

J. AXE

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DEVELOPING A LEARNING COMMUNITY:  
EXPLORING THE IMPACT OF ONLINE ACTIVITIES ON THE  
BUILDING OF CAMPUS-BASED COMMUNITIES

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Developing a learning community: exploring the impact of online activities on the  
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Josephine AXE

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## Abstract

Taking an action research approach, this study explores the experiences of three intakes of undergraduate students who worked in a cohort-based learning environment where team work and classroom participation was expected. This educational setting required students from diverse backgrounds to work closely together on campus during the intense one-year program. To facilitate in the development of a face-to-face learning community, where individual differences could be celebrated and problems could be solved in an open, trusting environment, an online bridging course was developed.

Aimed at decreasing the incidence of minority group marginalization and reduce feelings of isolation, the bridging course provided activities directed towards encouraging students to begin to develop an inclusive learning community prior to their arrival on campus. Exploring how online transitional activities had contributed to the development of a face-to-face learning community, as well as perceived disadvantages to that model, key stakeholders' perceptions were obtained through focus groups, interviews, and surveys.

Findings include: (a) an enhanced understanding of the ways in which an online course can be used to aid in the development of a learning community for on-campus students; (b) a heightened awareness of challenges faced by those working in a learning community; (c) a systematic approach to the development of learning communities. This research suggests that an online bridging course can be an effective way for on-campus students to start developing a learning community.

*Keywords:* Learning Communities, Blended Learning, Online Learning, Action Research, Diversity, Orientation.

For Reg

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## Glossary of Definitions of Terms and Acronyms

<b>Term</b>	<b>Definition</b>
Asian	Canadian usage: an individual with ancestry from China, Hong Kong, Japan, or South East Asia.
Associate Faculty	Faculty who are not fulltime employees of the university, rather they work on a contract to contract basis providing instructional services.
BCom	Bachelor of Commerce
Bridge Course	Self-contained online unit of study designed to aid in the development of a learning community.
CMC	Computer Mediated Communication
Cohort	A group of up to 50 students who are enrolled in the same program of study and who generally proceed through the program in the same timeframe. There may be more than one cohort of students in the same program/timeframe.
Communities of Practice	Groups of individuals, who have a shared expertise and passion and who are brought together informally. Generally understood to be more permanent than learning communities.
Community College	A post-secondary institution usually granting associate degrees and certificates.
Computer-mediated	The use of computers that brings people together and allows them to exchange information with relative ease.
Course	Canadian usage: Self-contained educational material that focuses on a particular topic, or series of topics.
ESL	English as a second language.
Facilitator	An individual who helps a class of students understand new concepts and gain new knowledge by coordinating their efforts.
Knowledge-building Community	A group of individuals working together to advancing knowledge; it is not restricted to students in an educational setting.
Learner	Used interchangeably with the term 'student'.
Learning Community	With a focus on learning, the culture is inclusive and trusting, where individuals collaborate in a constructive, caring manner, thereby creating a safe and positive community where all members feel supported.
Module	UK usage: Self-contained educational material that focuses on a particular topic, or series of topics.
Program	Canadian usage: An academic course of study.
Traditional Classroom	A long-established instructional environment incorporating face-to-face interaction in an on-campus setting, often using a lecture format.
Virtual Learning Environments	Software that supports teaching and learning through the internet by providing a variety of tools that can assist with items such as communication, assessment, and organization of educational content.

## Chapter 1: Introduction

Since the advent of email and computer conferencing in the 1970s, there has been a significant shift in the delivery of education. Education has moved away from the predominantly traditional campus-based classrooms toward the adoption of online platforms where educators facilitate learning in a virtual environment (Harasim, 2000). In the online classroom, students may not meet face-to-face with their fellow classmates or their instructor, yet they discuss concepts, analyze material together, take part in an array of computer-based activities, and more importantly to this study, build community. As a result, a growing body of research is associated with the impact made by computers and communication technologies on today's students.

Even though the sense of community that is found in the classroom may have its origin within the educational institution, social interaction is a contributing factor to its ongoing development (McInnerney and Roberts, 2004). It is therefore paradoxical that a learning community, in some respects, can grow to be independent of the institution responsible for its creation. Initially intrigued by the challenges students faced when working in an on-campus classroom, and with an understanding of the benefits associated with the social aspects of learning, I explored students' concerns in the context of the learning community. It quickly became apparent that a central issue for consideration must be the alienation felt by some students. As Kilpatrick et al (2003b) noted, if an environment that respects diversity can be established, the learning capacity of the community is enhanced (8). Conversely, we could assume that if an inclusive environment is not built successfully, with solid institutional foundation and support, the classroom experience may suffer for both the students who feel excluded, as well as those who feel included.

Consequently, even though there may be challenges associated with building learning communities, the benefits far outweigh the costs. This makes understanding the processes involved in learning community development invaluable to students, faculty, and administrators who work in post-secondary education. Therefore, I sought to explore the role of the online environment in the forming and supporting of successful and effective learning communities. By seeking the perceptions and observations of key stakeholders, through a series of interviews, focus groups, and surveys, it has been my aim to build on existing work in the area of learning communities to offer new meaningful insights that may guide educators as they work with students making the transition into higher education.

My research encompasses many aspects of evolving delivery models, including student and facilitator interaction in the virtual environment (Picciano, 2001), online activities that engage students (Salmon, 2003), and best practices for supporting and encouraging students studying in a learning community (Palloff and Pratt, 2001). While these areas are receiving increasing attention, my reading and thoughts began to focus on the needs of traditional students – those who choose to study in a face-to-face classroom. Considering computer-mediated learning in the context of on-campus students led me to question if and how the online environment might also effectively serve some of the on-campus student's needs and, more specifically, if online activities could support the development of an on-campus learning community for students from diverse backgrounds. In addition, in order to fully understand the limitations of the learning community model, I wanted to explore the challenges faced by students studying in an on-campus learning community.

### *Context*

In a variety of contexts, from Dewey (1897), with his focus on the social aspects of learning, to Wenger (2005), who pioneered communities of practice, scholars have explored the relationship between learning and social interaction. It is this social element of learning that intrigued me, leading to my initial exploratory research in Phase I of this study, research that focused on the issues that faced on-campus Bachelor of Commerce (BCom) students at a small institution of higher education in western Canada.

