

Culture and Community: Case Study of a Video-Conferenced Graduate Distance Education Program

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Abstract

While the phenomenon of learning communities within the online environment has been examined in some depth, there is limited research-based information regarding the impact of videoconferenced programs on the learning experiences of adults, and little has been written about how the collaborative learning experiences of adults can be facilitated through participation in such programs. Moreover, little empirical qualitative research is currently available on Jewish distance learning programs—a growing field of practice. By way of qualitative case study methodology, this research explores the connection between culture and community within the Jewish videoconferenced context. The study sheds light on the unique cultural vestiges that enhance Jewish learners' shared spirit for community, and their motivation and ability to create it in a distance learning program. Given the culturally specific nature of this study, the author discusses how the findings might transfer to similar programs offered by way of videoconferencing. In addition ideas regarding implications for practice and for further research are offered.

Resumé

Bien que le phénomène des communautés d'apprentissage dans un environnement en ligne ait été examiné, il existe peu d'études sur l'impact des programmes en vidéoconférence en regard des expériences d'apprentissage des adultes, et bien peu a été écrit sur la façon par laquelle les expériences d'apprentissage collaboratif des adultes peuvent être facilitées par leur participation à de tels programmes. De plus, peu de recherche empirique qualitative a été effectuée sur les programmes d'apprentissage juifs à distance, un domaine de pratique en expansion. Grâce à une méthodologie d'étude de cas qualitative, cette étude explore le lien entre culture et communauté à l'intérieur d'un contexte de vidéoconférence juif. L'étude éclaire les vestiges culturels uniques qui augmentent l'esprit de participation de l'apprenant juif à la communauté, et sa motivation et capacité à la créer dans un programme à distance. Étant donné la nature culturelle spécifique de cette étude, l'auteur indique comment les résultats pourraient s'appliquer à des programmes similaires offerts par vidéoconférence. De plus, des idées en rapport avec la pratique et des recherches futures sont offertes.

Introduction

Both education and the workplace have contributed a number of variations to the use of the term *community*, a somewhat nebulous term often used interchangeably with *learning community*. A review of the online learning literature reveals terms such as *community of inquiry* (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003), *discourse community* (Gram, 1999), and *knowledge community* (Stacey, 1999). Metaphors such as *cybercommunity* (Jones, 1997), *Cyberville* (Horn, 1998), and *virtual community* (Herring, 2004; Schwier, 2001) have also emerged. In addition, the concept of community is often referred to in the literature in less tangible ways as a “sense of 'community'” (Conrad, 2005).

A community can act as a learning community when it typically engages in the acquisition, creation, or transformation of knowledge (Schwier, 2001). Shulman (1997) defines six distinct principles that appear to characterize the conditions for authentic and enduring learning in the community of learners model: Generative content; active learning; reflective thinking and practice; collaboration; passion; and community or culture. Fulton and Riel (1999) define a learning community as a group of people who have a shared interest in a topic, task, or problem; respect for the diversity of perspectives; a range of skills and abilities; the opportunity and commitment to work as a team; tools for sharing multiple perspectives; and knowledge production as a shared goal or outcome. These definitions, which underscore the social relationships among participants as a core component in conceptualizing a learning community, informed the present study.

Research Problem and Purpose

Distance learning programs in the Jewish educational world, while a relatively new phenomenon, are burgeoning. (JESNA Report, 2003; Levine, 2004; Margolis, in press). Online courses and workshops are sponsored by academic institutions and other accredited initiatives. Institutes of Jewish higher learning also offer distance learning degree programs via various interactive distance delivery methods and combinations of methods including web based computer-mediated technology, web conferencing, and videoconferencing.

While the notion of community has been at the heart of distance education since its inception, and while the phenomenon of learning communities within the online environment has been extensively researched, it appears that videoconferencing—a lesser-used technology—has received little attention in this regard. Moreover, while the phenomenon of the learning community within the Jewish distance education environment has been identified (Bloomberg, 2003; Goodman,

2002; Tamivaara, 2003), how and in what ways the learning community impacts the learning experience has not been fully explored. This paucity of empirical research is noteworthy in light of the implications of the social component of learning, and even more so, given the centrality of the conception of community and communal study in Judaism.

