inevitable that in any attempt to create, or to recognize, social presence there is also a process of trying to communicate and interpret presentations of self. Through the creation and management of the WebTycho environment, through the selection, the implementation of pedagogic strategy, and through attempts to engender social presence online, it is the instructor who initially sets and determines an appropriate presentation of self. Considering that most BMGT 110 cohorts comprise adult learners, often with considerable experience and responsibility in their military duties, and taking into account the instructor's previous experience with creating an online presence, the appropriate presentation of self in this present research seemed to be “authenticity”. Patricia Cranton (2001) defines authenticity as, “the expression of the genuine self”.

With authenticity there is a presumed process of maturation, a sense of changed perspective, and a developing confidence in self and in others. Generally, those who teach in higher education are not trained in adult education and engage in teaching in ways that they intuitively recall from their own educational experiences. While neither intuitive nor obvious, reflective practice and a critical consideration of experience often lead to faculty becoming more authentic in their lives and in their instruction. Displays of authenticity are frequently attributed to more experienced faculty members who have engaged in a positive and considered way with the educational process and the fate of their students. This career convergence towards authenticity is often revealed in the sequential self-narratives and longitudinal studies of faculty members (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Cranton, 2007; and Cranton & Carusetta, 2004)

Patricia Cranton's work, originally developed from a grounded theory analysis of a range of teaching experiences in adult education and which reflects many themes in the preexisting authenticity literature, views authenticity as having four interrelated components: genuineness, authenticity, encouraging authenticity in others, and leading a critical life.

### *Genuineness*

Genuineness is seen in terms of self-awareness, where the learner recognizes learning as a potentially transformative process allowing for the critically reappraise and examine previously assimilated beliefs, values, and assumptions. This provides the opportunity to become more open, flexible, considerate, and permeable (Mezirow, 2000).

### *Authenticity*

Authenticity is viewed as a demonstrated consistency and congruency between values and actions (Brookfield, 1997). The instructor is perceived as having genuinely embraced the subject material, or as having subjected it to at least as critical review as any other adult learner. There is a sense that the educator is actively looking for questions and answers, and neither presumes to possess them nor wishes to communicate them in a passive, unquestioned, or uncritical manner. This might also be recognized in terms of a behavioral consistency that deliberately balances confidence and credibility with a presentation of openness and critical sensitivity (Brookfield, 1997), or it might be evidenced in an articulated awareness of limitations (Palmer, 2000). Authentic educators have a deep awareness of subject matter and bring that knowledge and themselves to the instructional context.

### *Encouraging authenticity in others*

Cranton (2001) notes that authentic educators usually have the goal of sharing and helping their students and seeking to cultivate and nurture authenticity in students and peers. Perhaps, this can be thought of more as an ongoing process than a terminal goal. As Jarvis notes (1992), "teachers learn and grow together with their students (p. 114)." The process of learning is understood to be a process of exchange, dialogue, sharing, and mutual discovery. These transactions are seen to take place within a social context. They are also considered to be exchanges between authentic actors, or at least actors trying to develop authenticity.

### *Leading a critical life*

For the authentic educator the critical life parallels the Jungian construct of "individuation", which is the existentialist appreciation that we are part of – as well as being apart from – our ambient social collective (Dirkx, 2000). This element may well underpin the other facets of authenticity, which can be seen as expressions of the educator's growing sense of authenticity and desire to reformulate practice, recast

educational encounter, and recreate learning environments in terms consistent with a progressively developing sense of authenticity. In the context of this paper, individuality is not understood as antithetical to community building; rather, individual expression of identity may allow for a more securely nuanced negotiation of social inclusion and for a more reflective appreciation of the value of community.