Figure 1 below shows the two different paths students may take to enter into this BCom Program. At most universities in North America, a BCom degree would require a minimum of four years fulltime course work. As can be seen from the figure below, the students at this university can graduate after one year of intense work, having either completed the first two years elsewhere, or being awarded Prior Learning Assessment (PLA) status. If a student is accepted under PLA, it implies that the student displays an equivalent skill set as could be expected from an individual who has completed two years of undergraduate study. In addition, the university uses a model that is participatory, with a collaborative classroom environment, and places an emphasis on team work, with up to 30% of the final course mark allocated to the work completed by students working in teams. Because of these attributes, and the fact that students move through their studies as a cohort, establishing an effective learning community is a key component of their success.

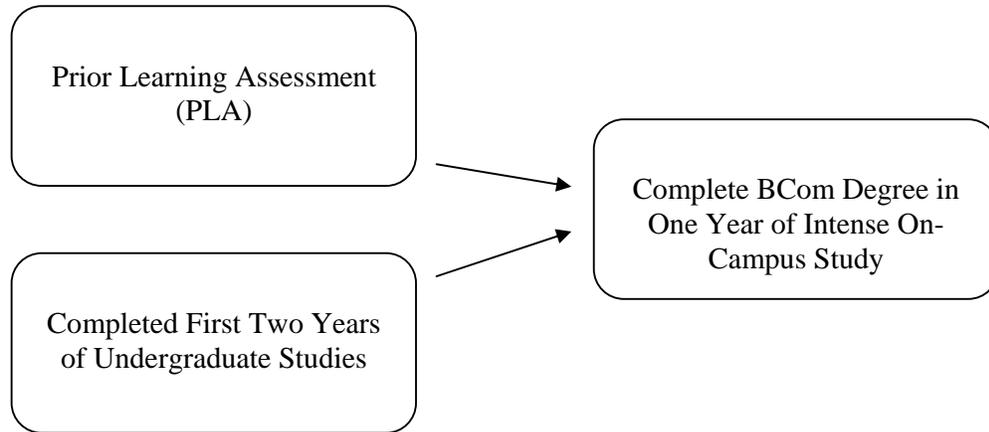


Figure 1: Path to the BCom Program

The majority of students in this study started the final year of their undergraduate program without meeting face-to-face prior to the commencement of their studies. Their backgrounds were varied. Over the three program intakes covered in this study, the average age of the students ranged from 23 to 25 years, with many of the students spending several years away from formal education before returning to complete their undergraduate degree. Because these individuals had been in the workforce for an average of six years, they had an assortment of skills that they brought into the classroom. In addition, the students arrived on campus from many different locations, some from within Canada, others from a variety of countries, each bringing their own cultural practices and value sets. For these reasons, during the course of the program, some students felt excluded, treated as outsiders by the majority who were able to dictate the acceptable norm. These factors, taken together with my own teaching and learning experience, and my early review of the literature, strongly influenced my choice of research questions.

### *Problem Statement*

Recognizing that the area of online learning and associated learning community development is receiving growing attention, I identified a focus of research within the traditional on-campus community of students engaged in undergraduate study. I observed that an emerging classroom norm in the 2005 intake class had been predominantly influenced by the younger, domestic student demographic in the group. These individuals were in the majority, and they shared similar backgrounds and experiences. Many had studied in the community college system in British Columbia, and they had lived, worked, and grown up in Canada. Mirroring the individualistic American culture discussed by Tan et al. (1998, 1267), these students expected their fellow classmates to be independent and self-reliant when engaging in both team and class-wide activities. The expectations set by these domestic students left some of the other students feeling alienated. Some of the staff who worked with the students observed cliques developing, cliques that led those on the outside to remain silent in classroom discussions, withholding all but token input when taking part in team activities, and generally disengaging from program-wide academic and social activities.

The problem therefore appeared, at the beginning of my research, to be as follows:

The age, background, cultural conditioning, and expectations of a diverse group of on-campus students does not lend itself to the development of an effective learning community without help and guidance. When left to themselves, the class tends to self-divide into small groups that serve the need of each member within the sub-group, while the sub-groups do not necessarily contribute to the cohesion, social growth, or learning potential of the whole class. There is also a risk that some

individuals may never engage with the class as a whole. Combined with certain cultural and age characteristics, this leaves some groups and individuals at a disadvantage in terms of participation, learning, and enjoyment of the course and class activities.

### *Purpose Statement*

Having considered the problem as stated above, and given my interest in online learning environments with the potential for developing and supporting a learning community, I proposed to link the two concepts. The purpose of this study therefore emerged as three-fold. Firstly, to explore the challenges faced by students studying in a learning community environment. Secondly, to investigate and review the possible ways in which a computer-mediated environment could enhance the development of learning communities for undergraduate students who choose to study on-campus. Thirdly, if the evidence supported it, to develop a non-credit course, which would make use of the research findings by providing activities aimed at building the foundations of a learning community to assist future students.

The primary focus of this research was on the experiences of three consecutive intakes of students who started their studies in the years 2005, 2006, and 2007. This three phase study placed an emphasis on the perceptions of key the stakeholders, including not only the students, but also the faculty and staff with whom they worked. Consequently, the participants' perspectives regarding the usefulness of the online environment to aid in the building of trust and learning communities were instrumental in the design and redesign of the online Bridge course. This course was aimed at providing students with the opportunity to lay the foundations of a learning community before the start of on-campus work. From the onset, it was expected that the results of the research would assist other institutions that take advantage of the

learning community model as they prepare student bodies, particularly those from diverse backgrounds and cultures, for their face-to-face studies.

The Purpose Statement may therefore be seen thus:

1. To determine what challenges exist for students working in a learning community environment.
2. To investigate and understand how educators may facilitate the generation of a sense of learning community among a diverse group of on-campus students, a learning community that enables the full participation of all members of the group, regardless of background, age and culture.
3. To use relevant findings in the development of an online bridge course with an emphasis on supporting students as they build a learning community prior to the commencement of on-campus for-credit course work.

#### *Research Question*

Out of the considerations highlighted above arose three research questions.

1. *Can online activities support the development of a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students, and if so, how?*
2. *What steps should be taken when developing a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students?*
3. *What are the perceived disadvantages of studying in a learning community?*

In order to fully comprehend the relevance of these research questions, it is important to understand the elements of which the questions are comprised.

Therefore, I will deconstruct the questions, clarifying their various components.