This study explored the connection between culture and community within a Jewish videoconferenced context, with a particular focus on learners' shared spirit or desire for community, and their motivation and ability to create and sustain it. In seeking to understand this learning experience the study addressed three research questions: 1) How do students and educators participating in this program conceptualize their experience of the learning community?; 2) What underpins the formation of a learning community in this program, and what are the factors and conditions that are perceived to foster and/or inhibit its formation and development?; and 3) How and in what ways do students in this program perceive that the learning community impacts on their individual learning? It was anticipated that the knowledge generated from this inquiry would afford new insights into what constitutes a learning community within a videoconferenced context, and inform adult educational practice.

Theoretical Framework

If as St Clair (1998) says, "...learning is not only dependent on community, but community relationships are essentially dependent upon learning" (p. 13), and if one considers community to be an integral aspect of the teaching-learning experience, an assumption upon which this research study was predicated, then fostering opportunities for meaningful learning and a deep understanding of *how* learning occurs becomes key. An important goal of all education should be to understand how learners learn, and to help learners learn how to learn in a variety of situations and under a variety of conditions. This goal seems particularly critical in an environment of rapid technological change.

Recently, research in the field of distance education has been critiqued for its atheoretical approach, the contention being that with few exceptions, there is little reference to theory outside the field (Conrad, 2005; Gibson, 2003; Perraton, 2000; Saba, 2000, 2003). That adult learning theory—as an analytical perspective or framework—can be drawn upon to aid adult educators understand and enhance current practice is particularly pertinent in the ever-transforming field of distance education if this field is indeed to remain a viable provider of accessible and continuous learning. Moreover, since implications for learning of the learning community experience were a core aspect of this study, adult

learning theory was used as one of the analytical lenses for this study's data.

Adult education as a field has always valued learning from collaboration and from experience, with Dewey, as early as 1916 making the claim that "the social environment ... is truly educative in the effects in the degree in which an individual shares or participates in some conjoint activity" (1916/1954, p. 26). Recent calls for the consideration of theory and theory development in the fields of adult and distance education extol the need to make sense of complex practices and phenomena by recognizing the collaboration among learners that is essential to successful distance learning (Garrison, 2000). Socio-cultural or contextual theories of learning, which includes experiential learning, and situated cognition, shed light on the highly interactive learning processes in which people engage in learning communities. The central tenet of this emergent body of theory—that describes the process of learning as a collaborative activity, in which individuals co-construct knowledge within a social and cultural context—elucidates and provides insight into the experiential learning processes that characterize learning communities.

Dewey's assertions about the relationship between learning and experience inform many of the subsequent theories about learning from experience. For Dewey (1938) experiences become educative, and individuals can learn from life, throughout life. In this way, growth becomes a means and an "end in view" (1938, p. 225). Echoing the sentiment that learning is socially and culturally constructed, Boud and his colleagues (Andreson, Boud & Cohen, 1995; Boud, Cohen & Walker, 1993; Boud & Miller, 1996) describe how adults learn from experience. In this view, experience becomes the foundation of and stimulus for learning. Learning is a holistic experience, socially and culturally constructed, and influenced and shaped by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs.

The concept of situated cognition goes a step beyond experiential learning theory by challenging conventional assumptions that knowledge can be abstracted from contexts in which it is used and that knowledge can be learned apart from those contexts (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989). Presenting as it does, "a conception of learning as an aspect of culturally, historically, situated activity" (Lave 1993, p. 30), the application of situated cognition theory to education has indeed resulted in a rich and increasingly expanding body of knowledge related to interactive and collaborative learning upon which the idea of the learning community is predicated. From this theoretical perspective, learning is a social process, whereby people become involved within a community or culture of learning, and participate in its history and socio-cultural values and

mores (Lave, 1993; Lave & Wenger, 1991). This has direct implications for Jewish education, which sets learning solidly within a social context, incorporating the individual within the community, and creating a unique culture of learning.

