Building Community Online in Honors Education during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract: Face-to-face contact in higher education was greatly reduced during the global health pandemic. This study examines how honors educators experienced community building with both students and colleagues during the period of emergency remote teaching. A questionnaire was developed to assess both the quality and importance of contact with students and colleagues as experienced by teachers, as well as changes therein due to the pandemic. Thirty-seven honors educators from various disciplines at a single institution participated in the study. Quantitative analysis indicates that teachers found the contact with both their students and colleagues to be of good quality overall and that they did not experience much change in the quality of communication as a result of the pandemic despite the lack of in-person interaction. Authors consider the large variation underlying their results, observing that while some teachers experienced a great deal of improvement, others perceived a significant decrease in the quality of contact. Results indicate that honors educators feel that too little attention was paid to their needs during the pandemic, especially regarding their need for community building with colleagues. Authors argue that educational leaders must ensure that teachers' contact with both students and colleagues is sufficiently supported, emphasizing that both are important for fostering a sense of community. Authors conclude that honors educators might especially benefit from a strong sense of community in the upcoming transition to more blended educational models, as it can stimulate their professional development and promote adaptive ways of effectively dealing with change.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic—teaching & learning; community building; blended learning effectiveness; Enalyzer (computer software); Hanze University of Applied Sciences (Groningen, The Netherlands)–Honours Programmes

The outbreak of the coronavirus at the start of 2020 has transformed lives and, even more, ways of living. To slow down the spread of the pandemic, many countries decided to limit physical interactions to the bare minimum. Social distancing rules were put in place, and working and studying from home became the norm. All over the world, this distancing has had a significant impact on higher education. In the Netherlands all teachers had to make a sudden switch to remote teaching. Teaching online, which was the predominant way of teaching during the last year, differs from face-to-face courses in design and also requires a different set of pedagogical-didactical skills (Hodges et al.). The transition has made strenuous demands on teachers' flexibility and inventiveness as the majority of teachers were not trained to teach online. One of the key features of honors education, building community, also came under pressure. Teachers and students struggled to find a way to create a community while teaching and learning remotely (Wolfensberger and Ding 6). Therefore, the current study examines how teachers experienced building community with students and colleagues in honors education in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic.

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN HIGHER EDUCATION

In line with Wolfensberger, we define a sense of community as "reciprocal interaction between a lecturer and students and among lecturers and students themselves" (*The Power of Encounter* 1). These reciprocal interactions include not only academic interactions but also more personal conversations that result in bonding within a class and a safe learning environment. Being part of a community is important for students and teachers because the relationships within a community are an important means to inspire learning (Felten and Lambert 10) and to create opportunities for personal and professional growth (Cox 82; Wolfensberger, *The Power of Encounter* 1) as well as for constructive academic discussions (Wolfensberger, *Teaching for Excellence* 25–26). To create a robust community with strong and supportive interpersonal connections, members should feel welcome and cared for and should develop significant relationships with other members. Moreover, members should recognize the importance of interactions and relationships to enforce learning (Felten and Lambert 10).

COMMUNITY BUILDING DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

As illustrated by François G. Amar, one of the big challenges for honors education and education in general during the COVID-19 pandemic was

to create a committed community while not being physically present (3–9). Research by Wolfensberger and Ding (6) showed that honors teachers during the pandemic experienced a lack of personal interaction and sense of community. They desired the support that comes with being part of a committed community in which they could connect with their colleagues and develop knowledge together about how to continue education remotely. Being part of such a community may allow teachers to deal more adaptively with the changing circumstances. Although we know that a strong community is possible in an online learning environment (Rovai 327), research has also shown that teachers found it challenging to achieve this in the past year due to the sudden switch to remote teaching (Ferri et al. 10).

CURRENT STUDY

As we are now at a pivotal moment in time to induce change in how education is designed (i.e., blended and hybrid learning), we were interested in how honors teachers in higher education dealt with the sudden transition to (emergency) online education and how they experienced community building with both their colleagues and students within an online environment. Therefore, the main research question in this study was the following: How did honors teachers experience community building in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic?