*Online activities* refers to the variety of tasks in which the students could engage when working in a computer-mediated environment. This study consisted of three phases as shown in Figure 2 below:

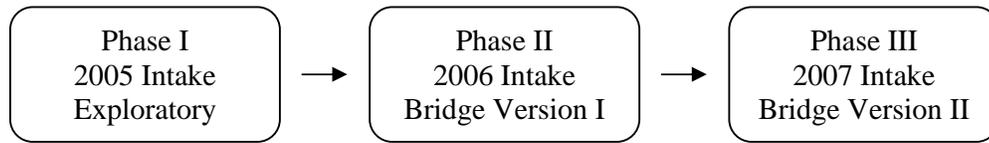


Figure 2: Three Phase Study

In Phase I of this study, since the first intake of students had only been exposed to one discussion area, participants were asked for input on additional elements that could be included in a course aimed at supporting the development of a learning community. Students from the second intake, Phase II of the study, were provided with the online Bridge course, Version I, which, while still quite basic, had online discussion areas, as well as suggested readings and associated deliverables. The Version I Bridge course was made available to students for just over three weeks prior to attending on-campus classes. Although the initial intent was to close the course once students began the course work, the course remained open and the program staff continued to post information, such as schedules, to the Bridge website. The third group, Phase III of the study, had access to an enhanced Bridge course, Version II, which included audio clips, an even wider variety of discussion areas, and deliverables that were followed by face-to-face workshops once the students arrived on campus. Participants in Phases II and III were asked to comment on the usefulness of the Bridge features, as well as to suggest additional community development activities.

At the university in this study, a *learning community* is perceived to have a focus on learning, with a culture that should be inclusive and trusting, where

individuals collaborate in a constructive, caring manner, thereby creating a safe and positive community where all members feel supported in their learning. This definition was generated through the analysis of data collected in Phase II and III of this study and is discussed further in chapters 5, 6, and 7. Learning communities can be distinguished from communities of practice in that the latter are usually perceived as longer lasting, and involve individuals who share a common expertise and passion. A third type of community, the knowledge-building community, differs from the learning community in that it focuses on the pooling of intellect, thereby advancing knowledge, making continual progress, and solving substantial problems, problems greater than those the individual alone can solve.

*Diverse population* pertains to not only differences in cultural background, but also the age range of the students present in the classroom. With the youngest students in the classroom at 18 years old and the oldest in their mid-forties, work and life experiences varied greatly. Students entered the program with anything from minimal, beginning-level work experience to 20+ years experience in a wide range of occupations. Given the variety of backgrounds, students had different expectations with regard to working with their fellow classmates.

*On-campus students* refers to individuals who studied in a face-to-face classroom environment. While their work sometimes included computer-supported activities, such as online discussion areas, assignment drop boxes, and online resources, the majority of their studies were undertaken in a relatively traditional face-to-face classroom setting. Nevertheless, the classroom environment in which these students were active was highly participatory, experiential, and team-based.

To answer the questions posed, the research examined three intakes of students; those in each intake had different program entrance experiences. Not only

did the students have different levels of online support in their community-building efforts, but they also came in under different intake policies. The 2005 intake had both international and domestic students, all of who took the same program of study in the same one-year timeframe. However, the 2006 intake included ten students from a university in China who were taking the same program of study as other students, but with classes taken over a two-year period. This meant that the Chinese students shared approximately half of their classes with their fellow 2006/07 intake classmates and the other half of their classes with the 2007/08 intake students. This program was discontinued after the initial intake in 2006.

#### *Assumptions*

Several assumptions were made, they are as follows:

1. It was important for stakeholders to have some control over the research process, so they had an invested interest when the Bridge was implemented. An action research approach was deemed the best fit given the needs of these stakeholders.
2. A three phase plan was essential. This enabled me to fully explore the initial issues, implement the required changes, explore the results, and execute/monitor necessary adjustments. In the first phase, exploratory work was conducted to determine participants' experiences in the learning community when no access to an online bridge course was given. In the second and third phases, participants' experiences in the learning community were explored after an online bridge course had been provided.
3. Even though three different intakes of students were involved in the study, their general characteristics were similar. Characteristics that were

considered relevant to the classroom community included age, number of years work experience, and cultural origin.

4. Students would bring a variety of perspectives, behaviour, and personal values into the classroom.
5. Even though most people choosing to study in Canada have access to the internet, it was not expected that all students who selected on-campus study would initially welcome participation in the online educational environment.
6. Online activities would have an impact on students choosing to study on-campus. It was expected that students would find online activities factored in their ability to build a learning community in both positive and negatives ways.
7. There are culturally-based effects on communication in an on-campus classroom.
8. Canadian students generally tend to operate in an individualistic manner, representative of the culture in which they were raised.
9. There is a certain anonymity found in the online environment that is not experienced in face-to-face encounters. This is evidenced by the lack of visual and audio cues.
10. Some barriers to learning can be overcome when the social aspect of learning is emphasized.
11. Even though students are often the most directly affected by the building of a learning community, they are so immersed in that community that they may not be objective. Therefore, they are not always in a position to make the most informed and objective decisions regarding appropriate

community development activities. As a consequence, it is critical that research in this area reaches a wider group of participants, including individuals who work with the students, as well as the students themselves.

### *Significance of the Study*

Our educational organizations are part of a continuous development process; innovative delivery models, new support systems for students, and improved facilitation techniques all evolve over time. We have become increasingly aware of the significance of learning communities that enhance the social aspects of learning (Bransford et al., 1999, xi). We have also found ways to reach a broader, more diverse population through the use of the online environment. Given these changes, as well as the growing accessibility of computers and the ease with which many members of our society use technology, it is logical to believe that this trend towards computer-mediated education will continue to increase. If we also consider the changing demographic of individuals entering into higher education (Dawson et al., 2006, 128), we can expect to see more classrooms containing students from a variety of backgrounds; not only diverse in culture, but also in age and work experience.

Recognizing and appreciating these factors leads to an awareness of the need to understand learning community development in the online environment. This understanding not only considers the perspectives of students who will continue their studies online, but also considers the perspectives of individuals who choose to study in a more traditional classroom, supported by an online virtual environment (Picciano, 2001, 61-62). Specifically, there is a need to fully understand how the online environment can serve the needs of diverse groups of on-campus students as they seek to build a learning community before meeting face-to-face in the classroom.

Furthermore, and of broader social significance, the many businesses that make use of the online environment for employee training purposes, as well as for team-based work, could benefit from a greater understanding of community building using an online platform. The thousands of organizations that work towards building teams for job-related tasks (Tocci, 2003, 1) could gain a better understanding of how communities are built to support face-to-face interactions. This could be a significant step towards achieving stronger employee bonds, thereby creating workplaces where individuals respect and value each other's contribution and make better use of the opportunity for information sharing.

#### *Thesis Outline*

This is a seven chapter thesis. Each of the chapters is outlined briefly below.

*Chapter 1* provides an overview of the study, highlighting the problem and providing background to the research.

*Chapter 2* reviews relevant literature in the field. Key works in the area of learning communities are highlighted, with a focus on understanding what they are, how they can be developed, and why they are important. The concepts of trust, respect, and communication are also examined as they emerged in the Phase I data collection as critical issues.