### **Methodology: Pedagogic Strategy and Classroom Management**

A section of an online course, BMGT 110 (Introduction to Business and Management) offered as a WebTycho option by UMUC Europe, was used to examine how instructor authenticity might moderate a sense of community online. Definitions of online community were suggested by the model proposed by Wilson et al (2004), which identified a number of components: shared goals; safe and supportive conditions; community identity; collaboration; respectful inclusion; progressive discourse towards knowledge building; and mutual approbation. Authenticity was understood in terms of the work of Cranton and associates (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Cranton, 2007; and Cranton & Carusetta, 2004)

The creation of authenticity was a pervasive goal in the delivery of interaction and learning within the WebTycho environment; however, the follow specific vehicles were used as strategic devices to initiate and sustain authentic communication:

- *Course Participant Survey.* At the outset of the course, participants were asked to complete a CPS that collected information about skills, competency, and online experience. The survey also opened discussion on perception of the course, feelings about beginning the course. It also allowed students to contribute additional information that they felt was relevant. The CPS was sent via the student assignment folder, awarded a nominal participation grade, and commented on individually. Comments recognized issues, concerns, and in many instances fears of participants. The CPS is shown in Appendix A.
- *Faculty biography.* A standard online feature that allows for an authentic and engaged presentation of self.
- *Conference: Executive Suite.* Standard in most online courses is a social space that allows students to ask questions and share information not directly related to the learning material. Such social spaces can produce a venue and atmosphere for exchange, interest, and mutual support. While it is instructor-structured in the first few weeks, it is then set up as “Respond and Write”, allowing for topics to be created by students. The name reflects the business nature of the course, and a positive anticipated career trajectory.

- *Forum: Introduce Yourself.* Introductory forums are standard in online course. They provide a place for students to make a presentation of self often in a limited, reserved, or guarded manner. Each contribution was responded to individually, using a standard format greeting but picking out and highlighting part of the student's introduction and commenting on it in a manner that was considered to demonstrate authentic interest.
- *Forum: Select Class Motto.* Commonly seen as "ice breakers", such forums do much more and can be used to demonstrate values, objectives, and trends in the online environment. Motto selection and advocacy demonstrate values of the student and their understanding of what the anticipated learning experience might be like.
- *Forum: Karaoke Request.* Often characterized as a trivial ice-breaking activity, it actually provides another place for deeper and more nuanced presentation of self. Students were asked to select a song, to quote a few lines that they considered most meaningful in the lyrics, and to guess the instructor's song. Instructor responses help consolidate, reshape, and define images presented.
- *Conference: Adult Learners Strategies and Styles.* Creation of a community can coalesce around different nuclei: joint exploration of the subject matter, or the commonality of adult distanced learners. While the former is the more obvious, the latter is also relevant and can be used to consolidate exploration of subject matter. Students see themselves as new to distanced learning yet overlook the fact that all distanced learners face similar challenges. Two or three forums were opened in the first few weeks of the course providing students with adult learner and distanced learner sites, self-evaluation tests, and allowing them to share and explore these results. Students were encouraged to discuss their own preferred learning modes and to comment on the posts of others. Instructor response was underpinned by an interest in eliciting thoughtful, respectful, sharing of individual challenges and surprises regarding the learning environment and in translating that into individual and communal strategies for success. Specifically, students were asked to read and respond to:

Strategies for Learning at a Distance, <http://www.uidaho.edu/eo/dist8.html>  
 What's your learning style? <http://www.learning-styles-online.com>

- *Conferences: Professional associations.* In order to present students with a sense of communities of practice and perhaps to begin to identify with them, conferences were placed throughout the course that related to relevant professional bodies and associations connected with various aspects of business. These included:

American Institute of Certified Public Accountants, <http://www.aicpa.org/index.htm>  
 Institute of Management Accountants, <http://www.imanet.org>  
 Society for Human Resource Management, <http://www.shrm.org/>  
 The Chartered Institute of Marketing, <http://www.cim.co.uk/home.aspx>  
 The American Marketing Association, <http://www.marketingpower.com/>

- *Class Announcement.* The instructor used this function to explore current courses material and contemporary economic and business issues function: in essence it was used as a blog. As such, it was another vehicle for demonstrating authenticity in the subject matter and its relevance to prevailing social, economic, and political issues.
- *Conference and exam feedback.* To create a sense of an empathetic and responsive social presence, all feedback to posted comments was done in a timely manner. Wherever possible, direct quotes were taken from a student's response and quoted in the feedback. Students were always addressed individually, using their first or preferred name. Feedback to students poses a critical channel of communication and, as such, can be used to initiate and reinforce authentic performances and presentations of self.

