

“Sense of Classroom Community” Inonline Social Work Education

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Abstract

The study examined sense of community for traditional foundation (BSW) social work students compared to fully online (MSW) foundation students. The literature highlighted mixed findings related to sense of community in the online setting. Along with the mixed results, the literature discussed the controversy of online learning in a “people profession.” The study had a total of 90 participants and utilized the validated Classroom Community Scale by Rovai (2002). The scale examined students’ self-reported sense of connectedness and learning. Along with comparing the two groups, the study examined sense of community related to employment status and age range. The study found there was a significant difference between the traditional face-to-face BSW program and the online MSW program. The MSW group scored higher in both the Connectedness and Learning subscales. As for the findings related to employment and age range, there were no significant differences in either the Connectedness or Learning subscales. The study’s findings were based on a small sample size which cannot be generalized to the social work population as a whole; however, the findings open the door for further research to investigate online social work programs.

“Sense of Classroom Community” in an Online Social Work Program

Technology has brought learning beyond the classroom. Many institutions provide online platforms to meet the needs of traditional and nontraditional learners. As online learning platforms emerge, institutions, instructors, and students are faced with many questions regarding the quality of the online classroom. For many years, instructors have striven to build “social connection” and a sense of classroom community to foster a positive learning outcome (Chickering & Gramson 1987). This social connection is rooted in the social learning theory and seen as an essential tool in the learning process. However, some disciplines are more concerned with the ability to create connection than others. These disciplines expect their students to have high engagement skills which need to be developed for their professional career (CSWE website, n.d.). In addition, studies have found that institutions in higher learning rely on sense of community to increase retention rates (Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Wiest, 2013). Rovai and Jordan (2004) found that a lack of community in students created isolation and increased dropout rates in the programs. With sense of community being an essential factor in the educational setting, researchers have begun to investigate the ability to form this community online. This researcher completed a comparative study of classroom community in a fully-blended online social work program versus a traditional social work program at a nonprofit Catholic institution in Central Florida. This chapter will review current literature from the past 10 years to provide the reader with a comprehensive background, along with highlighting the current findings utilizing Rovai’s Classroom Community Scale (2004). As online education is rapidly changing, the literature was selected from the past 10 years to provide the historical framework for the research while analyzing the current relevant findings related to the research topic in the following areas: theoretical framework, historical theories in education, developing theories in education, conceptual framework, online education compared to face-to-face, challenges in online learning, and social work education online.

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Theoretical Framework

The researcher implemented a positivist approach. Through this approach, the research was grounded in scientific method and design. Auguste Comte (1798–1857) is considered one of the founders of modern sociology. In his studies, he focused on empirical observation that is valid and reliable. The findings from this approach can be used to improve the human condition. Using the positivist approach, the researcher is given a set of scientific methods to utilize. With this approach, the experiential method is noted as ideal; however, this can be a challenge in social science (Creswell, 2009). The positivist approach is based on one positive truth: The root of the approach is based in the observable fact with a scientific approach. This model leans more towards quantitative research approach (Creswell, 2009). Using this approach, the researcher is implementing scientific inquiry in the natural world, which means the variables are clearly defined and a quantifiable tool is implemented in the process. In this research study, the researcher executed a quantitative comparison study of the two groups in order to examine the level of classroom community in both. For the study, the researcher compared the level of classroom community in an online program versus a traditional campus program. The independent variable was the classroom setting, age range, and employment status, while the dependent variable was the level of classroom community. The predominant theories on which the hypotheses for the research were based are student-centered learning theory and environmental theory (Creswell, 2009).

In the student-centered theory, the learning process is centered on the students' needs, not the curriculum. This theory is grounded in Carl Rogers' client-centered approach. In this model, the individual is put at the center of the process. In this learning process, students are guided by self-directed learning and motivation. The students' needs are driving the process. Through this process, students can achieve lifelong learning (Boyle, Hull, Mather, Smith, & Farley, 2009). The student is responsible for his or her own learning. The instructor should ensure the student is able gain knowledge through environment, activities, and materials. This theory assumes that if the student guides the process and the student's needs are met, then learning, development, and actualization will occur (Cubkcu, 2012). Lastly, environmental theory stresses the role of the external environment in the learning process. This theory notes there are multiple external factors which in turn impact the individual development. If the environment provides the elements the individual needs, then growth and development are enhanced (Boyle et al., 2009). This theory highlights the fact that students come from various backgrounds and levels; however, if the educational environment is successful, students will develop the skills and gain knowledge desired (Clover, 2006). Payne (2006) stressed the importance of human agency among students in order to foster the educational environment. By promoting human agency in the learning environment, students are able to have an environment which endorses development for each student. Dillon (2003) further emphasized the role of implicit curriculum in the classroom. The author noted the importance of the educational setting to foster community among students. Student community creates an environment which enhances learning opportunities for all students, regardless of the various levels. In addition, the author noted that various levels among students support an environment for higher order thinking and development. Students are able to gain knowledge and perspectives from peers, not only the instructor and text.

Historical Theories in Education

Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1991) described social learning as cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors which foster a level of learning for the participant. In Bandura's (1969) original work, he identified four learning components: attentiveness, symbolic coding, motor retention processes, and motivation. Bandura's (1991) studies dispelled past theories that observational learning is simply passive; rather, learners make a conscious choice known as human agency, cognitively process activities, and make behavioral changes. According to social learning theory, learning is an active process between all participants. Learning is not viewed in a vacuum; rather, learning is seen as an exchange of ideas and knowledge which results in greater knowledge for all participants (Vygotsky 1978; Wiest, 2012). Instructors are expected to foster and engage students as active participants. This engagement is done through collaborative learning activities which allow students to work in small groups while completing projects and solving problems. Through the collaborative social learning process, students are able to develop skills, think critically, and acquire new knowledge among peers (Bell et al., 2010; Wiest, 2012).

One of the many challenges of collaborative learning is the group process itself. Working in groups is challenging for many participants. In order to form an effective group, members must trust and respect their peers. Building group cohesion is a challenging process.

This process is challenging enough in the traditional face-to-face setting; however, in the online environment with no face-to-face contact, the process is even more difficult (Zastrow, 2009). The authors noted that in order to build rapport and trust, students must build a sense of connection and community. Rovai (2002) developed an Online Classroom Community scale (CCS) to assess the level of community in the online arena. Rovai stressed the importance of student connection to foster learning. With the development of a validated scale, researchers can further investigate the level of community in the online platform (Wiest, 2012).

Developing Education Theory

Engagement Technology Theory

Engagement theory has emerged from the examination of online learning. The theory focuses on the level of student engagement in the learning process. Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) noted that the fundamental principle is that students must be meaningfully engaged in the learning process through challenges, activities, and peer interaction. The theory examines the role of technologies and the ability to promote student engagement through a varied of tools such as: discussion boards, group projects, videos, web tours, live web classrooms, and problem-based learning. These various learning tools through technology promote engagement for all learning styles; however, traditional settings do not always allow the slower thinkers to process and engage in the learning process (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999). There are three basic principles of the engagement theory:

1. Group context (i.e., collaborative teams).
2. Project-based.
3. Real-world focus (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999).

This emerging theory differs from past technology theories where the emphasis has been on the individual learning process or instruction method. Rather, this model focuses on the group collaboration process (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999).

Review of Online vs. Face-to-Face Education

The changes to online learning platforms in higher education have created much controversy among institutions, instructors, and students. There are many discussions around the effectiveness and quality of online education. Many institutions and instructors frown on the transition to online learning platforms (Thompson & YuKu, 2006). Traditionalists view the online learning platform as inferior to the traditional face-to-face classroom. However, there are currently a vast number of institutions delivering online programs. These programs provide opportunities for learners who cannot attend a traditional setting. Many online learners are career professionals with families, military personnel, and/or learners pursuing educational goals to better their career path. Rudestam (2004) reported that, according to Higher Education Policy (2000), distance education increased by 72% from 1994-2004. Today, with the increased use of technology, online programs continue to increase at a steady pace (Library of Congress, n.d.; Wiest, 2012). Institutions are seeing the financial benefits of online platforms and students are able to accomplish learning goals formerly seen as unachievable (Wiest, 2012). This development of online platforms still leaves questions concerning the overall effectiveness of online education. Many researchers have conducted studies to evaluate these concerns. For example, Rudestam (2004); Solimeno, Mebane, Tomai, and Francescato (2008); Robinson and Hulligner (2008); and Bernard et al. (2004) evaluated the online education platform versus the traditional face-to-face classroom setting in a variety of ways. Solimeno et al. evaluated the learning outcomes related to computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL) versus traditional, face-to-face, collaborative learning. Solimeno et al.'s objective was to examine the research in the following areas: efficacy of traditional and CSCL on academic performance for professional graduate level students; impact of teacher characteristics related to student learning; and influence of specific personality traits and/or learning techniques on the outcomes. In the study, there was no significant difference in the learning outcomes for online versus face-to-face students. In addition, the authors reported no significant impact in the learning outcomes in relation to the teachers' characteristics and students' psychological characteristics (Wiest, 2012). Solimeno et al. found that the only significant difference in student learning online versus face-to face was for those students who had a higher level of autonomy. The study found that students with higher autonomy fared better in the online environment compared to their face-to-face cohorts.