*Chapter 3* explains the methodology used in the study. The rationale behind the choice of action research is provided, and the design is discussed. Data collection and analysis methods are examined and ethical issues are explored.

*Chapter 4* reports on the results of the data analysis for the first of the three phases of the study, Phase I. The themes that emerged from the data are investigated and results of qualitative research are provided.

*Chapter 5* examines the Phase II data, identifying several themes that emerged. Both qualitative and quantitative data are explored, with the results of the Phase II analysis laying out a path for the final phase.

*Chapter 6* explores the data from the final phase, Phase III. Themes that emerged from the data are reviewed. Again, both qualitative and quantitative data are examined.

*Chapter 7* presents the conclusions, connecting theory with the practical implications. Also, future research opportunities are proposed, and recommendations are made for areas that could be further investigated.

In addition, a number of appendices are attached that supplement the body of this thesis.

### *Summary*

Wegerif (1998) noted that if a community is developed, anxiety is reduced and students are more willing to take risks in the classroom (48). So logically, in a learning community, students are more enthusiastic about engaging in classroom activities and feelings of isolation are reduced. Building on existing work in the area of learning communities, this study examines the observations of the students enrolled in an on-campus undergraduate program, as well as the observations of the staff and faculty who worked with them. Focusing initially on the perceived fractionalization of the community, and later on how learning communities can be developed online to support on-campus students, this research has the potential to inform our thinking by providing new insights into the building of learning communities for students working in face-to-face environments. In addition to examining the activities used to aid in the development of learning communities, the challenges associated with learning

communities are explored, providing an understanding of the impact this educational model has on students, faculty, and support staff.

## Chapter 2: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

A purposeful literature review should establish the connection between a new study and existing work in the field (Ridley, 2008, 1). With this in mind, the literature review in this chapter sets out to bring key research in the area of learning communities into focus, providing insights into knowledge gaps, leading to a heightened awareness of advances not yet made in the field, thereby providing the basis for the research project that is presented in this thesis.

A critical review of the literature pertinent to the research question is provided, with the goal of not only identifying the gaps in knowledge, but also providing an insight into the foundation upon which the research was built. Taking an inductive approach in this study meant that themes emerged from the data; however, the initial exploration of literature began with an overview of learning communities. Specifically, common understandings of the term ‘learning community’, as well as its significance were examined, and the methods used to establish learning communities were explored.

In addition to investigating learning communities, this chapter examines diversity issues, as they are integral to the context in which the students at the university worked. As noted, because of the inductive nature of my research, some sections of this literature review are based on responses to comments made by research participants. Specifically, trust, respect, and communication are examined in light of comments brought forward in the first phase of my study. In order to gain insights into works in this area, and prior to collecting data in the last phase, an

overview of each construct was undertaken and is included in this section to provide a foundation for my study.

After an initial review of relevant literature, I discovered one critical gap that became the focus of my research – identifying how the online environment could be used to initiate the development of a learning community for diverse groups of on-campus students. It is this gap that led to the exploratory research, which in turn led to a more in-depth literature review based on other voids that emerged from the data. As noted, these voids included examining the roles of trust, respect and communication in the building of learning communities, as well as exploring the negative aspects of learning communities.

The material presented in subsequent pages of this chapter follows a logical progression through the literature. However, my own ongoing need to review literature emerged from interviews, focus groups and surveys and did not, therefore, follow quite the same structured path. Nonetheless, the literature explored in this chapter provided me with a compass-like bearing, directing my research efforts by highlighting the areas that are, as yet, relatively uncharted. As with any orientation exercise, it is advisable to examine a map of the local terrain closely. Therefore, I begin the next section with an overview of the term *learning communities*. By examining its roots and exploring why learning communities are important, as well as looking at our current understanding of learning community development, I will not only map out the terrain, but I will also identify areas for further exploration.

### *Learning Communities*

#### *Overview of Learning Communities*

Until the relatively recent appearance of computer technology, the term ‘community’ had a primarily sociological context. Communities in the traditional

sense related to groups of individuals, often connected by birth and geographic location, who interacted primarily in a face-to-face context (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005, 1). With the advent of computer-supported educational environments, we have seen the concept of virtual learning communities emerge. Moreover, research has informed us that students link their perceptions of social interaction in online courses to learning (Swan and Shea, 2005, 245).

However, before elaborating further on the nature of virtual learning communities, an overview of the more traditional forms of the learning community is warranted. Not only will this provide the historical context of the term, but it will also demonstrate the variety of applications for which the learning community model has been adopted. While the philosophical foundation of the learning community is attributed to Dewey, with his emphasis on the social aspects of learning (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, 1, Kezar, 1999, ix), it was Alexander Meikelejohn who, in 1927, founded the Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin. Meikelejohn was committed to restructuring the existing curriculum, thereby changing the roles of both students and faculty. It was there that the term ‘learning community’ was first used. Mindful of the need to offer students more than theoretical knowledge, Meikelejohn created an engaging educational environment that provided students with the opportunity to obtain the skills necessary to build a community. In doing so, he pioneered the way; providing other institutions of higher education with a path to follow as they became inspired by the learning community model he implemented (Smith, 2003, 1).

Since the 1920’s, several learning community models have been used in higher education. Kellogg (1999) lists the five major ones as: Linked Courses, Learning Clusters, Freshman Interest Groups, Federated Learning Communities and Coordinated Studies. An example of the first of these models, Linked Courses, is a

cohort of students taking two courses together, one of which would be a skills-based course, the other a content-based course. Similar to Linked Courses, in the second model, Learning Clusters, three or more courses are taken by a cohort of students. The third model, Freshman Interest Groups, involves the linking together by theme of three or more freshmen courses. Federated Learning Communities is the fourth and most complex of all the models as it involves the cohort of students taking a three credit seminar, taught by a Master Learner, as well as three other theme-based courses. In this model, the Master Learner is a faculty member who takes the three theme-based courses with the cohort, then helps the students synthesize the material using the seminar as the vehicle by which to achieve this goal. The fifth and last model, Coordinated Studies, has students and faculty participating in studies, lasting up to a year, based around an interdisciplinary theme. The fundamental similarity of these models is the focus on students taking at least two courses together, with the result that they have an opportunity to build a community through shared experiences. This allows students to take advantage of associated benefits ranging from higher academic achievement to a greater sense of involvement (2-4).

Although the first venture into learning communities by Meikelejohn lasted only six years, there was a resurgence in the 1970s and 1980s, when a number of universities and colleges took an inquiry-based approach, with an increased emphasis on civic engagement (Smith, 2003, 1). Since that time, with the emergence of online technologies capable of providing education to a wide variety of students, learning communities have moved in a new direction.