Situation cognition theory posits that the nature of interactions among learners, the tools that are used within these interactions, the activity itself, and the social and cultural context in which the activity takes place, all shape the learning process. As pointed out by sociocultural learning theorists Brown, Collins & Duguid (1989), context is an essential and central element in learning because knowledge is a product of the activity, context and culture in which it is developed and used. People take their cues for understanding as they socially interact, and learning develops in context as they address and deal with challenges and issues, and establish shared meaning. The nature of Jewish education is such that it encourages personal engagement, socializing, and community building, thereby impacting meaning-making and identity development. The learning community thus becomes the catalyst or motivator for learning, the support group for maintaining and sustaining the learning process, as well as the context within which learning occurs. The context in effect is not just the venue for learning, but is in fact the learning (Davis & Sumara, 1997).

Research Methodology

This research employed qualitative case study methodology to illustrate one example of a distance learning community within the field of adult Jewish education. The site that was selected as the case study for this research, and which for purposes of confidentiality is referred to as *Bet Sefer*, is an accredited institution of Jewish higher education dedicated to the professional development of Jewish educators. Among the seven institutions that make up the Association of Institutions of Higher Learning in Jewish Education, *Bet Sefer* is one of five colleges in North America that offer Master's degree programs in Judaic studies and Jewish education, and of these five institutions, *Bet Sefer* is one of three that makes use of videoconferencing technology. Since the mid 1990's an extensive program of synchronous interactive videoconferencing courses has been offered, providing access to students in eight US cities, where Masters students are organized as cohort groups.

A purposeful sampling procedure was used to identify and select research participants involved in the program. The sample included a group of Master's students (N = 22) and a group of College faculty members (N = 10). The student sample was drawn from all of *Bet Sefer's* eight distance learning sites. While research participants were all Jewish

adults, there were differences among them along various parameters: The sample included eighteen females and four males. Age of participants ranged from 25-55. Of the 22 participants, twelve were current students, seven were graduates of the program, and three had withdrawn from the program. The faculty sample was comprised of a group of educators who were involved in the facilitation of *Bet Sefer's* distance education Master's program. The sampling procedure yielded a group comprising of six females and four males. Of the ten faculty participants one was based outside the US. All faculty participants had been part of this program for at least three years.

Data Collection Methods

First, contextual information was needed pertaining to the site, and the distance learning program under review, and this information was obtained by way of document review. Documents of a public nature included faculty meeting minutes, program evaluations, accreditation documents, curriculum plans, policy statements, newsletters, and student and faculty handbooks. Personal documents included student assignments and self-reflection papers.

Second, perceptual information was needed from both students and faculty involved in the distance learning program under review. This information was collected by way of survey, interview, and focus group:

Surveys provided demographic information, and shed light on perceptions surrounding the impact on learning of this learning community. The survey also provided information on the overall population, enabling the researcher to identify potential participants, and select a research sample. Of the total student population (N = 110), 91 individuals completed the survey, yielding a response rate of 83%. Of the 16 faculty members that made up the faculty population, all except one responded, yielding a response rate of 94%.

On the basis of demographic information yielded by the survey, potential participants were identified, and the two sample groups were selected. The researcher developed two semi-structured interview schedules, one for student participants, and one for faculty participants. Following several pilot studies, 32 potential interviewees were contacted (22 students and 10 faculty members) and all agreed to participate. All interviews were conducted by phone, and all, with permission, were audio recorded for transcription purposes.

Finally, to explore some of the emergent findings, the researcher convened a one-hour focus group with a selected subset of this study's research sample. This group was comprised of both students (N = 6) as well as faculty (N = 2). The focus group was conducted by way of a

videoconference, and the session was videotaped and transcribed in its entirety.

Data Analysis and Synthesis

Data analysis was an iterative process, beginning with the development of a coding scheme, extending into three broad analytic categories based on the study's conceptual framework, and culminating with thematically organized findings. Coding categories were developed and refined on an ongoing basis, drawing from this study's conceptual framework, from related literature, and from pilot study findings. To analyze the data from interview and focus group transcripts, the researcher used the constant comparative method, borrowed from Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). Survey data were analyzed statistically, and the quantitative results yielded were used to supplement the study's qualitative findings.

Issues of Trustworthiness

To establish the methodological and interpretive validity of this study the researcher consulted with colleagues, and advisors to check ideas, and discuss findings and issues of concern. In addition, to maximize the validity and reliability of this study, various procedural safeguards were employed, including purposeful sampling for diverse perspectives, triangulation of sources, and triangulation of methods. In addition, various participatory and collaborative modes of research were employed, including the search for discrepant evidence and peer review.