In a study conducted by Robinson and Hulligner (2008), 201 undergraduate participants were examined in the area of student engagement in the online classroom versus the traditional classroom. The purpose of the study was to assess the level of student engagement online. The study administered an adapted version of the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE). The authors found that the average score on the NSSE was 5.87. This fell within the range of most traditional institutions reported by Robinson and Hulligner (2008) according to (IUCPR, 2006). The authors reported that online students indicated increased levels of engagement related to first-year and last-year on-campus counterparts. The study found no difference in teacher-student interaction in the online platform (Wiest, 2012). Another study completed by Rudestam (2004) investigated the role of online education in the education and training of applied sciences. The author evaluated the success of online education in the applied fields and examined the online pedagogy in the implementation of practical application skills such as psychotherapy. The study reviewed current models and the overall success. Rudestam reported the benefit of computer technology to teach practical application skills without potential harmful side effects on the participants. Currently, technologically advanced institutions are implementing the use of avatars in psychotherapy application. The avatar can respond to the intervention in a virtual world. The students and instructors are able to assess the skills without putting clients at risk (University of South California website, n.d.; Wiest, 2012). Lastly, Bernard et al. (2004) completed a meta-analysis which found that no single research study could answer the question of online effectiveness.

The authors stressed the need for a full review of the current literature to assess its efficacy. In the meta-analysis, 232 studies were examined. The authors reported findings related to attitudes of online learning versus face-to-face education. In addition, the authors found mixed outcomes in relation to student performance in the online environment. In some studies, the online platform outperformed by as much as 50%, and in other studies, the face-to-face cohorts outperformed by 48% (Bernard et al., 2004). Bernard et al. contributed these differences in the study to classroom design, bias, and weakness in research. Overall, the authors reported none of the studies to be representative samples that could be generalized to the population as a whole. There are noted differences in the diversity of the online setting delivery model, varied learning strategies online, and online pedagogy. The authors stressed the need for further evaluation on the various models (Bernard et al., 2004; Wiest, 2012). These studies have demonstrated the varied outcomes of studies concerning the overall effectiveness of the online format. Some studies have indicated positive learning gains in performance outcomes and student engagement, while others have demonstrated the opposite. As technology continues to evolve, the research must continue to investigate the benefits and limitations. These findings leave the researchers with even more questions on the overall effectiveness of online learning platforms. This lack of clarity on the subject of effectiveness strongly supports the need for further investigation of this research topic (Wiest, 2012).

Social Presence Online

With the growth and development of online learning platforms, institutions are able to recruit students from afar. Students across the globe are afforded the same opportunities as those with close proximity to the institutions (Rovai, 2002). However, there is debate concerning whether or not the online learning environment can foster the same level of community and social presence as traditional face-to-face settings (Mayne & Wu, 2010). Social presence is noted as key to the development of student engagement and classroom community. Many authors have researched the role, implementation, and level of social presence in the online environment. This section will review the findings, benefits, and recommendations. Hostetter and Busch (2013) examined the relationship between social presence and learning outcomes. The study examined 121 student attitudes of social presence online and impact on student outcomes. The authors evaluated three areas of the course to determine the findings. The three areas evaluated were:

1. Self-report of social presence utilizing the social presence survey by Richardson and Swan (2003).
2. Analysis of the online discussion forums.
3. Comparison of social presence and learning outcomes by using the Classroom Assessments Technique (CAT) ratings (Hostetter & Busch, 2013).

The authors found that students with reported higher levels of social presence had significantly higher scores on the CAT. These findings indicate that social presence positively impacts learning outcomes. In addition, students that reported higher levels of social presence scored higher on classroom assignments (Hostetter & Busch, 2013).

The authors recommended that the instructor be mindful of the benefits of increased social presence in the course development process. In addition, Leong (2011) examined the role of social presence and cognitive absorption in the learning environment. The author investigated four areas in the online platform: social presence, cognitive absorption, interest, and student satisfaction.

Leong conducted the study on 294 students in 19 online or blended courses (Business, English, Astronomy, Art, Mathematics, Nursing, and Education) at the University of Hawaii. By utilizing the student satisfaction survey and social presence measurement model, the author found that social presence does not directly impact satisfaction; however, a student's interest does significantly impact social presence and learning outcomes. Leong recommended that social presence, student interest, and learning need to be considered in course development and implementation. Furthermore, Mayne and Wu (2010) examined the role of a pilot study in an online nursing program to foster social presence. The pilot program was developed to specifically integrate teaching techniques which foster high levels of social presence online. The authors highlighted the techniques implemented in the pilot course as:

1. Welcome and icebreaker announcements.
2. Early instructor entry in the course and instructor biographical posted.
3. Helpful links.
4. Group-based learning activities.
5. Online coffee shop for students only.
6. Specific course expectations with rubrics and outlines (Mayne & Wu, 2010).

Using a two-group comparison, the authors found that the pilot course had significantly positive outcomes on student satisfaction and student perception of online learning. The students in the course also indicated that they would continue with the online learning platform, which is an important factor for program retention (Mayne & Wu, 2010). In another study, Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk (2012) highlighted a framework for the development of social presence in the online environment. The authors surveyed 522 participants from three schools to examine the structural framework of the courses and development of social presence. Wei et al. found that in order to develop a course which promotes high levels of social presence, the user must be able to effortlessly engage with interface. This can be done by providing regular social cues throughout the course. Moreover, the authors noted that high levels of social presence significantly impact learning interaction and learning performance by the students (Wei et al., 2012). In addition, Sung and Mayer (2012) identified five facets of social presence in the online environment. By administering the Online Social Presence Questionnaire (OSPQ) in two different online college courses, the authors found that the following elements are linked to a higher level of social presence online:

1. Social respect (receiving timely responses).
2. Social sharing (sharing information and beliefs freely).
3. Open mind (expressing agreement or positive feedback).
4. Social identity (being called by name).
5. Intimacy (sharing personal experiences; Sung & Mayer, 2012).

The authors noted that past research stressed the importance of social presence to foster student satisfaction and learning outcomes; however, the authors indicated that these findings clearly outline to elements of social presence. Sung and Mayer (2012) noted that the development of a strong social presence online can be challenging and frustrating at times. Lastly, Plante and Asselin (2014) examined the best practices for fostering social presence in the online environment by completing a meta-analysis of the literature. In the review, the authors found that the following elements are key components in fostering an online environment with higher levels of social presence:

1. Instructor communication is respectful, positive, encouraging, and timely.
2. Instructors continually encourage and incorporate activities to foster ongoing communication.
3. Instructors promote caring interaction and respectful behaviors online.
4. Instructors provide avenues for peers and instructors to develop deeper relationships in the online environment (Plante & Asselin, 2014).

These studies highlighted the benefits of high levels of social presence in online education. The authors also provided important elements and tools to aid in the development of social presence in the online setting. As noted in many of the studies, higher levels of social presence contribute to higher overall satisfaction, student engagement, learning, and classroom community.

Instructor and Student Perceptions of Presence and Community Online

While many studies have examined the role, elements, and importance of social presence online, other researchers have investigated the overall perceptions and attitudes of social presence online for students and instructors. In one study, Mathieson and Leafman (2013) compared the perceptions of social presence for students and instructors. In the study, the authors utilized the Social Presence Scale created by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997). The authors surveyed all current students and instructors in the online programs at the institution. The study findings indicated that both groups felt a high level of social presence in the online classes; however, the students reported significantly lower levels of social presence than the instructors. Students also reported that the Learning Management System (LMS) was impersonal and challenging to navigate. Students further commented that they had limited desire and time to develop social connection online with peers and instructors. Based on these findings, the authors suggested that further research is needed in the implementation of social media to foster a higher level of social presence and connection. In his study, Morgan (2011) stressed the role of the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework as an essential tool for developing a successful online environment in order to foster classroom community. Morgan explored the role of teaching presence in the COI to fully understand the impact in the online environment, and investigated how the instructors negotiated their teaching presence in the online environment. The study also examined the constraints which influence the instructors' ability to develop teaching presence online. In the qualitative study, the author examined six cases. For each case, the study analyzed instructor interviews, discussion forums, course documents, program director interview, and student course evaluations. The study's findings included:

1. Instructors felt limited by the LMS to foster a strong teaching presence.
2. The online environment did not provide the same level of identity as face-to-face classes.
3. The instructor reported limited ability to develop and influence the course design online, which was not a challenge in the face-to-face classroom (Morgan, 2011).