METHOD

Study Context

This research project took place at Hanze University of Applied Sciences (UAS) in Groningen, the Netherlands, and has been approved by the institute's ethical review board. The authors of this article are all working at Hanze UAS. The university houses 17 different schools, at which a total of approximately 30,000 students follow bachelor's or master's programs. All schools have an honors talent program. Additionally, interdisciplinary honors programs are available. All honors programs give students the opportunity to develop their talents, but schools have the freedom to organize their honors program in such a way that it best suits the needs and wishes of their students.

The survey was distributed in June 2021 during the last quarter of the school year. Teachers were still teaching their courses, and final exams would start within a few weeks. Since March 2020, staff and students had rarely visited the campus, with most education taking place online. At the moment

this research took place, the COVID-19 measures for higher education in the Netherlands were still rather strict. Almost all teaching happened online, including honors education, despite some possibilities of face-to-face classes such as lab work and practical training of medical skills. Given the sudden change and varying levels of expertise, great variation existed within the mode of delivery of online education among schools and teachers. Teachers were asked to use Blackboard Collaborate to communicate with students during online classes but were free to use other online communication tools such as Kahoot and Mentimeter whenever they felt it would be useful. Between classes, they could interact with students via messages on Blackboard, email, or video call. Communication between teachers most often took place via video calls on the platforms MS Teams or Skype for Business, or by telephone or email. The degree to which teachers made use of specific types of online media has not been assessed in this study.

Participants

We distributed a survey among all teachers at Hanze UAS (N = 2171). For this article, we analyzed only the data of the honors teachers in our sample. Of the total number of about 65 honors teachers at Hanze UAS, 37 started the survey, among whom 27 fully completed it. Most teachers were between 50 and 59 (n = 15; 40.5%) or 40 and 49 (n = 11; 29.7%) years old. Gender was distributed fairly evenly (male n = 18, 48.6%; female n = 19, 51.4%). Most teachers had completed a master's program (n = 32; 86.5%). All disciplinary honors programs except one were represented in the sample data (n = 16). Therefore, teachers in our sample taught a wide variety of courses. Most teachers came from the schools of nursing (n = 5; 13.5%) and business management (n = 5; 13.5%). Almost half of the teachers did not teach face-to-face classes in the last quarter of the school year (48.6%). Another 37.8% of the teachers taught face-to-face classes only 1 to 5 hours a week in the last quarter of the school year. Teachers taught students at different experience levels, from first-year students to thesis supervision done by seniors (last-year students).

Survey

We created an online survey in the software program Enalyzer <http://www.enalyzer.com> addressing teachers' well-being, community building in online and face-to-face education, and the subjective impact they experienced

on their teaching due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Even though the survey covered more topics, in this article we only focus on the questions regarding community building.

Community is operationalized here as the sense of relatedness that teachers experience with the students in their class and their direct colleagues. To measure the extent to which teachers were able to build a community with their colleagues and students, we used the questionnaire Teachers' Satisfaction of the Need for Relatedness with Students and Colleagues (Klassen et al. 154). This questionnaire includes 8 statements on the sense of community teachers currently experience, i.e., during the COVID-19 pandemic, with students and teachers (4 statements each). Participants indicated for each statement how often they experienced it on a scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). Following Klassen et al., we additionally asked teachers if connecting with students and colleagues, respectively, was an important part of their motivation when working at the time of the questionnaire (160). We added seven further statements on a 1 to 7 scale to assess retrospectively how their sense of community (and the importance of it) had changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, e.g., "During the COVID-19 pandemic the contact with my colleagues has: 1 (much worsened)–7 (much improved)." Because of the unexpected nature of the pandemic, we were not able to collect pre-pandemic data and therefore could not make a direct comparison between pre- and post-pandemic experiences.

For the analysis we have separated the statements into four categories for contact both with colleagues and with students: quality of contact (e.g., I feel connected to my colleagues), change in quality of contact (e.g., During the pandemic my contact with students improved), importance of contact (e.g., Connecting with colleagues is an important part of my motivation when I'm at work), and change in importance of contact (e.g., The COVID-19 pandemic made me value contact with my students more). The survey explained that "contact" could refer to both online contact—through, for example, Blackboard Collaborate, MS Teams, or email—and face-to-face contact. We also had two open questions in which teachers could further explain their experiences with online teaching and community building during the pandemic.