### **Methodology: Data Collection and Treatment**

At the conclusion of the ten-week course, students were asked to consider completing a Research Survey (RS). It was indicated that the completion of the RS was voluntary and that no identifiable information would be communicated to any other party. It was also clearly indicated that non-completion of the RS, or comments and opinions expressed, would affect the student's grade. The RS instrument attempted to capture student reactions on a number of areas, namely: the degree to which a community had been created; extent of mutual approbation and sharing; the perceived role of the instructor; benefit of interaction and mutual sharing; experience of group projects; perceived instructor interaction style; degree of instructor authenticity and interest in authentic presentation; and previous UMUC online course experience.

A qualitative approach was adopted. Specific questions were posed and the participant asked to respond in a sentence or two. While the questions did impose a restrictive a priori data classification, it was hoped that emergent themes might be gathered from an analysis of responses (Adams & Schvaneveldt, 1985; Shaffir & Sebbins, 1991). While open-ended questions would have produced richer information, the aim was to focus on an association of the main variable of the research. It is considered that the RS and population surveyed "shed light on the particular aspect of behavior under investigation" (Cassell & Symon, 1994). Sampling was purposeful, that is restricted to only those who had been active members of the specific online course.

Seventeen responses were collected from the nineteen active students registered in the section (a completion rate of 90%).

An issue that presented itself in designing the RS was the operationalization of what remains a rather fuzzy construct “authentic”. Questions posed in the survey referred to “real, interested, and involved” rather than to “authentic”. Submitted RS (N=17) contained thirteen questions that required either a yes/no response or a short sentence answer.

## Results

This research was exploratory and tentative. It sought to understand the ways in which students perceive online community and presentations of authenticity by their instructor. It is suggested that authenticity in communication and presentation of self is helpful in allowing people to project beyond limited understandings of the other in online environments and in accentuating the common purpose and goals of the collective. Participant responses are shown below. Completed Research Surveys submitted by participants were randomly assigned a distinguishing letter.

*Did you feel you were part of a community?*

All participants (N=17), except one, felt that they were part of a community of people who shared a common objective. Interestingly, the one participant who felt that there was no community considered himself to be “antisocial”. Most felt that the group has coalesced:

[A]. This class really came together as a group. While I think that some of my classmates weren't putting their all into the class, I still felt like those who did really made a huge impact on my understanding.

[B]. I am not a big fan of online classes and I usually have a harder time learning the material; however, in class everyone seemed really open and the environment was fun. It was much easier for me to go to the computer every day when I knew that I would enjoy myself.

[C]. It was like everyone enjoyed interacting with each other.... I have taken a few online classes prior to this one and the professors did not interact nearly as much.... Knowing that the teacher of an online class is always there posting new and interesting bulletins adds an extra feeling of a more realistic community online.

Some recognized the community sense but also appreciated that they could either opt in or out as they wished:

[D]. I was able to do my work and study when I needed to... but if I needed help or had an opinion it could be shared.

*Did you feel that information was shared among the participants?*

All participants (N=17) said that they did believe that such sharing took place. Even the self-styled “antisocial” participant recognized that others could share, commenting:

[E]. I thought that everyone had a story or could have related to a situation and I had nothing to offer.

Most felt that they too could share and participate:

[F]. People had the chance to express their ideas and their own opinions to given topics.

[C]. The importance of responding to each other was emphasized each week. I think that all the students would have still replied to each other’s work but not as much as if it hadn’t been assigned. Responding to different students and reading their information and opinions helped me learn and retain the subjects.

Others recognized that sharing ideas resulted in different perspectives:

[G]. Replying to other’s helped us see different ways of thinking

[A]. There were several times when one of us had an entirely different outlook on the same information had we not shared that insight among ourselves it would have been lost.

*Did the instructor try to bring people together?*

Again, all participants (N=17) considered that the instructor has tried to create and sustain a community online. Students identified timeliness and concern as part of that effort. They also recognized instructor involvement and energy as significant factors in bringing people together:

[A]. Not only did we comment on each other’s posts but so did the instructor. He took the time to read them all, and there were [*sic*] a ton, and give us his thoughts on them as well. Way to stay involved.