These challenges highlighted in the six case studies showed the limitations in developing a strong level of teaching presence online. The author noted that awareness of these constraints is beneficial for program directors and course developers for further course planning (Morgan, 2011). Pollard, Minor, and Swanson (2014) investigated the impact of social presence in the online environment based on instructors' framework in the class. The authors surveyed 137 business students at an online university. The authors noted that the independent variables were the level of social presence and teaching, while the dependent variable was level of community based on Rovai's (2002) Classroom Community Scale (CCS). Pollard et al. found that the instructors' level of social presence significantly impacted the level of classroom community in the online learning environment. The authors highlighted the COI framework by Swan and Ice (2010) as a significant tool for the online and blended courses. Pollard et al. identified the three dimensions of COI as:

1. Social presence for the students and instructor, in which the students and instructor are perceived as real.
2. Cognitive presence, defined as the ability to engage students in four phases of learning: triggering, event, exploration, and resolution.
3. Teaching presence, defined as the organization and format of the course, which directly relates to the feel of connectedness in the Classroom Community Scale (Pollard et al., 2014).

Pollard et al. (2014) noted that many studies over the last five years have found that the relationship of the three dimensions in COI has a significant impact on the overall learning experience online for students and instructors. These findings further support past research and note the significance of instructors' social presence, not just the need for students' social presence (Pollard et al., 2014).

Identified Challenges in Online Learning

Even though technology has enabled instructors and students to connect at any place and time, there are many challenges which need to be addressed and discussed when evaluating the effectiveness of the online classroom. Bernard, Rojo de Rubalcava, and St.-Pierre (2000); Thompson and Yu-Ku (2006); Lightner, Doggett, and Whisler (2009); Smith (2010); and Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) discussed the challenges of online learning. One of the primary challenges of the online classroom is technology itself.

Many students are excited with the opportunity to attend class online at their leisure; however, many are surprised at the amount of technological literacy needed to navigate the classroom. As online classrooms become more advanced, the need to prescreen or require prerequisite classes in the classroom platform is needed.

In their study regarding online readiness, Lightner et al. found that the participants agreed that online preparation is needed to be successful. The authors also discussed the importance of online learners to be self-motivated and problem-solvers (Wiest, 2012). The authors noted that there is often no one available to answer immediate questions by students. Students must be able to access resources and find the answers for themselves (Wiest, 2012). This action, in and of itself, suggests a level of critical thinking in the online classroom in order to succeed. Another concern in the online setting is the ability to build group cohesion and trust. In the online classroom, individuals work at different paces. This is an asset to many students, as it provides them the flexibility to complete their work around their busy lives. However, this becomes a challenge when a group of students are working collectively to complete an assigned collaboration project. Thompson and Yu-Ku (2006) reported their findings related to collaborative online learning. The authors found that the biggest challenges learned from the students' reports were communication, problem solving, coordination of the project, conflict resolution, and equity of work or "social loafing" (p. 372). Smith (2010) also reported challenges in online collaboration. The author found that students had more difficulty trusting peers in the online platform, and that these trust issues negatively impacted the group collaboration process. The study found the trust issues to be in two subgroups: trust of their own ability and trust of the ability of their peers. If the group is unable to successfully navigate these trust concerns, the collaborative process is unsuccessful and often leaves the members with a negative impression of the online group collaboration process (Smith, 2010; Wiest, 2012).

Along with these challenges in the online classroom, there are challenges with the negative perception of the online programs. Many professionals in the field have little knowledge about the mechanics of an online classroom. Professionals who graduated more than 15 years ago are unfamiliar with all the online world has to offer in the education arena. In many cases, individuals with online degrees do not receive the same respect as those with a traditional degree (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). Connolly and Diepenbrock (2011) found that students in a graduate program for student affairs have a negative perception of online learning in the professional setting. Students do not feel that online platforms provide them with the same quality education as the traditional classroom. The authors further reported that professionals hiring individuals in the field are less likely to hire someone with an online degree versus a traditional college degree. The findings were overwhelming, with 76% of participants reporting that online programs were not equivalent to a traditional classroom program (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011, p. 83; Wiest, 2012). Specifically, with respect to personal interaction, many of the participants did not believe the online setting could replicate the same collaborative learning opportunities as the face-to-face setting. Participants further reported that they did not believe the online setting could effectively prepare them for a field which requires a large degree of daily social interaction (Connolly & Diepenbrock, 2011). These concerns of perception are important to take into consideration with a discipline that entails a significant amount of personal interaction (Wiest, 2012). Lastly, with all these challenges addressed, many of the studies gave recommendations to aid in overcoming the challenges. Bernard et al. (2000) reviewed the benefits of online learning, but stressed the need for the following to be successful: preparing for collaboration, developing a sense of community, encouraging true collaboration, and using technology effectively. Smith (2010) noted the importance for instructors to effectively facilitate the online group collaboration process. The author stressed the need for the instructor to help increase positive communication and problem solving in the online setting. Along with the instructor's role in facilitating, it is important for him or her to build group cohesion through ice breaker activities and team building activities (Wiest, 2012; Zastrow, 2009). Many challenges exist in the online classroom. These challenges must be taken into consideration when evaluating an online platform for overall effectiveness. Specifically, these challenges highlight the barriers which impede group collaboration and a strong sense of community in the classroom. However, as with any challenges, there are ways to overcome the barriers through planning, education, and the proper tools. Further assessment of the emerging online classroom can evaluate whether these challenges are being met (Wiest, 2012).

Evaluation of Classroom Community Online

McMilliam and Chavis (1986) and Rovai (2002) defined sense of classroom community as the feeling that members have a belonging; that members matter to one another in the group; and that members' needs will be met through the commitment of being together in the learning process.

Utilizing this definition, Rovai developed an online classroom community scale. Rovai developed an Online Classroom Community scale to assess the level of community in the online arena. Rovai stressed the importance of student connection to foster learning. With the development of a validated scale, researchers can further investigate the level of community in the online platform. For example, Drouin (2008), Ni and Aust (2008), Rabe-Hemp et al. (2009), Exter et al. (2009), and Drouin and Vartanian (2010) all evaluated the concept of "sense of community" in the online classroom versus the face-to-face setting. Exter et al. (2009) conducted research using the Rovai scale to assess the level of community in a totally online program. The investigators researched distance learning for master's level students versus residential master's level students (Wiest, 2012). In the study, the investigators found no significant difference in the level of sense of community between the two groups. Students in both groups reported similar interaction with the instructors and satisfaction with the instructors. However, there was one noted difference between the two groups, which involved student interaction outside the classroom. Residential students noted increased opportunities to socially interact outside the classroom, which was partly due to the geographic closeness of students to one another and campus extracurricular activities (Exter et al., 2009). Based on this discovery, Exter et al. gave recommendations on ways to enhance outside interaction online. Among these recommendations were: teleconferencing, Skype, mentoring programs, and weekend seminars on campus (Wiest, 2012).

In contrast, Drouin and Vartanian (2010) conducted research comparing face-to-face undergrad students to online undergrads in the psychology discipline. In the study, the authors found that the face-to-face students reported a greater connection than their online counterparts. The participants reported that face-to-face students had greater opportunities to socially interact and communicate in and out of the classroom with peers and instructors. These findings differed from those of Drouin's (2008) earlier study. Drouin researched the sense of community related to student satisfaction and achievement. The author found that students reported greater sense of community when they had more opportunities to interact with peers and instructors. The study did not find any significant correlation between sense of community and achievement (Drouin, 2008; Wiest, 2012). With these studies, common themes emerge regarding greater social interaction between face-to-face students versus online students. Another study by Rabe-Hemp et al. (2009) found that students in the online environment reported higher levels of involvement in classroom discussion. Students had more time to analyze the topic, critically think, and integrate textbook knowledge into their responses (Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009). This researcher has observed similar outcomes in the online setting versus the traditional face-to-face classroom. In the traditional setting, students are given questions, and many times their responses are opinion based and not supported by empirical research. However, in the online platform, students have more time to critically respond, collaborate, and empirically support in their responses (Wiest, 2012). In addition, Hege (2011) noted the importance for the online learning environment to provide a platform for learning and vibrant virtual community. The author stressed the need for the online environment to foster student engagement and community to aid students in reaching the learning objectives. The author highlighted the following teaching strategies which foster student engagement in the virtual classroom:

1. Dedicating the first class to review of expectation, course materials, syllabus, assignments, ground rules for building trust and respect, and engaging ice breakers.
2. Utilizing video introductions for the students as rapport building strategy.
3. Imbedding weekly blogging, tweeting, or other forms of social media to keep students actively engaged.
4. Modifying the grounded version of the course, which is necessary before teaching the course online. The online course needs to be tailored to the online setting.
5. Using social media to create group platforms for engagement.
6. Implementing regularly scheduled virtual office hours (Hege, 2011).