Analysis

For this study, we used a combination of quantitative analyses, including descriptive statistics (i.e., means, standard deviations, and medians) and qualitative content analysis. We used Spearman's rho correlations to assess

the relationships between quality and importance of contact and the change therein. The answers to the open questions were used as data for the qualitative analysis. Annegien Langeloo coded this data using emerging categories (Creswell and Poth 69–110) with a focus on finding explanations for the quantitative results. In other words, we did not start with a determined list of codes but developed our coding scheme as important topics emerged from the data. To illustrate our findings, we included verbatim quotations. Quotations were translated from Dutch to English while keeping the original message intact as much as possible. The survey was administered anonymously, and quotations of different teachers are indicated by their participant number.

RESULTS

Quality of Contact

Table 1 shows that teachers rated the quality of contact with students during the COVID-19 pandemic high ($M = 6.04$, $SD = .641$). The scores ranged from 4.25 to 7.00, indicating that all teachers had a positive view of their contact with students during the pandemic. Teachers were also rather positive about the quality of contact with their colleagues ($M = 4.98$, $SD = 1.147$) although the average rating was lower in comparison with the average quality of contact with students. We also saw a wider range among teachers on the quality of contact with colleagues (2.25–6.75).

We explored whether the teachers thought the contact with their students and colleagues worsened or improved during the pandemic. In both cases, teachers generally did not experience much change (students: $M = 3.32$, $SD = 1.335$; teachers: $M = 3.07$, $SD = 1.359$), but the scores of individual teachers varied widely, ranging from 1 (minimum rating) to 6 (maximum rating) for contact with both students and colleagues. Some teachers experienced a strong worsening of their contacts while others indicated having much better contact with fellow teachers or with students during the pandemic than before.

Importance of Contact

Regarding the importance of contact during the pandemic, the results show that teachers strongly valued interactions—especially encounters with colleagues, which were highly valued ($M = 6.32$, $SD = .983$) by almost all teachers (range: 3–7). Most teachers also deemed contact with students important ($M = 5.29$, $SD = 1.272$, range: 2–7). On average, the pandemic

has made teachers value their contact with both colleagues (M = 5.00, SD = 2.108) and students (M = 5.04, SD = 1.895) even more, although large variation exists among teachers (colleagues: 1–7; students: 1–7).

Relationships between Quality, Importance, and Change

Using Spearman's rho correlations, we explored the relationships between the quality, importance, and change experienced therein for the contact with both colleagues and students. (The results are presented in Table 1.) We found a significant relation between change in importance of contact with colleagues and change in importance of contact with students, suggesting that teachers who thought their contact with colleagues became more important during the pandemic had the same feeling about their contact with students during that time. Furthermore, change in importance of contact with colleagues was significantly related to quality of contact with colleagues and importance of contact with students, indicating that teachers who placed a higher importance on contact with colleagues also rated their contact with colleagues to be of a higher quality and highly valued contact with students. Teachers' quality of contact with colleagues was significantly related to their experienced change in quality of contact with colleagues, indicating that teachers who rated the quality of contact with their colleagues as high had experienced an increase in the quality of contact during the pandemic.

High-quality contact with colleagues was significantly related to a high perceived importance of contact with students but not of contact with colleagues. In the same way, teachers who experienced high-quality contact with their students were significantly more likely to indicate that connecting with their colleagues, but not with students, was an important part of their motivation during the pandemic; this suggests that when the one need is satisfied (i.e., high quality of contact with either students or colleagues), the other need becomes more important.

Qualitative Analysis of Community Building during the Pandemic

Through open questions, we hoped to gain more insight into the reasoning behind teachers' quantitative responses on the contact with students and colleagues during the pandemic. Even though the quantitative results show a rather positive image of the quality and importance of interaction, the comments of the teachers were more focused on their negative experiences with community building during the pandemic.

Table 1. Means, Medians, Standard Deviations, and Spearman's Rho Correlation Matrix for Quality and Importance of Contact with Students and Colleagues

	M	Md	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Quality Students	6.04	6	.641	1	.029	.283	.190	-.089	.611**	-.011	-.273
2. Quality Colleagues	4.98	5	1.147		1	.230	.446*	.782**	-.103	-.062	.429*
3. Change Quality Students	3.32	3	1.335			1	.709**	.041	.100	-.171	-.077
4. Change Quality Colleagues	3.07	3	1.359				1	.149	-.093	-.092	.012
5. Importance Students	5.29	5	1.272					1	.132	-.144	.422*
6. Importance Colleagues	6.32	4	.983						1	-.045	-.117
7. Change Importance Students	5.04	6	1.895							1	.443*
8. Change Importance Colleagues	5.00	6	2.108								1

