



How to create a sense of belonging in a digital environment for adult learners

Mary Clare Massicotte

Vancouver Island University

OLTD 502 - The Digital Learning Continuum

Dr. Randy Labonte

June 5, 2021

Creating a sense of belonging for adult learners in a digital environment

In 2020, while facilitating a virtual introductory Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) program, I realized that, especially during the pandemic, people are looking for social connection. They felt isolated, particularly during the lockdown periods and were seeking ways to belong to something -- through their faith community, sports activities, music, volunteerism, or even, in extreme cases, gang activity.

The purpose of this paper is to explore how to create a sense of belonging in a digital environment and to review the literature on how to stay socially connected through digital programs. Additionally, as part of the EXTEND Curator badge activity described in Appendix A, I will incorporate a review of some research to create discourse with adult learners during and after training sessions. I also included information from a social experiment in Appendix B that references the EXTEND Collaborator badge.

As an adult educator, I feel that it is important to explain where belonging fits within education and training. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001) framework states that three elements must be present in online learning: Cognitive, Social, and Teaching presence(s). According to Parker (2013), teachers can create a sense of belonging by combining two frameworks: the Constructivist Pedagogical (CP) one which encourages learners to create their own meaning with learning through the learning environment, activities and methods, and the Community of Inquiry (CoI), which takes a collaborative approach to learning.

The adult learners that I teach within my consulting practice come from a wide range of backgrounds. They are adults participating in custom-designed training, such as that for volunteer fire departments. Or they are people who sign up for CMHA non-credit courses for personal development. Adult learners tend to have fewer social contact opportunities (with people outside of their home and/or

work environments), and they value interactions with real humans (Goeman et al., 2020, p. 3). In a digital environment, interactions with real humans need to be fostered by skillful facilitators.

Barber (2020) uses “digital moments” for fostering a sense of belonging -- whereby she asks her students to describe their week, in virtual pods, by showing a photo, quote, colour, or link to a webpage. R. Garrison et al. (2000) state that “Self-disclosure is described as a sharing of feelings, attitudes, experiences, and interests. As a result, it encourages others to be more forthcoming and to reciprocate, with the outcome being increased trust, support, and a sense of belonging.” (p. 100). I can find true value in using digital moments, especially to provide connection with the other students. In 2020, I used a similar approach through weekly icebreakers, either through verbal check-ins or the use of the whiteboard to draw something, for students to learn a bit more about me and about each other. However, I like the reflective piece of using a tool (picture, quote, a colour, or a link) to describe how their week was.

When I facilitate any course, I always allow ample time for check ins and check outs at the beginning and the end of each session. This investment of time is critical for the adult learners; it allows them to describe how they are doing, where they are at, and what has been going on in their lives. I then take those digital moments and weave them into the examples of the session as reflective practice.

Another essential component of engagement with adult learners is ensuring that people feel safe, respected, and encouraged to speak. Reflecting on her study, Barber (2020) concludes, “Interpersonal connections, within a professional context were a key component of the class, and professional boundaries were respected” (p. 393).

In their study of social presence scenarios, different strategies to enact and improve social presence were identified (Goeman et al, 2020). Three scenarios were elaborated; welcome and start of the programme, providing feedback and working together, and study progress and support. The conclusions were the accessibility and flexibility that blended education can provide is of value in adult

learning. As an aside to that finding, they also noted different reactions from the coordinators; some felt that it was unrealistic to try to create social presence. In my experience, some people normally do not feel comfortable with scenario-based learning, but in real situations, likely with the support of experienced coordinators would feel much more genuine fostering social presence, as that is what facilitators/coordinators do.

To support the above statement, in 2020, I facilitated an essential employment skills program and one of the young Indigenous male students mentioned to me that it was the first time that he ever felt safe and encouraged to share how he learns and feels about learning. I took that as a huge compliment and realized that I am on track with creating a safe and respectful environment for learners.

To establish a sense of belonging to a group, especially for people who are strangers to each other, I will ask the groups if they wish to stay connected via social media as there are so many platforms that can be used. Several of the participants that took the CMHA program in 2020 remain connected through private Facebook groups and WhatsApp.

Köbler et al. (2010) observe that social media allows users to post short notes, i.e., to micro-blog, about what they are feeling or experiencing. They note: "Status updates within the Facebook platform follow the micro-blogging paradigm, comparable to entries posted through the Twitter platform, enabling users to post ad-hoc status reports on emotional and situational states" (p. 7). Furthermore, the authors go on to say that micro-blogging is used to convey personal information to stay connected to others. I think that it is a good way to stay connected, like how some members of Cohort 9 text each other throughout the Online Learning & Teaching Program (OLTLD). It is more informal than writing an email, especially if the students are strangers to each other.