[C]. [His] being active on WebTycho frequently helped a lot. It made me feel as though I had an actual professor and more of a classroom setting instead of being alone and reading information on a computer screen.

[H]. He was very active in the class and commented frequently.

[I]. He did what all great teachers do... he made learning fun.

*Experience and attitudes to collaborative projects?*

This online class, although it sought to create a learning community did not use work groups or collaborative projects. While such collaborative work seems salient in community creation online, it is suggested that it is often perceived by students as unfair and may actually erode proto-social behavior. All participants (N=17), except for two, indicated that they held this view.

Many saw collaborative projects as good in theory but impracticable in a distanced environment, in part due to connectivity issues and scheduling:

[J]. I have experience of group projects. I don't like them and am glad that they were not part of this course. I don't think that an online course is the right venue for a group assignment.

[C]. I would enjoy group projects in a face-to-face class but not in DE... harder to organize because of different time zones and people's schedules.

[K]. [Group projects] are hard for me to contribute to with this wi-fi Internet.

Free-rider opportunities, trust in the ability of other to perform, and concerns that the lack of someone else's effort would impact the participant's grade were all considered significant.

[L]. I do not prefer group projects because my grade is dependent on other people.

[D]. I am glad we don't have them. I don't want to be let down or to let anyone else down.

[M]. Group projects often tend to fall in the laps of the ones who care and the others just skate by on the work of others.

[H]. Group projects over the Internet are a nightmare and should be used very, very rarely.

#### *Significant way in which instructor interacted?*

There were many ways in which participants recognized and evaluated the instructor's social and cognitive presence. Feedback on online conference posts was one issue frequently cited. Here timeliness, engagement, and personalization by using names and quotes from the original response, were all specifically noted:

[N]. By commenting the instructor showed he was reading people's work.

[G]. He always replied to my questions in a timely manner.

[M]. Personally addressing the student for whom the response was intended.

Others identified what were for them other crucial areas of engagement, including the *Executive Suite* conference and the *Karaoke Request*. One emergent theme was that students recognized an attempt to establish a respectful, inquiring, and accepting atmosphere online. This seems to be edging towards recognition and acceptance of authenticity, as picked up in the following responses:

[I]. He was fun, interesting, and just let people be themselves. I don't know if that makes sense but it was like we were all allowed to have fun while learning. I think that can really open people up.

[A]. He started off on the first day with a conference that had absolutely nothing to do with the course content... or so I thought. It started the bonding process right away. I don't know about my classmates, but I found myself wanting to sign on every day to see what was going to happen next! I loved it.

*Did you sense the instructor to be real, interested, and involved?*

All participants (N=17) agreed that the instructor projected authenticity, at least as defined in the question. Almost all of them recognized authenticity from the nature and content of feedback submitted during the course:

[J]. He responded to posts personally and took general interest in any question or response by a student.

[O]. ... the teacher responded to a lot of posts in the conferences... [that] means he actually read and analyzed the content.

[C].... responding to the majority of all students' posts and continuous activity throughout the week.

In a number of cases, authenticity seems to have been understood in a deeper sense and often the words of a participant come close to defining the core of the construct under investigation:

[H]. He was very open about himself and his personal life, so that we can get a picture of who he is and what he is like as a person.

[D]. I liked that he realized that life is very real and could go in many [different] directions and yet that life is real and keeps going as well.

[A]. ... he was very real to me and I felt he was genuinely interested in my thoughts and opinions.

[P]. He responded to our work with a sense of passion and care for the subject.

*Have you encountered real, interested, and involved instructors in prior UMUC courses?*

Of those who had prior online experience, responses were evenly divided.

[A]. I think that all of the UMUC instructors that I have had are definitely working to make the courses real for them and us.

Those who did not find that past online experience had been so positive, particularly in terms of community and authenticity, were more explicit and focused in their objections:

[Q]. Well, it's hard to answer honestly but no. I just took three classes and this [had] by far the most interaction from the instructor.

[C]. No, this class has been a great improvement ... on online courses!

[D]. I had a lot of trouble ... this was one of my easiest online classes because instead of restating what the textbook said it was literally re-taught in a different way.