As a result, there is a sizable body of work focusing on the characteristics of learning communities; although, as scholars have noted, the term is often used without precise definition (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, Mitchell, 2001). Despite having been the

subject of an effort to define its meaning (Dawson et al., 2006, 132), a clear interpretation of the term 'online community' is lacking (Souza and Preece, 2004, 607). Furthermore, Bruckman (2006) discussed the 'fuzzy boundaries' that appear to complicate our attempts to define the term 'community' (618). Therefore, allowing members to explain the term 'learning community' in their own context is more productive than debating the definition (Preece and Maloney-Krichmar, 2005, 2). Agreeing with this position, I asked research participants to discuss what the term meant to them by including questions aimed at uncovering the meaning of learning community within the participants' own context. Through their answers, students, faculty and staff effectively provided rich insights into their lived experiences in the learning community.

Moreover, instead of attempting to define the somewhat elusive term 'learning community', many scholars prefer to discuss attributes of learning communities, such as Palloff and Pratt (1999, 33), as well as Roberts and Pruitt (2003, 172), who discussed the collaborative nature of learning communities, oriented towards working together and cooperation. McConnell (2006) not only noted these properties, but also emphasized the role of engagement and support, noting that the cooperative groups depend on individual members accepting responsibility (7). Furthermore, Roberts and Pruitt (2003) discussed shared norms and values, focusing on the norms and values that are agreed upon by members of the community (8). While Roberts and Pruitt made astute observations, the role of pre-existing norms and values should also be carefully considered; specifically, if and how they support or interfere with the ability of individuals as they attempt to establish an inclusive community.

Wilson and Ryder (1996) discussed the supportive aspect of learning communities, but also noted that, although all communities learn, the term 'learning

community’ specifically involves a group that expects to engage in activities that lead to learning, is supportive of others in their pursuit to learn, and has formed habits and conventions that assist in this mandate (801). While their definition draws together many commonly held understandings of the term, it does not address the potential for the creation of new knowledge, nor does it expand to include the idea that a learning community has the potential to advance, not only the students in the distinct community, but also society in general (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, 120).

In addition, Rovai (2002) provided us with four dimensions to define the classroom community: spirit, trust, interaction, and common expectations and/or goals (Rovai, 2002, 4). This explanation, while concise, reads like a list of requirements for the students taking part in a learning community, rather than a clear definition of the term.

Kilpatrick et al. (2003b) undertook an analysis of the characteristics of learning communities, with the result that they presented the *Composite Definition of Learning Communities* (5) shown in Figure 3 below:

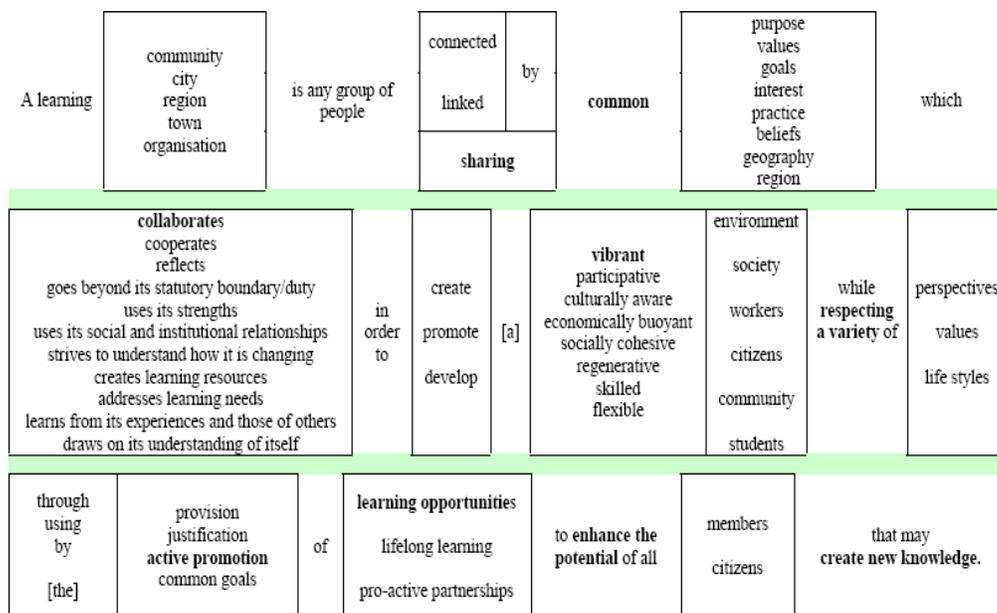


Figure 3: Composite Definition of Learning Communities

One of the goals of the learning community, according to Kilpatrick et al.'s composite, is the potential for the creation of new knowledge. Since the learning community in this study did not have a focus on the creation of new knowledge, their definition was not a good fit. Given the limitations of the definitions discussed in this section, and the hazy borders associated with the term 'learning community', it became apparent that the term needed definition within the context of this research study. Consequently, as noted previously, the participants were each asked to discuss what the term meant to them, and one of the outcomes of the study was a concise definition of learning community as it related to faculty, staff and students who were involved in this research project.

#### *Knowledge-Building Communities*

While the term 'learning community' has been the focus of much scholarly discussion, a clear all-encompassing definition has not been presented. Since it is possible that other terms, such as 'knowledge-building communities', may be confused with the term 'learning community', I will present a brief overview of the former term.

Scardamalia and Bereiter (1994) discussed knowledge-building communities, noting that they were inspired by the notion that communities have a significant role to play in educational institutions. Scardamalia and Bereiter believed that in these communities, knowledge is constructed collectively (4). They went on to define knowledge-building as "the production and continual improvement of ideas of value to a community, through means that increase the likelihood that what the community accomplishes will be greater than the sum of individual contributions and part of broader cultural efforts" (2003, 2).

In these communities, there is an emphasis on problem-solving and constructing a collective knowledge base. Therefore, the goal of education becomes more than the grade required to pass a course; instead, it revolves around artefacts that are produced by the students. These artefacts are evidence that the community is building knowledge and expertise (Gilbert and Driscoll, 2002, 59-60). The core principle of the knowledge-building community is therefore significantly different from the learning community where the emphasis is not necessarily on advancing the collective knowledge, but rather on supporting individuals working together in an educational environment. Even though both are founded on collaboration, the learning community makes no promise to create artefacts to demonstrate that the goals of the community have been met.