Notes: $n = 28$. All variables have a theoretical range of 1–7.
*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$

Teachers mainly commented on the interaction and community building with their colleagues. Teacher 17 mentioned that during the pandemic the attention was mostly focused on keeping students motivated for their education and on how to build a community online with their students. Teachers experienced less support for their own work situation or keeping in contact with their colleagues:

> I would have liked the same attention for teachers (the ones who have to make it happen): What does the teacher need? How do we ensure this enormous burden (the switch, the work pressure, the reduced contact with students/colleagues) is bearable? In my opinion there has been little concern about this. (Teacher 17)

The teachers mentioned that even though the contact with teachers with whom they worked in close collaboration remained the same or even intensified during the pandemic, they lost contact with other colleagues they only spoke to in the hallway or at coffee breaks, and they therefore experienced less sense of community with their team. For example, Teacher 24 noticed:

> You see fewer colleagues, and therefore, when you see someone live, it is more valuable. With many colleagues there is no contact, because the 'occasional encounter' is omitted. I also notice that the mutual communication deteriorates; less effort is put into good contact and coordination. Everyone seems to be working for themselves, and the common [goal] seems to be diminishing.

Another teacher mentions that in the next school year (assuming that more face-to-face education is possible again), time should be invested in team building: "Often [we had] no feeling of being part of a team, organization. Free up time, money to facilitate team building activities (off campus!) in the coming year" (Teacher 4).

Four teachers also mentioned some positive experiences in working from home. They experienced more freedom and autonomy in their work. Teacher 25 advocated "More freedom to act as a team to what the situation demands (certainly at the beginning of the corona crisis there was room to do what you thought was right as a team)." This freedom also had a positive impact on the quality of education: "Much less input and more rest ensure that I have more time to prepare things properly and not come home exhausted; I think that improves the quality" (Teacher 2).

Regarding the contact with students, Teacher 26 mentioned the following: "The interaction and contact with students is much less present with blended learning. Less community building [exists] among students and the motivation is less strong." Two teachers also noticed that their students had fallen behind in comparison to pre-pandemic teaching, not only in terms of study content but also in social aspects.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

In this study we explored the experiences of teachers with community building in honors education during the COVID-19 pandemic. We examined the changes in quality and importance of contact with students and colleagues using both quantitative and qualitative data from the survey we distributed among the honors teachers at Hanze UAS. Our study shows that honors teachers experienced contact during the pandemic to be of high quality, rating the contact with students somewhat higher in quality than the contact with colleagues. They did not experience significant change in the quality of contact during the pandemic but did start to value the contact with both students and colleagues more than before the pandemic.

Our results show that even though teachers valued the interaction with colleagues the most, they thought that during the pandemic their contact with students was of a higher quality. They also felt that student success and well-being were more important to the institute's management than support of the teachers, which was insufficient. On the other hand, they greatly valued the level of independence and autonomy they gained in their work during the pandemic. Contact with fellow teachers is not only of great value to teachers themselves, but community building among teaching staff is greatly beneficial to their professional development and can enhance honors programs (Cox 93). Educational leaders should therefore provide their teachers with sufficient opportunities to interact with their colleagues in a dynamic, nurturing way to facilitate a sense of community among staff (Eib and Miller 1). This sense of community will be especially important throughout the upcoming transition to more blended or online education and will likely benefit both teachers themselves and their teaching (Terosky and Heasley 157).

Our results also show that connecting with students was an important part of teachers' motivation during the pandemic, although less so than connecting with colleagues. Connecting with colleagues might have been a priority for teachers over connecting with students because their need for contact with students was sufficiently satisfied while their need for contact

with colleagues was not. This idea seems to be supported by teachers' own observations that most support during the pandemic was directed at community building with students rather than with colleagues. Additionally, the results show that for teachers who experience good quality contact with their students, connecting with colleagues—but not with students—is a greater part of their motivation when working. Similarly, for teachers who experience good quality contact with their colleagues, connecting with colleagues is not necessarily a large part of their motivation, but connecting with students is. Good quality contact with both colleagues and students therefore seems to be important to teachers, but the extent to which these two needs are already satisfied determines whether the teacher will focus more on connecting with colleagues or students. High-quality contact with both students and colleagues is needed to provide teachers with a good sense of community (Klassen et al. 161). Educational institutions must find a balance to address both needs in an online education setting.