The author noted that these techniques promote a high level of social presence and develop a strong level of classroom community in the online environment. In doing so, students reported higher satisfaction with the course and instruction (Hege, 2011).

In a study similar to Hege (2011), Yang and Liu (2008) identified a sound approach to developing a strong sense of classroom community in text-based computer-mediated courses. The authors coined the techniques as STEP. The STEP model includes four interlocking components which are:

1. Scaffolding before embarking on new learning.

2. Transaction during the learning process.
3. Formative and summative evaluation in the learning process.
4. Final presentations online of the learning outcomes.

The authors conducted a study on the implementation of these STEP techniques in a fully online course and a blended course. The study utilized Rovai's (2002) Classroom Community Scale to evaluate and compare the level of community based on the STEP techniques. Yang and Liu (2008) found that both groups reported strong feelings toward cohesiveness, community spirit, trust, interdependence, and learning gained. There was one significant difference in the online classroom versus the blended setting, which was that the blended platform had a stronger report of connection than the fully online platform (Yang & Liu, 2008). Furthermore, Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) investigated the elements which foster Sense of Community (SoC) according to Rovia's (2002) scale. The authors surveyed 381 students across graduate online disciplines and found that learner-to-learner interactions had the most significance in fostering SoC. The activities which allowed these interactions were: introductions, collaborative group projects, sharing personal experiences, online discussion, and resource sharing. While sharing of personal resources was not conducted often in the study, it yielded the higher level of importance in developing SoC (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). These interactions provide a set of tools to implement in the online process to foster SoC in graduate students (Shackelford & Maxwell, 2012). Likewise, Rovia and Jordan (2004) completed a causal-comparison study on traditional, blended, and fully online graduate education students. The authors utilized the Classroom Community Scale (CCS) as a pre- and posttest evaluation tool in all three platforms. The study found no significant difference in the traditional and fully online platform; however, there was a significant difference in the level of community in the blended learning environment. The findings suggest that the blended learning platform is able to meet the needs of various leveling styles, students' personalities, and students' relational desires (Rovia & Jordan, 2004).

Lastly, Ni and Aust, (2008) completed a study related to classroom community for online students in undergraduate and graduate students. The authors found higher classroom community in the groups where teachers utilized a student-centered model. Along with a student-centered model, teachers who demonstrated high engagement skills in the online platform fostered a sense of classroom community. The groups which reported higher levels of classroom community noted greater overall satisfaction in the learning process (Ni & Aust, 2008). These studies demonstrate the ability for online platforms to build classroom satisfaction. However, the studies have mixed outcomes regarding the ability to build the same social connection as the face-to-face environment. Drouin and Vartanian (2010) and Exter et al. (2009) both gave recommendations for developing this connection online. Among these recommendations were: mentoring programs; face-to-face, day-long seminars occurring yearly; integrating Skype or teleconferencing; and instructors with high level of proficiency in technology (Wiest, 2012).

Social Work Education Online

Even though online education has been used for over 15 years in certain disciplines, online learning is not as prevalent in the social work field. However, with the emerging use of online education in the applied science arena, social work educators are exploring the online platform for their educational programs. For instance, Dalton (2001) conducted a study with four comparison groups in an MSW social work program. Two groups were face-to-face and two groups were online. In the study, the author examined the learning outcomes from a pre/posttest in a macro social class. The author found no significant difference in the learning outcomes for the four groups. In addition, Siebert et al. (2006) evaluated the implementation of online education in clinical social work classes. The authors reported positive findings in relation to the traditional students. According to the study, online students had increased knowledge in the subareas and had similar results on end of the course assessment versus the face-to-face students. However, there was one noted difference in relation to instructor accessibility. Face-to-face students reported greater interaction with the instructor than online students (Wiest, 2012). However, in another study, Wilke and Vinton (2006) found there were significantly lower outcomes in a comparison study of online versus face-to-face social work students. The study found that the online students demonstrated lower overall rating in the field education related to case management, professional identification, professional communication, ethical consideration, and group and individual counseling skills (Wiest, 2012). Another study by Vermon et al. (2009) examined the effectiveness of the online social work classroom. The authors discussed student interaction emerging with technology. The report highlighted the benefit of online education in the field of social work as providing opportunities to rural populations. The authors assessed the various formats currently offered by Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) and Master's in Social Work (MSW) programs (Wiest, 2012).

According to the report, only 15% of BSW programs offer fully online formats. No information was provided regarding fully online MSW programs. The report identified the benefits of online delivery for some course work, but stated concerns of clinical course work delivered online.

Vermon et al. further noted that the social work profession is seen as a “people profession.” The authors questioned how a people-oriented profession can be taught completely online. Vermon et al.’s study illustrated common skepticism concerning online education in the social work profession. Professionals, educators, and students continue to wrestle with the concept of teaching practical application courses online. Along with Vermon et al.’s concerns, Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, and Fullmer (2013) noted the importance for the profession not only to teach skills and knowledge, but, more importantly, to enable students to have an ethical social presence. The authors explored strategies for students to create a professional presence online and set professional boundaries. In addition, Bellefeuille (2006) examined a web-based design classroom in social work education. The author investigated the overall satisfaction of students in web-based learning for child welfare courses. In the mixed method design, the author found overall positive feedback from the participants. The students stressed that the online environment allowed for greater interaction with professionals across the nation. This interaction gave the students greater understanding and knowledge of the practice methods across regions. However, the students did express learning challenges in integrating to an online classroom. In another study, LaMendola (2010) found that the importance of human and social presence was emphasized in social work education. However, the author argued that the idea of social presence and community is limited to face-to-face formats; however, it can be fostered in multiple platforms. LaMendola pointed out that online networking is now a social community and individuals have a great presence online. The author stressed the need for social work education to embrace social presence and community in various forms to meet the needs of the population as a whole.

Ayala (2009) addressed some of the concerns with an exploration of blended format programs. These programs allowed students to take theory-based (Human Behavior in the Social Environment, Social Welfare Policy, etc.) classes in the online classroom and attend face-to-face for the practice courses (Advanced Clinical Practice, Group Practice, etc.; Council of Social Work Education website, n.d.; Wiest, 2012). Ayala reported that blended learning can offer greater opportunities for students to engage in collaborative learning and employ higher level critical thinking. Students have access to resources which allow them to be active in the learning process and take ownership of their education. The author noted the concerns of skeptics regarding the lack of personal interaction for a profession expected to engage in human interaction in the field and presented the blended format platform to balance these concerns. When implementing this format, students are still expected to have regular face-to-face interaction, giving instructors the opportunity to assess the students’ practice skills face-to-face (Wiest, 2012). This researcher evaluated Ayala’s (2009) concepts regarding the blended platform and went one step further, by incorporating the recommendations through the use of the online face-to-face classroom platform called Blackboard Collaborate. The researcher evaluated the role of an innovative, fully online program and assessed the ability to bridge this connection gap through the online, face-to-face classroom software Blackboard Collaborate. This learning platform allows students to attend class via the Internet with virtually the same features of a traditional classroom. Blackboard Collaborate has a webcam feature, whiteboard, application sharing ability, breakout room function for small group exercises, and many other features of the traditional setting (*MSW Student Handbook*, 2012). The researcher found no empirical results on the use of fully-blended online programs in the social work field. Thus, the current research topic did not duplicate previous studies in the social work profession; however, this researcher’s current interest illuminated gaps in other studies. The study’s findings also provided a clear positive statement regarding the online platforms compared to the traditional platforms’ ability to develop classroom community (Wiest, 2012).

Research Topic

This study examined sense of classroom community between foundation social work students in a traditional on-ground Bachelor’s in Social Work program versus an innovative online Master’s in Social Work program at a nonprofit Catholic institution.

Problem Statement

The use of online educational platforms in social work has increased over the past 10 years. However, opinions have differed on the effectiveness of connection and sense of community in the online platforms.

Past research demonstrated mixed findings when comparing online and traditional face-to-face higher education. The researcher investigated these findings further by completing a comparison study on foundation level social work students. The researcher utilized an innovative, fully online platform versus a face-to-face platform at a nonprofit Catholic institution in Florida to compare classroom community (Wiest, 2012).

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to compare the extent of classroom community in the on-campus Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) program and the innovative, fully online Master's in Social Work (MSW) program at a nonprofit Catholic school in Central Florida (Wiest, 2012).