Swan et al. (2000) reported that there were three key requirements to be considered if online knowledge-building communities were to be successful: a transparent interface that would allow students to feel comfortable online, an instructor who is present and frequently interacts with students, and a discussion that students find meaningful (380). These requirements appear no different from those necessary to build a successful campus-based learning community, and could be easily translated into a face-to-face environment where students want to feel comfortable in the classroom, allowing them to build trust and establish respectful relationships, as well as engaging in valuable discussions with an instructor who demonstrates interest in the class members.

However, Bowen et al. discussed four key traits associated with knowledge-building communities. These were the focus on advancement of knowledge, problem-solving, dynamic adaption resulting in continual progress, and intellectual collaboration (as cited in Gilbert and Driscoll, 2002, 59). While students could be

involved in intellectual collaboration, continual progress, and problem-solving in a learning community, the main focus is not on the advancement of knowledge.

Therefore, we can see that while there are some similarities between knowledge-building communities and learning communities, the two are not the same, as the goals of each are distinct. Furthermore, we must examine a third term ‘communities of practice’, which also offers an alternative perspective on collaboration, with knowledge and education at its core.

### *Communities of Practice*

As noted, the use of the term ‘learning community’ in literature has lacked clear definition. In the interest of clearly distinguishing it from the term ‘communities of practice’, the following discussion will outline the distinctive features of the latter. While the concept of the learning community may be seen to have similarities to that of communities of practice, the latter was described by Wenger and Snyder (2000) as “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion for a joint enterprise” (139). Conversely, a learning community is usually formed as the result of students working together in a formal program of study. At the onset, it is not necessarily expected that the students will have a shared expertise, although the journey they are taking may well lead them in that direction. Also, while it is likely students have a passion for their chosen field of study, they are not practitioners, and the ‘joint enterprise’ that is central to the community of practice would more realistically be defined as a ‘common goal’ in a learning community. In addition, while there is some variation in meaning, generally, communities of practice is perceived as more permanent than a learning community, as the former operates over an extended period of time (Wenger and Snyder, 2000, 139), rather than the course-

based or program-based motivation that ties students together in a learning community.

Building on Wenger and Snyder's work, Barab et al. (2004) listed eight characteristics of communities of practice: "1. shared knowledge, values, and beliefs, 2. overlapping histories among members, 3. mutual interdependence, 4. mechanisms for reproduction, ... 5. common practice/mutual enterprise, 6. opportunities for interactions and participation, 7. meaningful relationships, 8. respect for diverse perspectives and minority views." (54). While some of these characteristics are held in common with learning communities, e.g. mutual interdependence, respect, opportunities for interactions and participation, and possibly meaningful relationships, the others are not necessarily shared.

It is therefore apparent that there are several attributes shared by knowledge-building communities, communities of practice and learning communities. However, the distinguishing features serve to make each relevant in different circumstances. While knowledge-building communities consist of intellectual collaboration with a focus on problem solving aimed at the advancement of knowledge, communities of practice usually serve individuals who share a common expertise, and learning communities most often provide students in educational institutions with a safe, supporting environment in which they can learn together.

#### *Significance of Learning Communities*

Scholars have discussed in depth the multitude of benefits brought by learning communities to the individual, educational institutions, and the larger society. Specifically, Kilpatrick et al. (2003a) commented on two aspects of learning communities commonly noted in current literature (3). The first focus is on the human dimension and the synergies that are created when individuals work towards shared

understanding and knowledge; the second focus is on the curricular aspects and the deeper learning that can result from engagement in a learning community. Related to deeper learning is student development (Fernback, 1999, 51) and the emphasis on individual and collective growth (Roberts and Pruitt, 2003, 7).

Also relevant is Palloff and Pratt's (1999) discussion centred on the relationship of building a learning community to the successful achievement of students (102-103). While they noted that there is often a general lack of focus on the development of a learning community, they did suggest that the ability to engage in a collaborative learning process does provide students with an opportunity to build a learning community (33).

Additional individual advantages include enhanced potential (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, 3), as well as greater academic achievement, student motivation, better retention, intellectual development, and greater levels of involvement (Kellogg, 1999, 4). Haythornthwaite et al. (2000) also identified happiness and an enhanced sense of well-being as key attributes of a learning community (3).

For the institution, several advantages may be realized, such as greater collaboration amongst colleagues, which in turn leads to a reduction in feelings of isolation, better integration of curriculum, and new ways of looking at the disciplines (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999, 56-57). Kellogg (1999) listed benefits for faculty that include empowerment and the feeling of being re-energized as they work in an environment that allows them to be creative. She also noted that faculty felt as though their opinions were of value (4). Similarly, Smith (2003) argued that learning communities brought greater coherence to the lives of both faculty and students (3). With regards to more extensive benefits, Kellogg noted that learning communities can offer a solution to some of the more long-standing educational issues (4), such as

student marginalization in the classroom caused by ethnicity and/or social class, thereby providing institutions who employ a learning community approach with a greater competitive advantage (Dawson et al., 2006, 130).

While many scholars discuss the advantages of learning communities to the individual and to institutions, societal benefits are also apparent. For example, when new knowledge is created there are economic and cultural benefits to society. Social cohesion can also result from learning communities that embrace members from a variety of social classes. Furthermore, a logical positive result of the ability of individuals to collectively solve complex problems is the potential for societal enrichment (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, 3).

The following table summarizes the benefits associated with the development of learning communities, based on current literature:

Table 1: Learning Community Benefits

<b>Individual</b>	<b>Institutional</b>	<b>Societal</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Synergy</li> <li>• Deeper learning</li> <li>• Higher academic achievement</li> <li>• Individual growth</li> <li>• Enhanced potential</li> <li>• Social achievement</li> <li>• Camaraderie</li> <li>• Greater bond with others</li> <li>• Reduced sense of isolation</li> <li>• Greater sense of well being/ happiness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective growth</li> <li>• Greater collaboration across boundaries</li> <li>• Decreased sense of isolation for faculty</li> <li>• Better curriculum integration</li> <li>• New approaches to disciplines</li> <li>• Positive student views of the institution</li> <li>• Lower attrition rates</li> <li>• Faculty empowerment</li> <li>• Rich teaching environment</li> <li>• Increased faculty commitment</li> <li>• Improved campus environment</li> <li>• Greater coherence</li> <li>• Competitive advantage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Knowledge creation</li> <li>• Individual involvement in the community at large</li> <li>• Ability to solve complex issues</li> <li>• Social cohesion</li> <li>• Community capacity building</li> <li>• Cultural and economic development</li> </ul>

While the positive attributes of learning communities are emphasized in literature, there are also some negative ones. Kreijns et al. (2003) discuss some of the pitfalls of collaborative learning, noting that interaction between students does not

automatically happen (340). And, even when social interaction does happen, there has to be a level of trust before individuals engage in meaningful collaboration. The authors go on to note that if only cognitive learning processes are considered when attempting to develop a learning community and the psychological dimensions of social interaction are not considered, a learning community may not develop effectively (343).