In addition to micro-blogging, blogs are generally an extremely important connection tool. Blogging is a way to tell a story about something. Kind & Evans (2014) reviewed blogs, and in particular micro blogs, for medical professionals as lifelong learners. I learned, through reading this article, that

Twitter is a microblog platform which I had not been considered previously. The adult learners that I work with and I will explore this concept in more detail to see if it is appropriate for these learners.

An alternative approach for fostering a sense of belonging are communities of practice. Farnsworth et al. (2016) state that communities of practice can arise anywhere that people want to collectively share information, expertise, interests, and practices (p. 140). Their premise is that learning takes place through participation in multiple social practices, practices which are formed through pursuing any kind of enterprise over time. Wenger (2011) suggests that various technology, such as Skype, Facebook, LinkedIn, MSN chatrooms, YouTube, Ted Talks, and Vimeo, can support a community of practice.

In my opinion, social connectedness is what adult learners are looking for, especially in informal, and non-credit courses such as the CMHA ones. After reviewing several studies, Diep (2018) concludes that participants who stay in contact through social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter feel more connected. In fact, he shows that the greater the participation in the social networking systems, the more a person feels socially connected. He uses a model for the three dimensions of online participation (discussion contribution, collaborative facilitation, and social interaction) and he aligns it to adult learners' social connectedness (Diep, 2018, p. 337).

To add to this discussion, Gray (2004) studied how online communities of practice contribute to informal learning programs. Her take is that we all belong to communities at home and through our hobbies (p. 3). The study involved enculturation of a newcomer to the practice of coordinating communities of practice. She concludes that it is meaningful for members of a professional organization to share their work and experiences. The aspect of story telling throughout the study proved to be a valuable process for the participants. It also helped to provide cohesiveness for those who are not geographically close to each other, which is the situation that I face with the learners who participate in the virtual CMHA program delivery.

In conclusion, there is no magic bullet for creating a sense of belonging and encouraging ongoing social connection for adult learners. Through the journey of writing this paper, I discovered what I intrinsically already knew: adult learners vary and want different degrees of social connectivity. However, this research will improve my practice as a facilitator, as I will incorporate Barber's "digital moments" so people can get to know each other better and develop a sense of trust. Through the social experiment that I conducted for the EXTEND Collaborator badge described in Appendix B, I may encourage, depending again on the group, the use of an informal community of practice. This micro-blogging tool, as described by Bates (2014) and Kind & Evans (2015), can be through one of the social media platforms (Facebook, WhatsApp, Slack, or Instagram). I could incorporate the use of a social platform (Facebook, Instagram, WhatsApp, Slack, or something else) to get people used to connecting with each other throughout the courses. If they wish to continue after the course is finished, they can create their own private group to carry on.

References

- Alsaadat, K. (2018). The impact of social media technologies on adult learning. *International Journal of Electrical and Computer Engineering (Malacca, Malacca)*, 8(5), 3747.
<http://ijece.iaescore.com/index.php/IJECE/article/view/8637/9564>
- Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks*, 5(2), 1–17
<https://olj.onlinelearningconsortium.org/index.php/olj/article/view/1875/706>
- Barber, W., 2020. Building creative critical online learning communities through digital moments. *The Electronic Journal of e-Learning*, 18(5), pp. 387-396. <https://academic-publishing.org/index.php/ejel/article/view/1920/1883>
- Bates, T. (2014). The role of communities of practice in a digital age. *Online Learning and Distance Education Resources*. <https://www.tonybates.ca/2014/10/01/the-role-of-communities-of-practice-in-a-digital-age/>
- Diep, A. N., Zhu, C., Cocquyt, C., De Greef, M., & Vanwing, T. (2019). Adult learners' social connectedness and online participation: The importance of online interaction quality. *Studies in Continuing Education*, 41(3), 326-346. <https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.viu.ca/doi/pdf/10.1080/0158037X.2018.1518899?needAccess=true>
- Farnsworth, V., Kleanthous, I., & Wenger-Trayner, E. (2016). Communities of practice as a social theory of learning: A conversation with Etienne Wenger. *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 64:2, 139-160,
<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.viu.ca/doi/pdf/10.1080/00071005.2015.1133799?needAccess=true>
- Garrison, R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in text based environment:

Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2–3), 87–105.

https://cde.athabasca.ca/coi_site/documents/Garrison_Anderson_Archer_Critical_Inquiry_model.pdf

Goeman, K., De Grez, L., van den Muijsenberg, E., & Elen, J. (2020). Investigating the enactment of social presence in blended adult education. *Educational Research*, 62(3), 340-356.

