

MOM Groups- Creating Social Presence in an Online Agricultural Leadership Course

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Background

During COVID when classes were moved to online formats, the impact of relationships between peers on learning was made clear (Baber, 2021). This idea stemmed from needing a way to foster relationships in online courses during COVID. A need exists to create meaningful, engaged learning in all environments (Roberts et al., 2016) and this idea strives to better engage learners who are taking a leadership course online. Social presence theory refers to the degree of prominence of others in an interaction and the importance of those resulting interpersonal relationships (Short et al., 1976) and has been found to have a positive relationship to learning outcomes for online courses (Tu & McIssac, 2002). It has been recommended that agricultural education eLearning course instructors design assignments that encourage social interaction between peers in order to increase their social presence and thus more positive learning outcomes in the course (Strong et al., 2012). This innovative idea sought to increase the social presence of students with their peers in an online agricultural leadership course. MOM stands for Meeting of the Minds and allows students to take an asynchronous class while still actively engaging with peers within that class. These groups allow students to meet with a learning community at a time that works best for them. This creates opportunities for students to have meaningful conversations about class content, while making connections with their classmates.

How It Works

The MOM groups were utilized in a five week summer session for a personal leadership education course. These learning communities consisted of three to four students each. Two days prior to class starting, the instructor sent a Google Sheet out via an email allowing students to pick which days and times would work best for them to have an online meeting through Zoom (or another online platform with similar functionality). After students responded, the instructor team sorted students into learning communities based on what times they were available to meet throughout the week. Students who did not respond to the survey were put in groups together, and encouraged to reach out to the instructor team if they could not find a meeting time that worked for every group member. Students were expected to meet 30-60 minutes every week. During these meetings they were provided with a list of prompts, referred to as Curiosity Q's, to help generate conversations about course content. The Curiosity Q's were structured in a way that encouraged students to connect to the course content as well as to their peers. Some sample questions are: *How balanced does your life feel right now? Any particular areas you need help with? What quadrant do you currently feel like you are living in with regards to life balance? Do your community members have any suggestions on strategies for balance for you?* After each meeting students had a discussion post that included both group submissions and individual submissions. The group submission included a summary of their group meeting, questions discussed, and a screenshot from their group meeting. The individual submission included an individual reflection of learning that occurred from the group meeting.

At the beginning of each meeting the groups assigned roles to delegate responsibilities for the group submission, and students were encouraged to rotate responsibilities. Roles consisted of: proof provider, summarizer, initiator, reminder, liaison. Students had the opportunity to request a teaching assistant join their meeting to answer any questions about

course content or assignments they had. At the end of the semester students presented individual presentations via Zoom within their learning communities and a member of the instructor team.

Results to Date

Based on student reflections about the MOM groups, many students expressed having a positive experience. According to one student, “The LC Meeting of the Minds was very impactful on my learning in this course because there were many times I was unsure about information and my LC would help me understand what the content was. The biggest challenge with the LC Meeting of the Minds was finding time in our busy weeks to meet, but they were fun and they served as a reminder that we all have the same time struggles.”

Although most students expressed an overall positive experience, the instructor team acknowledges that not all students enjoyed the MOM groups. However, based on student feedback, some students who did not enjoy the meetings acknowledged they gained something from them. This student stated, “Also, like everyone else in my group, I utilize summer to work as much as possible to save for the fall and spring when working is more challenging, so scheduling was a significant conflict for us since most of the time, we are working. However, that being said, having a designated group of people that I have been in contact with and worked with all summer consistently has been primarily positive, as we can help each other remember when assignments are due, figure out how [*sic*] instructions together, and help each other find resources needed for the class.”

Advice to Others

We recommend collecting input from students as early as possible (even prior to the course beginning) about their general availability prior to creating the learning communities as this will better ensure they are able to find a time to meet. We also recommend creating authentic questions (Curiosity Q’s) that the MOM groups can discuss at each meeting. These questions help spark conversation about the course topics as well as the assignments in the course. The questions should be worded in a way that encourages metacognition at the community level as well as the individual level.

Overall the biggest complaint or thing students found challenging was finding time to meet. This could possibly be fixed by reinforcing the requirement of a weekly meeting in the syllabus and by discussing with students early in the semester about how previous students benefited from the MOM groups.

We are engaged in design-based research which analyzes data to find problems, and then designs and implements solutions in order to maximize this experience for students. To date, we have implemented the MOM groups in two separate summer semesters. Thus far, our research indicates that MOM groups may be fostering learning outside the group more than within.

Resources Needed

The main resource needed for this project is time. There must be time to create and send out the spreadsheet, as well as analyzing the spreadsheet once it is filled out to create the groups. It also takes time to create the curiosity Q’s to help guide the groups in their discussions. No additional funding is required for this project.

References

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