[I]. I have taken only one other UMUC online courses and it seemed to be the exact opposite of this one. The teacher [in that class] gave her input but it never felt like she was really helping. It felt more like she was only correcting us. I struggled much more in that class.

*To what extent do you feel a real, interested, and involved instructor helps the online process?*

Unanimously, participants agreed that such an instructional style was helpful in their own learning and construction of knowledge. Several thoughts were raised and the predominant one was the difficulty of preserving motivation in online classes and the role of the instructor in providing support, stimulation, and encouragement especially through maintaining contact and providing timely feedback:

[Q] It's very important. Without face time, quick real answers and advice are a necessity in DE.

[N]. The online process is difficult because there is no face time, so to speak; but, with an invested instructor it almost makes you feel part of the class.

[D]. To a great extent ... it is motivating and refreshing. Online classes are not much fun so a teacher can definitely make a difference.

[C]. It's hard to keep motivated in DE. Having a real, interested, and involved instructor helps to motivate students because it gives them a sense of being in a classroom instead of being on the Internet.

[I]. For me, if an instructor is interested in my learning then I will be more interested in it [as well]. It is easier to learn material when you know the teacher will be there to offer support and help.

[R]. When they are able to respond to your comments and push you to think more.

Another theme was that real, interested, and involved instructors were probably more informed and understanding about student limitations and the difficulties they experienced in online learning. Sometimes that was expressed as caring and sharing thoughts and ideas:

[K]. Understanding students' situations... or schedules are hectic and require a lot of flexibility.

[H]. I think that it's important because you feel someone cares about your questions and assignments.

[A]. [They] ... help my online learning process by making themselves accessible to the student and actually sharing their thoughts and ideas.

## Discussion

Distanced education is characterized by displacement not simply from the core educational community but among other learners. This displacement results in a changed dynamic within the learning process and an attenuation of the social context within which learning takes place. A tenuous sense of community can be created and appreciated by online course participants. In the course BMGT 110 under review, participants sensed that they were included in a social network that had many of the characteristics of a community. Responses indicate that there was a perception of joint enterprise, shared repertoires, and mutual engagement. In this preliminary qualitative exploration, there is no convincing way of estimating the perceived strength or longevity of the community that was created.

Similarly, there is no way of ascertaining whether the value of this community experience is sustained, or re-established, in subsequent UMUC online courses. Participants were divided about issues such as perception of subject matter excellence and teaching enthusiasm in other course offerings but were unanimous that this course was exceptional in trying to establish and sustain a sense of community as an educational outcome. Since community is a positive and desired dimension of the educational process, it might be argued that a more sustained and prevailing interest in online community would be more effective at a macro level.

While the usual paradigm in co-locational higher education has been the lecture with the instructor assuming a role of “sage on stage”, adult education generally, and distanced adult education specifically, does not lend itself readily to such a performance. Changed learning dynamics suggest that the “sage on stage” shifts to a “guide on the side” model. Here the instructor has to be more focused in devising appropriate pedagogic strategies and in managing the educational process. The shift from lecturer to instructor parallels, in many significant ways, the transition from teacher to mentor (Herman & Mandell, 2004), with a greater emphasis on student dialogue, interaction, mutuality in accomplishing educational goals, and a greater awareness and responsibility for managing the learning environment. While the distancing of students and instructor, spatially and temporally, might not suggest the ideal setting for a shift in instructional paradigm, distance per se does not preclude initiatives to refocus on individual concerns and the creation of a marginally cohesive social learning environment (Starr-Glass, 2004).

In this class, students not only perceived instructor action but also interpreted it in terms of engagement and eliciting responses in other than subject area matters. Indeed, while the research acknowledges the difficulty of operationalizing instructor authenticity, many participants recognized that the instructor was attempting to project an image of personal openness, a sense of passion, and caring. There was a perceived sense of instructor help, support, and engagement. There was a sense that the instructor was real and that that realness marked the possibility for interaction and relatedness. In particular, participants felt that they were motivated, and included in a learning environment. What also emerged is that the authentic instructor is perceived to be personally and

professionally concerned with members of the learning community as individuals: flexible about extracurricular involvement, individual scheduling matters, and unexpected TDY.