<https://www-tandfonline-com.ezproxy.viu.ca/doi/full/10.1080/00131881.2020.1796517>

Gray, B. (2004). Informal learning in an online community of practice. *Journal of Distance Education*, 19(1), 20-35. <http://www.ijede.ca/index.php/jde/article/view/103/83>

Kind, T., & Evans, Y. (2015). Social media for lifelong learning. *International Review of Psychiatry* 27(2), 124-132. <https://doi.org/10.3109/09540261.2014.990421>

Köbler, F., Riedl, C., Vetter, C., Leimeister, J.M., & Krcmar, H. (2010). Social connectedness on facebook: An explorative study on status message usage. *Proceedings of 16th Americas Conference on Information Systems*. <https://ssrn.com/abstract=1641178>

Muñoz-Rodríguez, J. M., Hernández-Serrano, M. J., & Tabernero, C. (2020). Digital identity levels in older learners: A new focus for sustainable lifelong education and inclusion. *Sustainability*, 12(24), 10657. <http://dx.doi.org.ezproxy.viu.ca/10.3390/su122410657>

Oh, H. J., Ozkaya, E., & LaRose, R. (2014). How does online social networking enhance life satisfaction? The relationships among online supportive interaction, affect, perceived social support, sense of community, and life satisfaction. *Computers in Human Behavior*, 30, 69–78. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2013.07.053>

Parker, R. E. (2013). *Redesigning courses for online delivery: Design, interaction, media and evaluation*. ProQuest Ebook Central <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/viu/detail.action?docID=1593397>

Ricoy, M., & Feliz, T. (2016). Twitter as a learning community in higher education. *Journal of Educational Technology and Society*, 19, 237-248. https://www-jstor-org.ezproxy.viu.ca/stable/jeductechsoci.19.1.237?seq=1#metadata_info_tab_contents.


Wenger, E. (2011). *Communities of practice: a brief introduction*. <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/1794/11736/A%20brief%20introduction%20to%20CoP.pdf>


Appendix A

EXTEND Curator Badge

To delve deeper into this topic I will explain how I incorporated the critical challenge question “how to create a sense of belonging in a digital environment” into the EXTEND Curator badge <https://extend.ecampusontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/Curator-Module-2021.pdf> activities.

To begin with, I reviewed the Creative Commons licenses explained in this YouTube video <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4ZvJGV6YF6Y>. Understanding Creative Commons is essential for my work as a contractor. I quite often am researching images or videos to imbed into curriculum through Creative Commons sources. Creative Commons uses license elements, to learn more about them go to <https://creativecommons.org/about/cclicenses/>, or if you want to search for a product go to search.creativecommons.org. The image that I selected was for Facebook and Twitter. It is licensed CC BY-SA which included the following elements:

BY  – Credit must be given to the creator

SA  – Adaptations must be shared under the same terms

To view the image click on this link "[arsp_050](#)" by [theanthonyryan](#) is licensed under [CC BY-SA 2.0](#).

Secondly, I looked at locating three Open Educational Resources. The ones that I selected were through Vancouver Island University’s library by narrowing my search criteria to adult learners, social connection, and Open Access items only. The documents that I found are:

1. Chen, J. C. (2017). Nontraditional Adult Learners: The Neglected Diversity in Postsecondary Education. SAGE Open. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2158244017697161>
2. Dron, J., & Anderson, T. (2014). Teaching Crowds: Learning and Social Media. AU Press.

<https://web-a-ebshost-com.ezproxy.viu.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzg2MTMwNF9fQU41?sid=9bc398c1-5bb6-48e3-b04f-f1cb3decf5ca@sessionmgr4007&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1https://web-a-ebshostom.ezproxy.viu.ca/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzg2MTMwNF9fQU41?sid=9bc398c1-5bb6-48e3-b04f-f1cb3decf5ca@sessionmgr4007&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>

3. Lee, B. (2013). Social Media as an Informal Learning Platform: Case Study on Adult Learning at SIM University, Singapore, *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, Volume 93, 2013, Pages 1158-1161, ISSN 1877-0428, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.10.007>

Thirdly, I applied the following CRAAP criteria to review online literature.

Currency: The timeliness of the information

The article *Nontraditional Adult Learners: The Neglected Diversity in Postsecondary Education* was published online on March 6, 2017, and the initial publication was January 1, 2017. It has not been revised or updated. The topic that I wanted to research initially was during the pandemic from 2020-to date, however it is extremely hard to find relevant information from an open educational resource that fits this criterion. So, this article from 2017 is current enough. The links to the article are fully functional, and a downloadable pdf is available.