Mitchell and Sackney (2000) discuss the damage that can result, when individuals work together, if criticism is offered in a negative and derogatory manner. When community members are hampered by this type of behaviour, there is a lack of willingness to take risk, or as Mitchell and Sackney say, “stick out their necks” (66). Daniel et al. (2003) go into more detail regarding the implications of negative behaviour when they discuss the pitfalls of social capital. In their paper, they discuss how internal trust between members of sub-groups can lead to communities where hatred develops towards the non-conformists who belong to the larger group. In addition, they note that cohesive groups, demonstrating high levels of social capital, may deny entry to new members (7).

Clearly, there are some potentially negative implications of the learning community model. Implications that if explored further could lead to greater understanding by providing a more complete picture of learning communities. As more institutions of higher education seek ways to make learning collaborative, with an emphasis on the social aspects of learning, it is important to fully understand all the implications of adopting a learning community model. If we ignore the negative dimensions, we are not acting on full information. If we act on incomplete information, we could compromise the educational experience for students, staff and faculty.

### *Development of Learning Communities*

In 1981, when describing learning communities, Pedler wrote of students managing their learning needs together, with an emphasis on negotiation and discussion (as cited in McConnell, 2006, 16). While Pedler recognized the importance of these elements to the development of learning communities, the notion of discussion has been somewhat neglected in more recent works on learning communities. We might expect that with the increasingly diverse student body found in today's classroom, there exists a greater need to enable students to enter into discussions easily. Discussions often lead to the development of trust and the building of learning communities. Further research in this area is therefore needed to make the connection between communication, trust, and learning community development.

Very few models exist that provide insights into the development of learning communities. In 2005, Palloff and Pratt published their *Model of Online Collaboration and Community* (9), which includes features they believed were critical to the development of an online community:

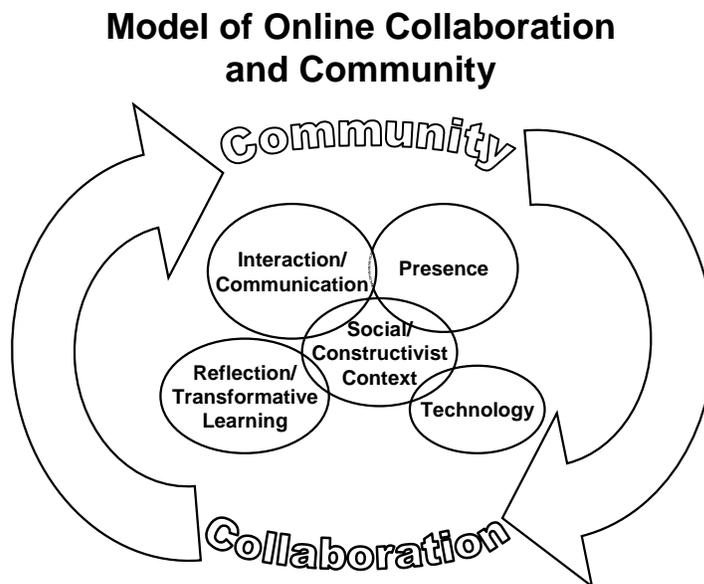


Figure 4: Model of Online Collaboration and Community

Rather than a model that represents a system or phenomena, designed to aid understanding and analysis (Robson, 2002, 549), Palloff and Pratt's diagram, while making an attempt at representation, does not display the process of learning community development and therefore is not a fully functioning model. Brook and Oliver (2005), however, do provide a workable model (2):

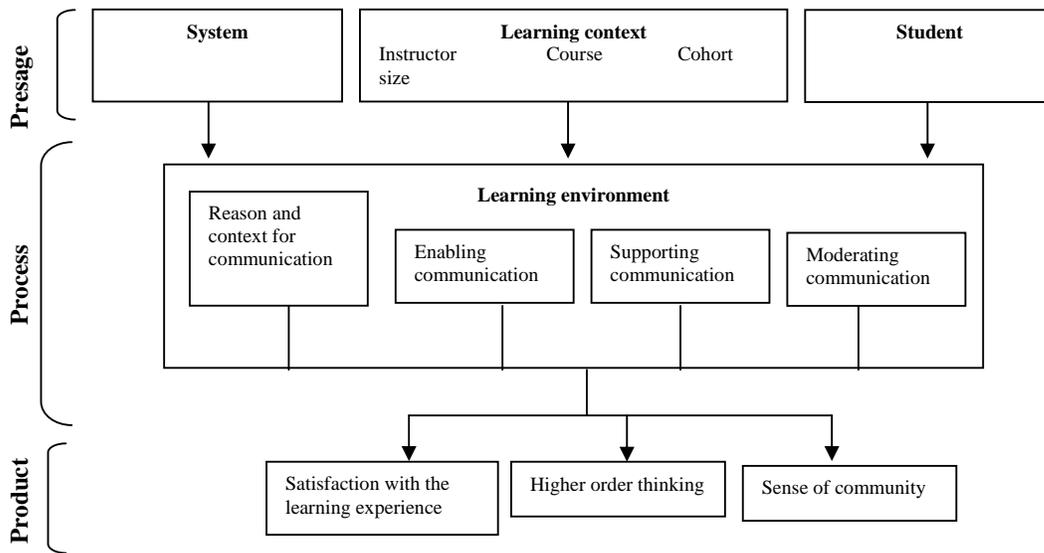


Figure 5: Learning Community Development Model

The focus of the Brook and Oliver model is on three elements: product, process, and presage. The Presage section looks at the learning context, the students coming into the learning environment, and the system within which the learning environment operates. In their discussion of this element of the model, the authors note characteristics of the students that will have an impact on the formation of the community. They highlight education, experience, perceptions of self, patterns of socialization, gender, and cultural background. Yet in this complex array of characteristics, they do not include desire to take an active part, willingness to extend trust, nor the ability to communicate effectively. Consequently, further work in this area is called for.

In the Process section, the focal point is communication. The authors discuss issues such as proficiency with technology; use of humour; helping students with their written communication, goal setting and prioritizing; preparing students for conflict and tension; providing a safe environment; and promoting trust. However, they do not include establishing respect in their criteria. We could therefore expect that further work in this area would result in an expansion of the process issues highlighted by Brook and Oliver.

