Michael Miyazaki, OMDE 610 9040

April 24, 2015

To: Linda J. Smith, Interim Program Chair for MDE, University of Maryland University College

From: Michael Miyazaki

Re: Suggestions for improving the sense of community in MDE

Hello! You do not know me; and I had quite a time finding who you are. Therein lies the problem.

I have been a student in the Masters in Distance Education (MDE) program for three years and am just about to complete my fourth course, OMDE 610 9040 Teaching and Learning in Online Distance Education. The class is a review of learning theory influencing Distance Education (DE), most of which stress the importance of community for the distance learner. In three years, outside of the community formed in any specific class, I have never felt part of an MDE community of distance education learners. In this memo, I offer a few suggestions that might help rectify this situation.

Community and Presence in Distance Education
The first class assignment was an update article by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) celebrating the lasting success of their Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Notably, two thirds of the model stresses presence, in both the form of teaching presence and social presence. Community was a theme throughout the class, such as Lewis and Abdul-Hamid opining, “fostering an online atmosphere with vibrant interaction among students and between the instructor and the students was one of the primary areas of emphasis in the study findings” (2006, p. 87). Similarly, Moisey and Hughes aver, “creating a supportive learning environment for online learners is crucial for ensuring success, promoting persistence, and avoiding dropout” (2008, p. 419).

Teaching presence in specific DE classes has also been an extensive theme in our class. When researching this memo, I found it interesting that it has also been extensively covered in internal UMUC teaching documents (e.g., McDonough, W., 2011 and Meneses, L., & White, B., 2012). My favorite quote: “Effective faculty members immediately establish and maintain their presence” (CSI Staff, 2003).

The Need for “Administrative Presence”

Just as DE teaching requires different strategies than those used by face-to-face instruction to be effective, I believe that DE administration needs to be similarly considered and adapted. There appears to be far less research on building a school-, rather than classroom-, level community. The main article we read about DE administration in class (Moisey & Hughes, 2008) covers a
wide range of issues, but their discussion of “Community Building Tools” (p. 428) stayed pretty much at the class level. Similarly, I could not find much in research in several searches of ERIC.

The Problem at UMUC

Face-to-face (FTF) learning environment offers students many opportunities to feel like part of a larger school community that DE lacks: encountering other students and faculty on campus, reading a department bulletin board, picking up a campus newspaper, hanging out at the library, etc. In the three years I have been enrolled at UMUC, the only official communication I have received from UMUC staff has been from the “academic advisors,” sales representatives who have little “advice” to give except “take another class.” When researching this memo, I was shocked to discover the MDE Hub site. In fact, when I asked a UMUC reference librarian whether there was a web page of DE faculty, the librarian could not find one.

Suggestions

I offer the following suggestions for improving the feeling of community for UMUC DE students:

*Improve communication.* This is the most obvious first step in improving the sense of community. Students would welcome an e-mail from the program head at the start of each semester. You might also have instructors tell students about the MDE Hub at the beginning of each class.
Commit to excellence for the MDE Hub. The site and the people it is meant to serve deserve regular updates. Currently, on the home page, the first item listed under “Latest News” (dated March 2015), says, “Read our latest Newsletter for all the recent happenings” (University of Maryland University College, 2015). Following that link takes one to a page titled “WELCOME TO THE FALL 2014 NEWSLETTER” (University of Maryland University College, 2014).

Also, please consider adding a “Video Message from the Dean.” In my current class, I have been quite impressed about the way the instructor’s warm, personable, topical videos for each class unit has given me a feeling of connection to the class. Research certainly exists that asynchronous video improves online social presence (e.g., Borup, West, & Graham, 2012).

Give students stuff. I do not own a single tangible item that has a UMUC logo on it. Moisey and Hughes point out “students often wish to purchase memorabilia or ‘logo-wear’ as a symbol of belonging to an online college or university” (2008, p. 425). It would be nice, as a new UMUC student, to receive something like a pennant. As another option, giving every student a modest credit at the UMUC online shop could be a great public relations boon while driving significant traffic to the store site, exploding revenue.

Provide access to the UMUC library for students not currently taking a class. The UMUC library is an incredibly rich resource that most current students probably do not adequately
exploit. However, it would foster a continued connection to the program if students, even for a fee, could maintain access to the library to do continued research.

**Conclusion**

Thank you for your consideration of these suggestions. I appreciate that UMUC is a for-profit institution and that the MDE department must work within constraints; the fact that the MDE Hub is a Weebly site, rather than being hosted on UMUC.edu, speaks volumes. However, the lack of community in the MDE program is a serious problem. These suggestions, with the exception of library access, should be reasonably accomplishable on the department level. As a next step, creating a common interactive community tool for all students enrolled in the MDE program is sorely needed; but it is a large, complex undertaking that will require study and studies. The modest proposals presented here will not make the sense of community for DE students at UMUC robust or even adequate, but they can make it better.

**References**


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Meneses, L., & White, B. (2012). *Impact of direct instruction on student perception of teaching presence in online learning*. University of Maryland University College (UMUC). Retrieved from