On average, teachers did not report much change in the quality of their contact with students and colleagues due to the COVID-19 pandemic even though the number of face-to-face interactions was greatly reduced during that period. Online interactions might be sufficient to maintain social connectedness (at least partially) at times when face-to-face interactions are scarce. However, social connectedness seems to depend largely on the type of online medium used (Nguyen et al. 3), which varied widely across schools and teachers in our sample and could explain the large variation that underlies our results, with some teachers experiencing a great decrease or increase in the quality of contact due to the pandemic. Jensen et al. state that teaching priorities in part determine whether teachers' contact with their students is better or worse during online courses compared to face-to-face classes (1157). Teachers who prioritize social interaction over student-subject interaction might benefit from opportunities that online education offers to more effectively direct social interaction, such as quickly changing between different group settings in a way that stimulates social interactions, allowing a more positive student-teacher relationship as a result. Future observational research might therefore focus on how teachers facilitate contact with their students in an online environment to see what might explain the individual differences as shown by the teachers in our study; this could give us insight into effective teaching methods that can foster teachers' sense of community in online environments.

Teachers have indicated that they now value the contact with their students and colleagues even more than before the pandemic, and future research

might investigate in more detail why this is the case. Because the pandemic was an unexpected event, it was not possible to collect baseline data on our variables, making it difficult to draw conclusions about changes over time. Collecting more in-depth qualitative data—for example, by using interviews or focus groups with teachers—could give more insight into what underlies the changes that teachers experienced in both the quality and importance of contact with colleagues and students during and after the pandemic. This insight could help us further stimulate community building in the (blended) future of higher honors education.

Community building is a vital part of honors education (Wolfensberger, *Teaching for Excellence*). Even more than in regular education, interaction between students and between the teacher and the students is core to letting students reflect on their own education and its societal contexts (Amar 2). Only honors teachers participated in the present study, and in the Netherlands many of them will have been specifically trained in community building (Ten Berge and van der Vaart 76–77; Heijne-Penninga et al. 7). We could therefore expect honors teachers to already have a strong focus on community building, having higher expectations of the community among teachers and students and putting more effort into creating an engaged community in their classroom. Future research might indicate whether teachers from regular study programs have had experiences similar to those of the honors teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, we only explored communities of colleagues/teachers and communities of a teacher with his or her students. Because we only surveyed teachers, we did not gain much insight into the community building among students without the involvement of a teacher. These types of communities were likely impacted differently by the pandemic, possibly with communities among students being of lower quality since most interaction in online education takes place between the teacher and students.

Limitations

We recognize several limitations in our study. First, the study focused on a survey of community building in higher education, but the scope of the survey was much wider than analyzed in the present study and a limited number of statements was used to assess community building. Therefore, results should be interpreted with caution. Second, the sample size of our study was rather small as only 27 teachers fully completed the survey. Therefore, we could not examine the underlying variation in our results in detail. The teachers in our

study were from different fields and taught students at different stages of their study, which might explain teachers' varying experiences with online teaching. In a future study with a larger sample, these differences between teachers could be addressed. Also, even though we distributed our survey to all teachers at the university, it is possible that teachers with a strong opinion about or interest in online teaching were overrepresented in our study. However, we expect that both opponents and proponents of blended learning had an incentive to participate in this study, still leaving us with varied responses.

Implications for Practice

The present study has shown that teachers highly value their contact with both fellow teachers and students, especially during a period of (emergency) remote teaching. Although in general the quality of contact was high, teachers primarily missed the face-to-face contact with colleagues. More attention should be paid to the needs of teachers and not just the well-being and sense of community of students. The past year and a half have demonstrated the possibility of providing high-quality education and building community online, but this success requires specific skills and effort from both teachers and students. A future with more blended learning and/or online education will require more attention to faculty development. Teachers will need ongoing training, especially in community building in an online environment. Additionally, management and team leaders should, in close collaboration with teachers, invest and be schooled in creating a strong sense of community among colleagues through face-to-face and online encounters while keeping intact the independence and autonomy that teachers gained and valued during the pandemic.

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