To enhance the study's reliability, professional colleagues were consulted at various intervals to review data collection methods and check coding schemes. Furthermore, the researcher maintained an audit trail that chronicled the evolution of her thinking throughout the study. This trail, which Merriam (2002) describes as offering "transparency of method", was dependent on the researcher keeping a journal as well as a record of all memos that detailed how data was analyzed and interpreted, and on what basis conclusions were drawn.

Findings

This study yielded four major findings:

Finding #1

Not all students entered this program with expectations of being part of a learning community. However, by way of experiencing the program, all of them were able to articulate what they believed to be the central aspects of a learning community, and what belonging to this learning community entailed. This

finding shed light on students' expectations and understanding of the concept of a "learning community" and on perceptions around issues of membership, roles, and responsibilities:

Just over half the students (59%) indicated that on entering the program they had some expectations regarding being part of a learning community. Of those, half commented that these expectations were based on prior participation in distance learning programs. The vast majority of students (91%) saw the notion of a learning community as being aligned with Jewish cultural values. Most of the students (77%) saw the idea of a learning community in broad rather than in narrow terms—that being part of a community of learners offers the potential to connect with the broader culture or community, rather than being simply a "classroom community". Most (86%) cited distinct differences between a learning community and a "group learning experience," among them continuity and ongoing interaction/engagement, depth of relationships, and a sense of commitment.

The majority of students (91%) considered faculty to be part of the learning community. Of these, most said that they considered all faculty to be members of their learning community, and some said that they considered only some faculty to be members of their learning community. Many (68%) considered that only students at their local site were members of their learning community, and saw students at other sites as separate and "distant".

All students (100%) stated that both faculty and students together play a role in developing, creating, and maintaining the learning community. Half (50%) the students emphasized the instructor's role and responsibility in fostering the learning community. While only a few students (32%) reported that they were aware of faculty attempting to create a learning community, all students (100%) stated that they would welcome faculty intervention in this regard.

Finding #2

Faculty in this program were not unified in their understanding of the term "learning community," nor in their beliefs regarding the educational value thereof. Their approach to planning and teaching in this program was guided by the ways in which they defined and characterized a learning community. This finding shed light on faculty's understanding of the term "learning community", and on perceptions surrounding issues of membership, roles and responsibilities.

The majority of faculty participants (80%) understood the idea of a learning community as a shared learning experience, and all of them (100%) viewed Jewish education and the notion of a learning community as being fundamentally aligned.

Over half of the faculty participants (60%) saw themselves as integral members of the learning community. While acknowledging the challenges involved, most faculty participants (80%) saw the possibility of distance sites as being part of an integral learning community, and viewed it as a desirable goal. Most (70%) acknowledged a shared responsibility between faculty and students in creating a learning community. A few (30%) saw the creation of the learning community as being a possibility without faculty intervention.

All except one faculty member, (90%) said that when teaching in this program, they practiced collaborative teaching techniques. They pointed out the educational benefits and implications of taking a non-didactic stance, and spoke about the ways in which adopting this pedagogical approach could help overcome some of the challenges of distance learning. Most faculty participants (80%) thought it would be useful to know if a learning community was developing among their students.

Finding #3

All this study's participants, both students and faculty, identified various personal issues and program-related factors that they believed either strengthened or detracted from the development of the learning community, and the learning that occurred there. Various interview questions were designed to probe perceptions as to what facilitated and/or hindered learning in this program. As this finding revealed, there are a multitude of factors and combinations of factors—both personal and contextual—that impact the learning experience.

Among both the student and faculty samples, peer support was recognized as a key facilitating factor vis-à-vis learning in this program (Students, 77%; Faculty, 90%). For both groups diversity of the student body was the next most significant factor (Students, 77%; Faculty, 50%). The key contextual factors for both groups were instructors (Students, 100%; Faculty, 80%), technology (Students, 86%; Faculty, 100%), monthly colloquium seminar (Students, 86%; Faculty, 60%), *Hevruta* or small group study (Students, 82%; Faculty, 90%), and face-to-face interaction with faculty (Students, 50%; Faculty, 50%).