This qualitative research does not demonstrate, and was not designed to show, a conclusive causal relationship between instructor authenticity and social cohesion in an online course. It is recognized that the measurement of social cohesiveness and instructor authenticity requires more clarity; however, this research suggests that instructor assumption of a student-related role is recognized, appreciated, and considered an element in developing a sense of community online. There is evidence for the co-existence of tentative social cohesion within the group and perceived instructor authenticity; such co-existence might suggest a degree of causality or the mediation of authenticity in the development of social cohesion. Further quantitative work conducted with a larger participant sample size might more definitively assess the linkage between the variables. There is an assumption running through the present research, and reinforced by participant observation, that while instructor authenticity is not the only component in the creation of a sense of community it is a powerful element in that mix. Authenticity may also be positively linked with the personality characteristics of instructors who seek to initiate community within their courses.

“Presentation of self” may suggest a dramaturgical emphasis that is too forced and in many ways alien to the construct of authenticity; however, this is not correct. Goffman (1959) understands that social meaning is conveyed and understood through a performance-like interaction with others. Individuals are inevitably recognized, and known within a social context, by their drama-like that can be real, honest, and uncontrived. Authenticity is not simply acquired by maturity, reflection, or desire: it is something that has to be reflected upon and brought consciously into our presentations of self. Authenticity, as a performance style and existentialist goal, becomes increasingly common in the later versions of self-narratives that faculty use and forms a recognizable trajectory in longitudinal studies (Carusetta & Cranton, 2005; Cranton, 2007; and Cranton & Carusetta, 2004). This does not mean that younger faculty, or faculty who have not addressed authenticity in their practice, cannot be encouraged to consider the dynamics of educational engagement from a more committed, authentic perspective.

The transition from “sage to guide”, involves a change in the degree of personal investment in the learning environment, individual student, and resulting community of learning. Subject area competence is not the same as educational competence, although it is often mistaken for it. In effectively managing and motivating online environments, the instructor must remaining sensitive to subject matter competence and technical limits and possibilities, but also to what has been described as “artful teaching” (Bickford, Van Vleck, 1997), with its emphasis on the transient subtleties of performance, engagement, and ongoing instructional and pedagogic refinement.

The more we understand the needs of our distanced students, the more we understand what they think, want, and how they view what we bring to the educational engagement. The more we appreciate the consequences of distanced educational and

appropriate instructional strategies, the more we are able to initiate bridges that allow for the transfer of knowledge and for a greater degree of connectedness with other students, faculty, and institution. Communities of learning benefit all those who are included within them. Community connectedness and relatedness are attenuated by distance but that represents a challenge rather than an irresolvable difficulty. It is online instructor skill, artfulness, and perhaps the authentic presentation of self that can take the collection of units and craft them into a community of learning – the metaphoric transformation of a collection of individual stones to a connecting arch (Calvino, 1997).

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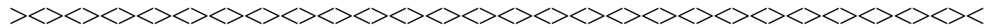
## Appendix A

### CLASS PARTICIPANT SURVEY

It is important that I know something about you, your educational and career goals, and your present level of knowledge and skills. This information which will be treated in confidence and will not shared with others, will help me facilitate this course in a way that will help you fulfill your educational goals and aspirations.

The easiest way of posting this survey is to “cut-and-paste” the answers to the questions below and post them through the student assignment folder.

This assignment is voluntary, confidential, and will neither be graded nor used as part of your participation; however, it will help me to focus my course more specifically on your needs.



Name:

Physical Location:

Current Job/ Work Position:

Academic Major:

- Have you taken previous distance courses using WebTycho?
- If so, which courses have you taken?
- Do you enjoy working with computers and exploring the Internet?
- How would you rate your present word processor/keyboard skill level?
- Do you have a Web site? If so, what is the URL?
- Why are you taking this particular course?
- What do you expect to get out of this course?
- Do you have work experience?
- If so please briefly note positions and responsibilities.
- Do you prefer learning by yourself or with others?
- How much time do you think you will budget for this course per week?
- Do you anticipate any major study interruptions this session -- TDY, exercises, etc?
- How do you feel starting this course?
- What are your long-term career goals?
- What else would you like to share with me?