Research Hypotheses

The researcher had three hypotheses for the study:

1. The researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference in classroom community in the two programs (BSW campus and MSW online) at a Catholic nonprofit institution in Central Florida.
2. The researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference in "Classroom Community" in the two programs (BSW campus and MSW online) at a Catholic nonprofit institution in Central Florida based on employment status.
3. The researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference in classroom community in the two programs (BSW campus and MSW online) at a Catholic nonprofit institution in Central Florida based on age.

Research Design

Population

The population of interest for the study was comprised of two social work education programs at a nonprofit Catholic institution based in Central Florida. The study examined classroom community in the BSW and MSW programs, which are both at the foundation level according to CSWE.

Sample Size

The sample size for the current study was based on current enrollment in the nonprofit Catholic institution's BSW and MSW programs. This was a purposeful sample (Creswell, 2009). There were a total of 75 students in the Fall foundation cohort for the BSW program and 84 in the MSW online program (Dr. Cindy Lee, personal communication, September 5, 2014). Based on this information, the estimated sample population was 159 students in the two programs.

Sample Demographic

The demographic variables for this study were social work students enrolled in either the BSW or MSW online program at the nonprofit Catholic institution. The two programs have similar student demographics. Both programs serve not only traditional students, but adult learners as well. The two programs are located over several states (Florida, Georgia, North Carolina, Illinois, Hawaii, Virginia, Alabama, and Maryland). Students in the program are both male and female; however, males currently comprise less than 10% of the population in both programs (Dr. Cindy Lee, personal communication, September 5, 2014). This ratio is in line with the national average of professional social workers in the field (NASW website, n.d.). The current age range for the two programs is 20 years old to 65-plus years old. Various ethnicities are represented in the two programs, including Caucasian, Hispanic, African American, Jamaican, Russian, Polish, Haitian, and other. Students in both programs have various employment statuses as well. Some of the students are traditional full-time students and others are returning professionals in various fields. Along with employment diversity, students in the two programs have diverse families (married without children, married with children, single with children, single without children, divorced with children, divorced without children, cohabitating, etc.; Dr. Cindy Lee, personal communication, September 5, 2014). Lastly, the nonprofit Catholic institution serves a large veteran population, so a number of students in the two programs are active or retired veterans from all service branches (Saint Leo University website, n.d.).

Recruitment Plan

The recruitment plan utilized a purposeful sample population. The study utilized the foundation level students in the two programs at the beginning of their second semester.

For both programs, a cohort model is implemented. Students in both programs are required to take classes in sequence. In both programs, students enter both programs as a foundation level student under the criteria of CSWE.

In both programs, foundation students are required to take the same four courses (individual practice, social welfare policy, human behavior in the social environment, and research) successfully before they can progress to the second foundation semester of their program. The researcher utilized the individual practice course in both programs for the recruitment platform in the study. By utilizing a standardized curriculum via CSWE for foundation students, the BSW students are able to earn an advanced degree upon graduation. This permits BSW students to enter an MSW program and omit the first year. Essentially, a BSW student is able to obtain a master's degree in one year versus two years. The researcher discussed the research study with the BSW and MSW directors in order to gain support. Once the researcher gained support, the researcher contacted each of the course instructors in each course section for both programs. The researcher personally contacted each instructor to discuss the researcher's study. The researcher reviewed the purpose, design, and benefits of the research to both programs. The researcher informed the instructor that the researcher gained permission from the directors to complete the research study. The researcher emailed the instructors in the BSW program an announcement and directions on completing the survey. With the support of the directors, the instructors were asked to read the announcement, review the instructions, and hand out the directions in each of course sections. On the survey instructions, the students had the researcher's contact information as well. In the MSW program, the researcher had access to all sections of the course due to the researcher's role in the MSW program. The researcher informed the course instructors of the survey and the directors' support. The researcher also informed the course instructors that an announcement and email regarding the survey was posted in the instructors' course. By taking these steps, the researcher was able to increase participation above the standard 10% return rate to 60% (Creswell, 2011).

Challenges

The study was voluntary and students were not required to participate. Students needed to be motivated and encouraged to participate. This motivation was fostered by the instructors' review and support for the study. Another challenge was gaining Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Argosy University and the nonprofit Catholic institution. Once approval was granted, the researcher also had to discuss the study with each individual instructor of the course sections. These challenges were addressed before the study was conducted (Creswell, 2011).

Location

The location for this study was a nonprofit Catholic institution located in Central Florida. The researcher administered the surveys in the BSW and MSW programs which serve students in Florida, Virginia, and Georgia.

Methodology

Instrumentation

The researcher conducted a quantitative study utilizing a quantifiable Classroom Community Scale by Rovai (2002). This is a concurrent embedded strategy (Creswell, 2009). This scale contains 20 questions on a 5-point Likert scale which evaluates the extent of classroom community (Appendix A). This scale was the primary method of data collection. The scale was developed in 2002 by Rovai, and in 2004, Rovai, Wighting, and Lucking (2004) refined and further validated the scale. During this process, the scale was evaluated by a panel of four experts at face value for validity. The experts found the scale posed a high level of content validity (Rovai et al., 2004; Wiest, 2012). The scale was also evaluated for concurrent validity by determining its ability to vary indirectly when measuring opposite concepts (Rovai et al., 2004; Wiest, 2012). During the study, a Cronbach's coefficient α was conducted to evaluate reliability (Rovai et al., 2004). The Cronbach's coefficient α reliability for the two groups was .84 and .83, respectively. In addition, the internal consistency coefficients for social learning and community learning for the subgroups were .85 and .82, respectively. In order to evaluate stability, a Pearson's r correlation coefficient utilizing a pre/posttest model was given over two-week intervals (Rovai et al., 2004; Wiest, 2012). The stability for each interval was .91. These results support the instrument as valid, reliable, and stable, which made it an optimal tool for the researcher's study (Rovai et al., 2004). In addition to the scale, the researcher asked two demographic questions to address Hypotheses 2 and 3 in the study.

For Hypothesis 2, the researcher asked employment status. The participants were given the following options: full-time, part-time, retired, and not employed. For Hypothesis 3, the researcher inquired about the age group of the participants. The participants were given the following age ranges to choose from: 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50-59. These two questions allowed the researcher to further examine the two subgroups.

Procedure

The researcher administered the Classroom Community Scale by Rovai (2002) anonymously in the following courses at the nonprofit Catholic institution: SWK 331 (BSW Methods of Social Work Practice with Individuals and Families) and SWK530 (MSW Methods of Social Work Practice with Individuals and Families). The researcher utilized Qualtrics, an online survey platform, to administer the survey systematically and anonymously over a three-week period of time. Prior to completing the survey in Qualtrics, the participants were given an implied consent statement. This statement informed the students of the purpose of the survey, its risks and benefits, and researcher contact information. Once the students reviewed the implied consent, the student could choose to continue and complete the survey or decline and log out. This served as the implied consent for the study. Prior to survey implementation, the study was submitted and approved by both institutional IRBs (Appendix B). In addition, the researcher emailed Alfred Rovai (alfrov@regent.edu) to gain permission to utilize the scale.

Data Analysis

Once the surveys were administered in Qualtrics over the three weeks, the researcher analyzed the data using SPSS to compare the two programs' ability to develop classroom community. The researcher first coded the surveys from Qualtrics for SPSS. In SPSS, the researcher ran an independent *t* test with a $P < .05$ to determine if there was any statistical difference between the two programs for Research Question 1. As for Hypotheses 2 and 3, there was more than one independent variable. In order to control for a type I error, an ANOVA was utilized to analyze the subgroups instead of a *t* test. By administering an ANOVA, the researcher was confident that any significant findings were not by chance. An ANOVA was administered with a $P < .05$ to determine if there was any statistical difference between the subgroups based on age and employment status (Creswell, 2009).

Methodological Assumptions

For the study, the researcher utilized a quantifiable scale which has been tested for reliability and validity. However, the study used a purposeful convenience sample. The findings are not generalizable to the broader social work education population. Along with the type of sample, the size of the population was a limitation. The Catholic nonprofit institution has a relatively small social work department, with the overall enrollment typically less than 400 students in the two programs (BSW and MSW). This limitation impacts the transferability and generalizability of the study (Creswell, 2009). In addition, the sample was comprised of both BSW and MSW program participants. Although the curriculum is standardized, there are variations from program to program. These variations might impact the overall development of the Classroom Community (Wiest, 2012). Another limitation of the study was the administration method of the survey. The surveys were administered electronically using Qualtrics. Administering the studies face-to-face increased participation; however, this was not possible in the online program, so in order to standardize the procedure, the survey was administered online for both samples (Creswell, 2009). This impacted the internal validity of the study (Creswell, 2009), which was another limitation to consider when reviewing the survey participation results (Wiest, 2012). Not only were there limitations in the survey administration method, there was also a limitation in the researcher's involvement in the MSW program. The researcher is currently the Field Director of the MSW program. The researcher has involvement with the students in their field placements. The researcher was aware of this limitation while the surveys were administered (Creswell, 2009; Wiest, 2012).