Relevance: The importance of the information for your needs

The article does relate to my needs particularly because it focuses on non-traditional adult learners (NAL) and the challenges that they (we) face when attending courses in post-secondary institutions. The intended audience is post-secondary academic institutions and program planners. It is written at a level, with enough data to affect policy changes. I understood it very well and could see how it could form some changes within program planning such as incorporation of prior learning assessment (PLA) into programs.

Authority: The source of the information

The creator of the article is Joseph. C. Chan, an assistant professor at DePaul University's School for New Learning, a competence-based, individualized degree-completion program for adult learners. Joseph Chen is a licensed clinical psychologist, Associate Professor, and Director of Student Support Services at SCPS. He received his undergraduate degree in Psychology from Wheaton College and completed his doctorate in Counseling Psychology from Virginia Commonwealth University. His clinical experience includes community mental health, juvenile corrections, and university counseling centers. His research interests include: the impact of culture on perceptions/behavior, the change process, health and wellbeing, and the influence of groups/community/systems on worldview development.

Accuracy: The reliability and truthfulness of the information

The information in the paper is supported by lots of good evidence. As an adult educator, I was pleased to see references to Malcolm Knowles, an adult education practitioner whom I have studied. Knowles is credited for explaining the difference between pedagogy, or the science and art of teaching children, to andragogy, the science and art of teaching adults. This article in Sage Open has had 25,626 view and downloads, Cross referenced 22 times, cited in the Web of Science 12 times. However, if you search for it under Google Scholar it shows that it has been cited 108 times. This article has been peer reviewed, in fact, Sage Open posts this on their website "peer-reviewed, "Gold" open access journal from SAGE that publishes original research and review articles in an interactive, open access format. Articles may span the full spectrum of the social and behavioral sciences and the humanities." <https://journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo>

The article was error free and grammatically correct.

Purpose: The reason the information exists

I believe that the author wrote this article to affect change in post-secondary institutions, especially around course delivery, implementing prior learning, creation of adult friendly campuses, and changing

mindsets of academic institutions to understand that non-traditional learners are a huge market for post-secondary institutions. I believe that the information is based on facts, demographic trends and research and is not just opinion and/or propaganda. There is an undertone of personal bias in the article but not one that makes it unreadable or not credible.

Through the EXTEND Curator badge activity I can honestly say that I have a much better understanding of how-to curate information that is valid, current, open sourced, and licensed. This information will be important for my studies at VIU and through my professional practice.

Appendix B

EXTEND Collaborator Badge - Social Experiment

I also did a social experiment in line with the Collaborator badge

<https://extend.ecampusontario.ca/wp-content/uploads/Collaborator-Module-2021.pdf> by

reaching out through Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook to various professional organizations that

I am involved with, and informally through my social network. I posted this question “What

digital tools do you use in your educational programs for adult learners to create a sense of

community (i.e., Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, etc.)? Your contribution is greatly

appreciated!” and I added these hashtags: [#extend](#) [#adultlearners](#) [#VIU](#) [#oltd502](#) [#Curator](#).

Here is a summary of what I received back from the posts:

Twitter:

I posted the tweet to the International Association of Emergency Managers, Canadian Council @IAEMCdnCouncil and to the International Association of Facilitators @IAFacilitators. 337 people saw the tweet, with 6 engagements. I did not receive any replies, but my tweet was forwarded by IAF to two different chapters.

LinkedIn: I received 241 views of my post and the following three written (verbatim) comments:

“For the most part in this virtual environment, I have been using Zoom and MS Teams in combination with MS One Note as the foundational instructional platforms. For less formal matters, Whats app has proven to be of great value to keep the teams communicating outside of the virtual classroom.”

“When working online, I use a combo of Nearpod and Collaborate Ultra to deliver Tutorial material and encourage small group work (mostly case based learning). Also highly supportive of our student's Facebook pages for the program. Finally, use SMS and

other means of contact to connect w them while they are on placement. Hope that helps.”.

“In lieu of face to face zoom classes have been very successful, also using Zoom for drop in cafes where students can join for informal conversation with a soda or glass of wine.

To stimulate group teaching and learning (and community) as part of a module, I post a focused question on the learning platform discussion board (moodle D2L or whatever) and require one post, 2 responses to other posts. I only weigh in after deadline. Hope this helps.”

Facebook (FB):

There were 12 replies on my private FB page, none from the Victoria Facilitator’s Network. People replied that they use Zoom (the professional package with higher security levels), email, private FB groups, FB messenger, Facetime, Slack, MS Teams, WhatsApp, Google docs, and Twitter.

In conclusion, the social experiment was somewhat successful, although it did not increase my network at all, it helped validate the tools that I was thinking that I would use in the future for social connectedness and to develop a sense of belonging.