It should be noted that some contextual factors were seen to have the potential to be both a support and/or a barrier. All the students and most of the faculty acknowledged that instructors play a crucial role in either fostering or hindering the development of the learning community. Some students and all the faculty acknowledged that technology had the potential to either enhance and/or impede the learning experience. Most of the students saw multiple sites as a challenge to learning, and only few mentioned its inherent advantages. In contrast, among the faculty group,

multiple sites as a factor was seen mostly as offering a combination of benefits and challenges.

Finding #4

The learning community experience was perceived by the majority of students to offer certain discernable benefits in terms of individual learning, and all the students were able to identify various changes in knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs. Overall, students were able to address specific changes in their thinking that they perceived to be a result of their experience in this program. In sharing their perceptions, they cited and described various examples, which revealed new learning. The most significant categories of learning that emerged from the data were openness to new perspectives (14 students; 64%); appreciation of collaborative learning (14 students; 64%); and critical and reflective thinking (13 students; 59%).

Discussion: Analysis and Interpretation of Findings

The researcher viewed the findings through three analytical lenses—adult learning theory, distance learning, and Jewish education. The overall focus of this synthesis was on developing a deeper understanding of the underlying dynamics of this specific research context, and the implications thereof for enhancing distance education practice.

While only just over half the student participants indicated that on entering the program they had some expectations regarding being part of a learning community, none were at a loss in identifying and addressing what they believed constitutes a learning community, and the educational implications thereof. Even those who acknowledged that they were more focused on their own learning to begin with, seem to have developed a clear idea of the central aspects of this learning community, and what belonging entails. From the researcher's perspective this can be attributed to Jewish cultural values as well as to active participation in this particular learning community.

In terms of experiential learning theory it is the learner's active engagement with the milieu that constitutes the learning experience. Learning, according to this view, is a holistic experience, socially and culturally constructed, and influenced and shaped by the socio-emotional context in which it occurs (Anderson, Boud, & Cohen, 1995). Thus the learning community itself is the catalyst or motivator for learning and the support group for maintaining and sustaining the learning process, as well as the context within which learning occurs. A learning community, by virtue of what it is, is *the learning experience itself*—becoming as such the very context for learning. The very specific nature of the learning community under examination, thus offers a very specific context for learning. More specifically, it appears that the learning community itself

becomes an *informal* learning context. Indeed, the descriptions of the majority of students seemed to imply that they were engaged in informal and experiential learning mainly through *Hevruta* or small group study, an integral part of this program, which nurtures interpersonal interaction, thereby fostering the informal sharing of ideas. In this way the socio-cultural context in which interaction takes place shapes the learning process.

Most student participants were able to point to what they believed to be the distinct differences between a learning community and a “group learning experience.” Among these characteristics are continuity or ongoing interaction, depth of relationships, and sense of commitment. It seems clear that there is an understanding among participants that the learning community is conceived of in terms of the complex processes involved in developing relationships and cultivating a sense of shared purpose. That the learning community needs to be conceived of in terms of *process*, and that this incurs many challenges, is indeed in line with much of the literature related to learning communities in distance education (Choi, 2001; Conrad, 2002, 2005; Gray, 2004; Hill, 2002; Koku & Wellman, 2004; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2005; Stacey, 1999).

An underlying assumption of the researcher was that a broad view of the learning community was ideal or desirable, with the implication that this learning community, rather than being classroom-based, would necessarily embrace the inclusion of multiple sites. Aside from the literature on videoconferencing promoting the possibility of creating a broad-based learning community, the researcher's assumption was predicated on the idea that Jewish learning strengthens the ties of learners with other Jews, be they in their immediate circle of learners, or the more abstract notion of Jewish community or Peoplehood. Moreover, the researcher also assumed a broad conceptualization of the learning community based on the knowledge that the program under review caters predominantly to the professional development of Jewish educators. Supposedly, because they share a common field of practice, they would seek to network with colleagues, and to make professional connections. One of the most unanticipated parts of the analysis of this study's findings thus, was the discovery that while students defined a learning community in broad terms, they were not experiencing it as such.