Coding and Scoring

The data collected in this study were from Rovai's (2002) Classroom Community Scale. In order to analyze the data, the initial coding and scale process was completed according to Rovai's scale directions. The test instrument items were scored as follows:

- For items 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 16, 19: Weights: Strongly Agree = 4, Agree = 3, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 1, Strongly Disagree = 0.
- For items 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18, 20: Weights: Strongly Agree = 0, Agree = 1, Neutral = 2, Disagree = 3, Strongly Disagree = 4.
- Add the weights of all 20 items to obtain the overall CCS score.

CCS subscale raw scores varied from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of zero. The CCS subscale scores were calculated as follows:

- Connectedness (social community): Add the weights of odd items: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19.
- Learning (learning community): Add the weights of even items: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20 (alfredroviawebsite, n.d.).

Frequency Tables

Hypothesis One

In the first hypothesis, sense of community between MSW and BSW students was compared. There were a total of 90 participants out of 141 students who responded to the survey over the three weeks. There were 46 MSW students who responded and 44 BSW students who responded. The frequency tables below show the distribution for each question in the survey. The frequency tables also show the distribution responses based on the Connectedness subscale and the Learning subscale.

Connectedness Subscale (1, 3, 5, 7, 8, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19) Tables

Table 1: 1. I Feel that Students in this Course Care About Each Other

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	36	40.0	40.0	40.0
	Agree	41	45.6	45.6	85.6
	Neutral	10	11.1	11.1	96.7
	Disagree	3	3.3	3.3	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 2: 3. I Feel Connected to Others in this Course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	28	31.1	31.1	31.1
	Agree	40	44.4	44.4	75.6
	Neutral	17	18.9	18.9	94.4
	Disagree	5	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 3: 5. I Do Not Feel a Spirit of Community

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	6	6.7	6.7	6.7
	Agree	5	5.6	5.6	12.2
	Neutral	13	14.4	14.4	26.7
	Disagree	46	51.1	51.1	77.8
	Strongly Disagree	20	22.2	22.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 4: 7. I Feel that this Course is Like a Family

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	18	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Agree	33	36.7	36.7	56.7
	Neutral	24	26.7	26.7	83.3
	Disagree	9	10.0	10.0	93.3
	Strongly Disagree	6	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 5: 9. I Feel Isolated in this Course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Agree	12	13.3	13.3	16.7
	Neutral	6	6.7	6.7	23.3
	Disagree	46	51.1	51.1	74.4
	Strongly Disagree	23	25.6	25.6	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 6: 11. I Trust the Others in this Course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	18	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Agree	43	47.8	47.8	67.8
	Neutral	23	25.6	25.6	93.3
	Disagree	5	5.6	5.6	98.9
	Strongly Disagree	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 7: 13. I Feel I Can Rely on Others in this Course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	18	20.0	20.0	20.0
	Agree	47	52.2	52.2	72.2
	Neutral	19	21.1	21.1	93.3
	Disagree	4	4.4	4.4	97.8
	Strongly Disagree	2	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 8: 15. I Feel that Members of this Course Depend on Me

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	2	2.2	2.2	2.2
	Agree	23	25.6	25.6	27.8
	Neutral	39	43.3	43.3	71.1
	Disagree	20	22.2	22.2	93.3
	Strongly Disagree	6	6.7	6.7	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 9: 17. I Feel Uncertain about Others in this Course

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	2	2.2	2.2	2.2
	Agree	15	16.7	16.7	18.9
	Neutral	26	28.9	28.9	47.8
	Disagree	35	38.9	38.9	86.7
	Strongly Disagree	12	13.3	13.3	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 10: 19. I Feel Confident that Others Will Support Me

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	25	27.8	27.8	27.8
	Agree	44	48.9	48.9	76.7
	Neutral	15	16.7	16.7	93.3
	Disagree	4	4.4	4.4	97.8
	Strongly Disagree	2	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Learning Subscale (2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20) Tables**Table 11: 2. I Feel that I am Encouraged to Ask Questions**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	43	47.8	47.8	47.8
	Agree	41	45.6	45.6	93.3
	Neutral	1	1.1	1.1	94.4
	Disagree	5	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 12: 4. I Feel that it is Hard to Get Help When I Have a Question

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	4	4.4	4.4	4.4
	Agree	12	13.3	13.3	17.8
	Neutral	11	12.2	12.2	30.0
	Disagree	45	50.0	50.0	80.0
	Strongly Disagree	18	20.0	20.0	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 13: 6. I Feel that I Receive Timely Feedback

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	16	17.8	17.8	17.8
	Agree	38	42.2	42.2	60.0
	Neutral	14	15.6	15.6	75.6
	Disagree	17	18.9	18.9	94.4
	Strongly Disagree	5	5.6	5.6	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 14: 8. I Feel Uneasy Exposing Gaps in My Understanding

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	2	2.2	2.2	2.2
	Agree	14	15.6	15.6	17.8
	Neutral	19	21.1	21.1	38.9
	Disagree	39	43.3	43.3	82.2
	Strongly Disagree	16	17.8	17.8	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 15: 10. I Feel Reluctant to Speak Openly

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	4	4.4	4.4	4.4
	Agree	9	10.0	10.0	14.4
	Neutral	13	14.4	14.4	28.9
	Disagree	39	43.3	43.3	72.2
	Strongly Disagree	25	27.8	27.8	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 16: 12. I Feel that this Course Results in Only Modest Learning

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Agree	7	7.8	7.8	11.1
	Neutral	25	27.8	27.8	38.9
	Disagree	29	32.2	32.2	71.1
	Strongly Disagree	26	28.9	28.9	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 17: 14. I Feel that Other Students Do Not Help Me Learn

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Agree	2	2.2	2.2	2.2
	Neutral	11	12.2	12.2	14.4
	Disagree	54	60.0	60.0	74.4
	Strongly Disagree	23	25.6	25.6	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 18: 16. I Feel that I am Given Ample Opportunities to Learn

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	29	32.2	32.2	32.2
	Agree	48	53.3	53.3	85.6
	Neutral	8	8.9	8.9	94.4
	Disagree	3	3.3	3.3	97.8
	Strongly Disagree	2	2.2	2.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 19: 18. I Feel that my Educational Needs are Not Being Met

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	5	5.6	5.6	5.6
	Agree	6	6.7	6.7	12.2
	Neutral	8	8.9	8.9	21.1
	Disagree	45	50.0	50.0	71.1
	Strongly Disagree	26	28.9	28.9	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Table 20: 20. I Feel that this Course Does Not Promote a Desire to Learn

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	Strongly Agree	3	3.3	3.3	3.3
	Agree	3	3.3	3.3	6.7
	Neutral	6	6.7	6.7	13.3
	Disagree	40	44.4	44.4	57.8
	Strongly Disagree	38	42.2	42.2	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

Connectedness Subscale

Table 21

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	11.00	2	2.2	2.2	2.2
	12.00	3	3.3	3.3	5.6
	13.00	2	2.2	2.2	7.8
	14.00	4	4.4	4.4	12.2
	15.00	3	3.3	3.3	15.6
	16.00	1	1.1	1.1	16.7
	17.00	6	6.7	6.7	23.3
	18.00	4	4.4	4.4	27.8
	19.00	2	2.2	2.2	30.0
	20.00	7	7.8	7.8	37.8
	21.00	7	7.8	7.8	45.6
	22.00	7	7.8	7.8	53.3
	23.00	6	6.7	6.7	60.0
	24.00	6	6.7	6.7	66.7
	25.00	4	4.4	4.4	71.1
	26.00	3	3.3	3.3	74.4
	27.00	3	3.3	3.3	77.8
	28.00	4	4.4	4.4	82.2
	29.00	1	1.1	1.1	83.3
	30.00	3	3.3	3.3	86.7
	31.00	1	1.1	1.1	87.8
	32.00	5	5.6	5.6	93.3
	33.00	2	2.2	2.2	95.6
	37.00	1	1.1	1.1	96.7
	39.00	1	1.1	1.1	97.8
	40.00	1	1.1	1.1	98.9
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	41.00 Total	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
		90	100.0	100.0	

Learning Subscale**Table 22**

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	10.00	3	3.3	3.3	3.3
	11.00	2	2.2	2.2	5.6
	12.00	1	1.1	1.1	6.7
	13.00	3	3.3	3.3	10.0
	14.00	5	5.6	5.6	15.6
	15.00	5	5.6	5.6	21.1
	16.00	7	7.8	7.8	28.9
	17.00	2	2.2	2.2	31.1
	18.00	4	4.4	4.4	35.6
	19.00	11	12.2	12.2	47.8
	20.00	6	6.7	6.7	54.4
	21.00	3	3.3	3.3	57.8
	22.00	4	4.4	4.4	62.2
	23.00	11	12.2	12.2	74.4
	24.00	4	4.4	4.4	78.9
	25.00	2	2.2	2.2	81.1
	26.00	3	3.3	3.3	84.4
	27.00	1	1.1	1.1	85.6
	28.00	1	1.1	1.1	86.7
	31.00	1	1.1	1.1	87.8
32.00	3	3.3	3.3	91.1	
		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
	33.00	2	2.2	2.2	93.3
	34.00	1	1.1	1.1	94.4
	35.00	2	2.2	2.2	96.7
	36.00	1	1.1	1.1	97.8
	40.00	1	1.1	1.1	98.9
	45.00	1	1.1	1.1	100.0
Total		90	100.0	100.0	

Descriptive Statistics

On the connectedness subscale, the mean was 22.6 and the skewness was .254, which is in the satisfactory range according to Schminder, Ziegler, Danna, Beyer, and Buhner (2010). As for the learning subscale, the mean was 21.0 and the skewness was .254, which is also in the satisfactory range (i.e., skew < 2.0 and kurtosis < 9.0; Schminder et al., 2010).

Table 23

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Skewness		Kurtosis	
	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Statistic	Std. Error	Statistic	Std. Error
Connectedness Sub Subscale	90	11.00	41.00	22.6667	6.67546	.516	.254	.131	.503
Learning Subscale	90	10.00	45.00	21.0667	6.95378	.968	.254	1.107	.503
Valid N (Listwise)	90								

1. In which program are you currently enrolled?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid. Percent	Cum. Percent
Valid	MSW	46	51.1	51.1	51.1
	BSW	44	48.9	48.9	
		90	100.0	100.0	

SPSS Results

- Ho: BSW students' sense of community = MSW students' sense of community
- Ha: BSW students' sense of community ≠ MSW students' sense of community

Table 24

In which program are you currently enrolled?		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Connectedness subscale	MSW	46	25.2174	7.13960	1.05268
	BSW	44	20.0000	4.96499	.74850
Learning subscale	MSW	46	23.8696	7.70745	1.13640
	BSW	44	18.1364	4.55249	.68631

Table 25

Independent Samples Test

		<i>t</i> Test for Equality of Means			
		Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		
			Lower	Upper	
Connectedness subscale	Equal variances assumed	1.30180	2.63033	7.80445	
	Equal variances not assumed	1.29166	2.64714	7.78764	
Learning subscale	Equal variances assumed	1.34205	3.06616	8.40024	
	Equal variances not assumed	1.32757	3.08771	8.37869	

Table 26*Independent Samples Test (continued)*

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		<i>t</i> Test for Equality of Means			
		F	Sig.	<i>t</i>	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean difference
Connectedness Subscale	Equal variances assumed	6.161	.015	4.008	88	.000	5.21739
	Equal variances not assumed			4.039	80.477	.000	5.21739
Learning Subscale	Equal variances assumed	7.841	.006	4.272	88	.000	5.73320
	Equal variances not assumed			4.319	73.570	.000	5.73320

For the first hypothesis, the null was rejected. The BSW group (n=44) was associated numerically with an M=20.00 (SD= 4.96) on the Connectedness subscale and an M=18.13 (SD=4.55) on the Learning subscale. By comparison, the MSW group (n=46) was associated numerically with the mean 25.21 (SD= 7.13) on the Connectedness scale and the mean 23.86 (SD=7.70) on the Learning subscale. In order to compare the BSW and MSW related to sense of classroom community, an independent *t*-test sample was run in SPSS to determine if there was any statistical difference between the foundation MSW and BSW programs. The distribution of BSW and MSW students was sufficiently normal for conducting a *t* test with the skew<2.0 and kurtosis<9.0 (Schminder et al., 2010). In addition, the assumption for homogeneity of variances was tested and not satisfied according to Levene's test (F[88]=6.1, p=.015 for the Connectedness subscale and F[88]=7.8, p=.006 for the Learning subscale). This means that one cannot assume there is an equal variance. The independent sample *t* test was associated with a significantly statistical effect (t[88]=4.03, p=.000 for the Connectedness subscale and t[88]=4.31, p.000 for the Learning subscale). Thus, the MSW students were associated with a significantly higher sense of connectedness and learning than the BSW students, and the null hypothesis was rejected.

Hypothesis Two

The researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference in classroom community in the two programs (BSW campus and MSW online) at a Catholic nonprofit institution in Central Florida based on employment status. In the second hypothesis, sense of community for both programs (MSW and BSW students) was compared based on employment status. The categories were full-time, part-time, retired, and unemployed. The frequency tables below show the distribution for each employment category.

Table 27

What is Your Current Employment Status?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	a.full-time	41	45.6	45.6	45.6
	b.part-time	29	32.2	32.2	77.8
	c.retired	3	3.3	3.3	81.1
	d.unemployed	17	18.9	18.9	100.0
	Total	90	100.0	100.0	

SPSS Results

- Ho: Employment status = sense of community
- Ha: Employment status \neq sense of community

Table 28

One-Way ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Connectedness subscale	Between Groups	245.198	3	81.733	1.889	.137
	Within Groups	3720.802	86	43.265		
	Total	3966.000	89			
Learning subscale	Between Groups	353.672	3	117.891	2.567	.060
	Within Groups	3949.928	86	45.929		
	Total	4303.600	89			

In Hypothesis Two, the null was accepted. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between employment status in the BSW/ MSW groups and sense of community. The independent variable was employment status (full-time, part-time, retired, and unemployed), while the dependent variable was sense of community according to Rovia's (2004) subscales of Connectedness and Learning. ANOVA was not significant for Connectedness subscales, $f(3, 86)=43.26$, $p=.137$, $n2=.054$. The ANOVA was not significant on the Learning subscale, either, $f(3, 86) =45.93$, $p=.060$, $n2=.082$. In this case, the null was accepted for both the Connectedness and Learning subscales. Thus, 5.4% was the variance for employment status and Connectedness subscale, while 8.2% was the variance for employment status and Learning subscale. As there were no significant differences found in the ANOVA, a posthoc test was not completed to compare the grouping differences.

Hypothesis Three

The researcher hypothesized that there was no significant difference in classroom community in the two programs (BSW campus and MSW online) at a Catholic nonprofit institution in Central Florida based on age. In the third hypothesis, sense of community for both programs (MSW and BSW students) was compared based on age. The categories were 20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50- 59. The frequency tables below show the distribution for each age category.

Table 29

What is Your Age Range?

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	20-29	32	35.6	35.6	35.6
	30-39	24	26.7	26.7	62.2
	40-49	19	21.1	21.1	83.3
	50-59	15	16.7	16.7	100.0
Total		90	100.0	100.0	

SPSS Results

- Ho: Age range = sense of community
- Ha: Age range \neq sense of community

Table 30*One-Way ANOVA*

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Connectedness subscale	Between Groups	208.277	3	69.426	1.589	.198
	Within Groups	3757.723	86	43.694		
	Total	3966.000	89			
Learning subscale	Between Groups	150.634	3	50.211	1.040	.379
	Within Groups	4152.966	86	48.290		
	Total	4303.600	89			

Lastly, for Hypothesis Three, the null was accepted. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to evaluate the relationship between age range in the BSW/ MSW groups and sense of community. The independent variable was age range (20-29, 30-39, 40-49, and 50- 59), while the dependent variable was sense of community according to Rovia's (2004) subscales of Connectedness and Learning. The ANOVA was not significant for the Connectedness subscales, $f(3,86)=43.69$, $p=.198$, $n2 =.004$. The ANOVA was not significant for the learning subscale, either, $f(3,86)=48.29$, $p=.379$, $n2=.035$. In this case, the null was accepted for both the Connectedness and Learning subscales. Thus, 0.4% was the variance for the age range and Connectedness subscale, while 3% was the variance for age range and Learning subscale. As there were no significant differences found in the ANOVA, a posthoc test was not completed to compare the grouping differences.

Findings

The study utilized Rovai's (2002) Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to investigate and compare the level of sense of community between a traditional face-to-face BSW program and a fully online MSW program. For Hypothesis One, an independent *t* test was used to compare the two groups. The results indicated there was a significant difference between the two groups, which means the null hypothesis was rejected. The results found that the MSW had higher connectedness and learning subscale results. As for Hypotheses Two and Three, a one-way ANOVA was completed to analyze the results. The test found there was no significant difference between employment status or age range in either the Connectedness subscale or Learning subscale. This means that for Hypotheses Two and Three, the null hypotheses were accepted and no posthoc test was needed.