As a technology, videoconferencing has the potential to educate in a meaningful way in that it offers both intimacy and immediacy. By virtue of its capabilities, it affords a high degree of interaction among students, and as such very closely resembles a traditional classroom. Moreover, that students are not only physically together in one classroom, but are connected with other “virtual” classrooms, suggests that the collaboration

among peers can be extended and enhanced beyond what is generally possible in a traditional classroom. While videoconferencing allows for and encourages interaction and collaboration, and while it has the capability to bring together different learning communities into one virtual space, students did not seem to be able to build community across multiple sites. Moreover, and perhaps more significant and problematic is that most students do not even seem to acknowledge the value in a multi-site learning community, focusing more on the inherent hindrances of multiple sites rather than on potential advantages. Various explanations are proposed: First, the distance factor reinforces the need to bond more closely with peers at one's own site, thereby enabling localized connections among students. Second, what is missing in electronically mediated communication is the *perceived presence of others* (Peters, 2003), suggesting that peers on the screen are not as real as those physically in the classroom. As the findings indicated, the majority of students did not consider students at other sites to be members of their learning community. The comments of some students such as "a sea of faces," "disjointed [sic] voices," and "the talking head thing," describes students' sense of disconnection with those on the screen. Third, while the majority of students acknowledge that some faculty members do make an effort to establish inter-site connections, ease of communication, collaboration, and interaction are still limited and somewhat cumbersome by virtue of the distance factor. Moreover, students are less likely to make the effort unless they are directed to it. Indeed if there is little or no effort in encouraging collaboration across sites, this leaves people to seek each other out where they actually are, namely, at their local site. In the distance education environment, teachers as well as students need to re-learn the concept of an "educational space." In this regard, as one faculty participant put it, we need to "change our mental models and build a different imaginary landscape."

Students in this program had a good idea of what is entailed in maintaining this learning community. Not only was it commonly endorsed that instructors play a crucial role, all the students and many of the faculty, too, acknowledged a "partnership" in developing and creating the learning community. The issue of agency, that is who creates a learning community, remains a central issue in the literature. Some distance learning practitioners and researchers suggests that course designers can evolve community through nurturing conditions (Chen, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Schwier, 2001). Some refer to community as something that can be "built" (Hill, 2002), or "architected" (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Conrad (2002; 2005) found that as opposed to creating a community by careful design, learners themselves, in the course of the learning experience, recognize the need to become a community. What

emerged clearly from the findings of this study is the phenomenon of the learning community as the *corrective* in the distance education environment. Interestingly, and somewhat paradoxically, the distance itself—the “big bad wolf” so to speak—becomes the facilitator of the learning community. To compensate for the lack of facilities and opportunities for interaction that are afforded by a traditional classroom environment, it appears that distance learning students in this program made a concerted attempt to form a learning community. It is the researcher's contention that while a learning community has the potential to develop naturally, this cannot be taken for granted, and faculty should remain aware of providing the conditions that will facilitate its emergence.

In endeavoring to provide the ideal conditions for learning, distance education practitioners should remain cognizant of identifying the learning challenges and capitalizing on those factors that support learning. Both sample groups recognized peer support as a key facilitating factor. The very reason, according to many students, for choosing the videoconferencing program was specifically for the social interaction opportunities that this technology offers. Moreover, the high value placed by students on diversity indicates that students seek a dialogical community within which to learn, to collaborate and exchange ideas, and to engage in discourse. Among the program-related supports to learning mentioned by both students and faculty were the colloquium (monthly small-group seminar focused on educational issues), *Hevruta* study (studying in pairs or triads), and face-to-face opportunities among faculty and students. The colloquium and *Hevruta* study (both of which offer the opportunity for face-to-face interaction) together with the ever present and pervasive Jewish “culture of learning,” enhance discourse and reflection—necessary ingredients for fostering significant learning. The opportunity for face-to-face interaction with faculty is indeed an issue that is raised consistently in the distance learning literature, and the success of online learning communities is often attributed to this (Bielman, 2000; Conrad, 2002, 2005; Koku & Wellman, 2004; Swan, 2002). Collaborative study and opportunities for interaction form the foundation of a learning community by providing the context for meaningful discussion. The physical separation, which becomes exacerbated by the issue of multiple sites, makes teaching in videoconferenced programs a challenge for all; teachers and students alike. Remaining proactive, and facilitating collaborative study by way of dialogical pedagogy can help develop a sense of community, thereby enabling the creation of an environment capable of sustaining and developing opportunities for ongoing collaboration, interaction, and learning.