Discussion

The study found there was a significant difference between the face-to-face BSW program and the fully online MSW program. The results found that the online setting in the MSW program developed a significantly more connected classroom for the students than the traditional face-to-face setting. The CCS scale also found that the students in the MSW program reported significantly higher scores on the Learning subscale. Another finding was that the online MSW program demonstrated a greater level of classroom community compared to the face-to-face BSW program in the nonprofit Catholic institution. The findings support previous findings by Rovai (2004); Robinson and Hulligner (2008); Drouin (2008); Exter et al. (2009); and Hostetter and Busch (2013) which assert that classroom community can be developed in the online environment. Based on the findings from Hypothesis One and previous studies, it can be concluded there is significant research to support the assertion that online platforms provide the same level of community, connectedness, and sense of learning as the face-to-face setting (Wiest, 2014). The study's findings go further to demonstrate that the online platform provided a higher level of community, connectedness, and sense of learning. More importantly, these findings support the ability for social work programs to develop a social connection online, which refutes experts in the field of social work such as LaMendola (2010), Vermon et al. (2009), and Ayala (2009). LaMendola argued the idea that social presence and community is limited to face-to-face classes (Wiest, 2014), while Vermon et al. and Ayala noted the need for face-to-face classes in the field of social work in order to teach practice skills and foster engagement. However, some professionals in the field like Bellefeuille (2006) pointed out that online networking is now a social community and individuals have a great presence online.

Bellefeuille noted the need for social work education to embrace social presence and community in various forms to meet the needs of the population as a whole. While the study's findings support the ability for social connection in a fully online social work program, a number of questions still remain:

1. How is the online platform able to foster a higher level of community?

2. What about the MSW's implicit curriculum is promoting a sense of community?
3. What about the BSW's implicit curriculum is not promoting a sense of community?
4. What barriers are impacting the level of community in the face-to-face settings?
5. What in the MSW's program structure/model is allowing the students online to feel connected?
6. How can this model be implemented in other programs?

As for Hypotheses Two and Three, there were no significant differences based on employment status or age range. These findings suggest that there is no difference in level of community across generations or job statuses. The study's findings support the concepts presented in environmental theory, student-centered theory, and engagement theory. In student-centered theory, the learning process is centered on the student's needs. In contrast, environmental theory notes the importance for the environment to provide the essential tools for the student to develop the skills (Bolye et al., 2009; Wiest, 2014). Lastly, Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) noted that the fundamental principle is that students must be meaningfully engaged in the learning process through challenges, activities, and peer interaction. This theory focuses connection and learning based on the student's engagement with peers, instructor, and class, not the student itself. The study's findings suggest that community is not developed by additional time, but by the quality of experience (Wiest, 2014). Even though there was not a significant difference for Hypotheses Two and Three, there are still several questions to explore:

1. Do students in various age ranges utilize the online and face-to-face classroom differently?
2. What tools are used to learn and socialize in various age ranges?
3. Does employment status impact the tools utilized in the classroom setting?
4. What are the most common communication tools used for different employment statuses?
5. Does the amount of time connecting with peers and instructors in a course differ based on employment status?

The current study supports previous findings which found that online learning environments are effective and successful in developing, providing, and fostering connection. The findings also support the emerging engagement theory which highlights the concept that connection is not based solely on student demographics (e.g., age, employment), but rather on peer connection, environment, and engagement. While these findings are fascinating, the study leads to many more questions and future research topics in order to further grasp the sense of community in a fully online social work program.

Implications

While the study was completed on a purposeful small sample at one university's social work program, the findings are not representative of the social work population as a whole. The findings are not generalizable or transferable to the entire social work population; however, the findings do open the door for further discussion regarding the online educational platform in social work. These findings have strong relevance in a profession which has limited research and strong opposition regarding the implementation of online educational platforms to teach practice courses, as illustrated in the literature review. In previous studies, researchers in the profession have examined the use of online platforms and have had mixed results. For instance, Dalton (2001) conducted a study with four comparison groups in an MSW social work program. Two groups were face-to-face and two groups were online. In the study, the author examined the learning outcomes from a pre/posttest in a macro social class. The author found no significant difference in the learning outcomes for the four groups (Wiest, 2012). In addition, Siebert et al. (2006) evaluated the implementation of online education in clinical social work classes. The authors reported positive findings in relation to the traditional students. According to the study, online students had increased knowledge in the subareas and had similar results on end of the course assessment versus the face-to-face students. However, there was one noted difference in relation to instructor accessibility. Vermon et al. (2009) investigated the use of online education in social work classes. The study reviewed student interaction and engagement in the online platform. The study noted benefits for social work education online, especially for rural students who cannot attend a traditional setting (Wiest, 2012). The social work literature currently does not support the use of completely online platforms (Vermon et al., 2009). In contrast, the current study's findings demonstrate the effectiveness of online platforms in order to develop sense of community.

While the findings of the study challenge and refute past findings which state that the social work profession is seen as a “people profession” with skills that must be developed in traditional setting, social work professionals question how a people-oriented profession can be taught totally online (Vermon et al., 2009). In a study by Vermon et al. (2009), there were shared concerns for online education in the social work profession. Professionals, educators, and students continue to struggle with the notion of teaching practical application skills online, and concerns about fostering social connection in a fully online setting persist (Wiest, 2012). The findings provide a relevant need to explore online social work education as online education continues to experience significant growth and demand across the globe (Rudestam, 2006).

Recommendations for Research

As the current findings are reviewed and examined, there are more questions than answers. This study is a good starting point for more in-depth research on the innovative, fully online social work program.

- A quantitative study comparing multiple MSW programs across regions would be beneficial to make the findings more generalizable to the MSW population.
- A mixed method study examining the learning outcomes for traditional programs and fully online programs would shed light on the competency development between traditional and online social work programs. Are the online programs providing similar levels of competency achievement?
- A mixed method study which analyzes the field evaluations for traditional and online programs would allow field supervisors to be interviewed on perceived readiness of traditional students versus online students.
- An investigative study which interviews students in both BSW and MSW programs on the most common mediums utilized for social communication would aid programs in utilizing the tools commonly used by the students to interact.
- A qualitative study on how the innovated program is able to foster this level of community could examine the implicit and explicit curriculum, including online platforms, student activities, teaching styles, and peer interaction which allows students to feel connected.
- A qualitative retrospective study could examine students who graduated from the fully online program and the impact in the professional setting regarding job readiness, employability, challenges, and strengths.
- A mixed method study investigating the generational differences and myths of online literacy and use would be beneficial.

These are several studies that would be useful in following up the current study based on the findings. As education and professional development programs are more often utilizing technology and online learning platforms, it is essential that researchers have an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses. The struggle will be keeping up with the constant forward motion of technology.

Conclusion

This study examined sense of community for traditional foundation (BSW) social work students compared to fully online (MSW) foundation students. There were a total of 90 participants in the study. The study utilized the validated Classroom Community Scale by Rovai (2002). The scale examined students’ self-reports of connectedness and learning. Along with comparing the two groups, the study examined Sense of Community related to employment status and age range. The study found there was a significant difference between the traditional face-to-face BSW program and the online MSW program. The MSW group scored higher in both the connectedness and learning subscales. As for the findings related to employment and age range, there were no significant differences in either the Connectedness or Learning subscales. The study’s findings are based on a small sample size that is not generalizable to the social work population as a whole; however, the findings open the door for further research to investigate online social work programs. The findings also support the online platform’s ability to foster community, which is seen as an essential element in the profession.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Classroom Community Scale

Directions: Below are 20 statements. Read each statement carefully and choose which statement best describes your level of agreement with the statement. There is no correct response. Do not spend too much time on any given statement, but give the response that seems to describe your feelings best. Please respond to all 20 items.

Once you complete the 20 question, please answer the two demographic questions at the end.

Statements	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I feel that students in this course care about each other					
2. I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions					
3. I feel connected to others in this course					
4. I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question					
5. I do not feel a spirit of community					
6. I feel that I receive timely feedback					
7. I feel that this course is like a family					
8. I feel uneasy exposing gaps in my understanding					
9. I feel isolated in this course.					
10. I feel reluctant to speak openly					
11. I trust the others in the course					
12. I feel that this course results in only modest learning					
13. I feel I can rely on others in this course					
14. I feel that other students do not help me learn					
15. I feel that members of this course depend on me					
16. I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn					
17. I feel uncertain about others in this course					
18. I feel that my educational needs are not being met					
19. I feel confident that others will support me					
20. I feel that this course does not promote a desire to learn					

21. Which program are you currently enrolled?
 - a. Bachelor's of Social Work (BSW)
 - b. Master's of Social Work (MSW)
22. What is your current employment status?
 - a. full-time
 - b. part-time
 - c. retired
 - d. not employed
23. What is your age range?
 - a. 20-29
 - b. 30-39
 - c. 40-49
 - d. 50-59