Limitations of The Study

Given that this case study was context specific, a major critique of this research might be the limited possibility of generalizing this study to other groups and other programs. While generalizeability is not the intended goal of case study research, the researcher did address the issue of *transferability* (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Any learning community is contextually-bound, and tempered by various factors, not least of all cultural dynamics. As such, a Jewish learning community might be said to be uniquely constructed, defined, and experienced because of Jewish cultural values and traditions. No doubt, as Jewish educators participating in the *Bet Sefer* distance learning community, the research participants' experiences were colored by the fact that they were all Jewish, and that they shared certain values about learning and about community. It thus seems important to ask how and in what ways, aspects of this particular study, being as culturally specific as it is, would transfer to similar programs offered by way of videoconferencing, and/or to other distance learning programs offered by way of other mediums especially online technology. Moreover, It would also be important to inquire as to what extent it would be feasible to build this kind of learning community in other distance learning programs that do not share a Jewish orientation.

On the one hand, it can be argued that the *Bet Sefer* learning community is unique in that there are very specific cultural values and traditions involved. Based on an appreciation of *Hevruta* or shared learning opportunities, there is a natural tendency or proclivity for collaborative learning. Having said this, however, it is the researcher's view that collaborative learning is a core element in adult education, and as such an effective way of learning in any adult program of study. Adults who are involved in a course of study that is based on shared and common interests and purposes would most likely view the group itself as a resource, and would therefore most likely be inclined to learn together through sharing ideas and knowledge. Moreover, in programs where educators have a constructivist or collaborative orientation, this type of learning is even more likely to occur. Speculating on the likely applicability of findings to other situations under similar, but not identical, conditions, it is likely that if common interests, shared purpose, and sense of group identity are nurtured and fostered through collaborative work and reflective exercises, then a learning community has the potential to develop with different groups of learners in other video-based distance learning programs. Admittedly, the extent to which it is truly feasible to foster a learning community in another distance learning program or course of study that is not based on Jewish values

would also depend to a large extent on whether and in what ways learners saw the notion of community as a resource that could contribute to their own learning.

Implications for Practice and Further Research

As Palloff and Pratt (1999) point out, "The learning community takes on new proportions in this [distance learning] environment and consequently must be nurtured and developed so as to be an effective vehicle for education" (p. 15). The findings of this study point to the ongoing challenges facing researchers and practitioners in enhancing and enriching the distance learning experience. As many of the students and some of the faculty themselves indeed emphasized there is a need for educators to be "socialized," or "acculturated" in terms of distance education practice.

The principal recommendation for administrators of distance learning programs is for increased and sustained communication and dialogue at all levels of the organization. Creating opportunities for sharing ideas, knowledge, and information at all levels will build appreciation of a culture of shared learning. Specific recommendations include:

- Establish greater visibility of the learning community experience within programs
- Organize professional development opportunities for faculty in which they can be socialized regarding facilitating learning communities.
- Develop ways to sustain and develop the learning community beyond a program so that it can contribute to ongoing learning.

The overriding recommendation for teachers in these programs is that in order to make the learning experience as effective as possible, they must remain aware of the challenges facing distance learners, and remain open to learning themselves. Specific recommendations include:

- Help formulate and establish group norms
- Provide opportunities for student interaction both within and between sites
- Provide ongoing opportunities for critical thinking and reflection.

A major force driving this study was the limited research-based information regarding the impact of videoconferenced programs on the learning experiences of adults. While the literature reveals that distance education in a variety of formats is increasing exponentially, little is written about how the collaborative learning experiences of adults can be facilitated through participation in such programs. In light of this the

researcher recommended that further studies be conducted that explore the connection between culture and community in videoconferenced programs. Such studies will contribute to developing a larger database of information, and as such will provide a more comprehensive understanding of the diverse learning experiences of adults in this emergent context.

Notes

1. This report constituted a dissertation that was submitted in partial fulfillment for the degree of Doctor of Education, Teachers College Columbia University, New York, March 2006.

2. The Teachers College Columbia University Institutional Review Board approved this study, and informed consent was obtained from participants prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, identities were protected by way of pseudonyms, and all data remained confidential.

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