Using their model, Brook and Oliver explored the community experiences of online students in a course designed to benefit from the development of a learning community. For my purposes, key limitations to this study were twofold. Firstly, the participating 'students' were instructors themselves, rather than students in full time study with long-term educational commitments to each other and their learning. Secondly, the instructors met face-to-face at the beginning of the course, which implied there was some opportunity to build community prior to the online experience. Given these limitations, further work focusing on university students, with an emphasis on individuals who had not met face-to-face prior to meeting online, would propel our understanding of learning communities forward.

Brook and Oliver's model targeted factors we should consider when building an online learning community and, by doing so, the model appears successful. However, comments such as Bender's that highlighted the more problematic aspects of the online environment are also relevant. Specifically, Bender noted that the feeling of being overwhelmed can contribute negatively to students' experiences in the online classroom (2003, 31). In addition, McInnerney and Roberts (2004) focused on the isolation experienced by some students in the online classroom, isolation that can cause students to feel dissatisfied with their choice of educational environment (74).

While the isolation may be counteracted by the development of a learning community, if not built and supported effectively, the learning community could serve to exacerbate existing problems.

From a different point of view, Wegerif (1998) compared students who were ‘insiders’ with those who were ‘outsiders’ and determined that there was a social threshold which, if crossed, created a feeling of belonging and community. Those students who passed into this realm were likely to feel that they had gained more from the course (48). In the online environment, crossing this social threshold may be further complicated by the need to develop technological skills. Salmon and Giles (1998) developed a five stage model, Figure 6 below, demonstrating the necessity of supporting software skills development, as well as support for the development of skills that emphasize learning and moderating in the online environment (5).

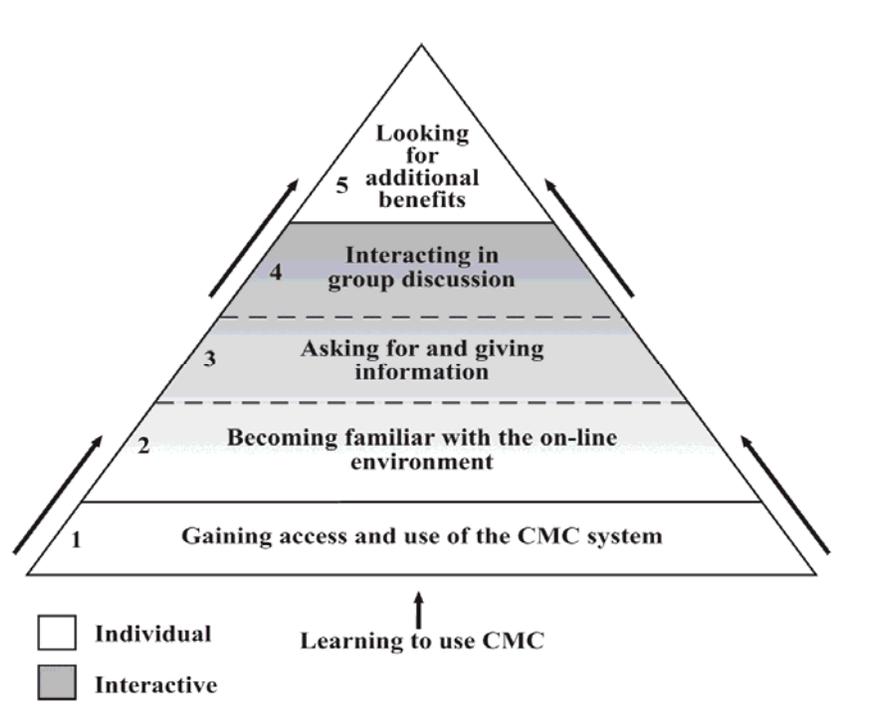


Figure 6: A Five Stage Model

It is clear from this diagram that students need to gain not only access to the Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) system, but they also need to become familiar with the environment in which they are working. In addition, it is important for students to develop the necessary skills that allow them to request information from and provide information to others. When they have acquired these skills, they are ready for interacting in a group discussion. Salmon (2000) went on to develop the *Model of teaching and learning online through CMC* (26). In this more recent model, she emphasized that participants in CMC must not only be able to access the system, but they must also be motivated (Stage 1). Once these requirements are met, the participants go on to establish their own online identities and can start to interact with others (Stage 2). Next, participants begin to exchange information about their work with each other (Stage 3). This leads to greater collaboration (Stage 4). Finally, participants are able to reflect on the learning process and look for ways to achieve their personal goals through by integrating CMC and other types of learning (25).

In light of Salmon's model, it is apparent that for some students the added emphasis on using technology effectively in order to take part in a learning community might result in a negative educational experience. Consequently, because of the collaborative environment, classmates could be adversely impacted. Therefore, in order to fully understand how all community members might be affected by these potentially negative influences, further studies are needed.

Brown (2001) identified three stages of community in her paper on community building at a distance: 1. Making acquaintances/friends, 2. Gaining membership, 3. Camaraderie (24). She did not discuss whether or not a face-to-face environment could be used for any of these stages, as her paper was focused on distance learning classes. While it could be argued that the stages noted by Brown are

equally applicable to the process of face-to-face community building, it is not clear if a combination of online and on-campus work could produce equally effective results. This raises the question of whether students choosing to work in a face-to-face environment can start the community building process online, prior to meeting on campus.

In addition to examining current literature to gain an understanding of (a) the term learning communities, (b) why they are significant to students, institutions and society, as well as (c) how they can be developed, the topics of trust, respect and communication emerged from the first two phases of my research as key considerations to be explored. Consequently, the following discussion will provide illumination on these three topics. Since trust featured more prominently in interviews with research participants than respect and communication, it is explored in greater depth in this section than either respect or communication.

### *Trust*

Some scholars have established links between trust and learning communities. Along with spirit, interaction and commonality of goals, Rovai (2002) noted that trust is a critical element of a classroom community, arguing that without it, the classroom is dominated by the instructor (5). While Kilpatrick et al. discussed the link between social capital and trust, pointing out that trust is fostered in environments where norms and values can be used to the benefit of all (2003b, 7), Mitchell (2001) emphasized the role of trust and mutual respect, stating that individuals deserve to be educated in a supporting, caring environment in which trust exists (2). In addition, McConnell (2006) placed an emphasis on the relationship between community, trusting relationships, and meaningful learning (4). Although the ability to establish trust may be influenced by the diverse backgrounds of the group members (Lewis and

Weigert, 1985, 980), it is essential to build trust if collaborative work is to be successful (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, 9). Considering these viewpoints, trust emerges as a key requirement for the development of a fully functioning learning community, without which, the community will be unable to reach its full potential.

In addition, there is a wide array of studies dealing with trust specifically in an online environment. Scholars, such as Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998), explored the link between trust, shared goals, and power struggles in an online environment; Panteli (2005) looked at the extent to which computer mediated interaction could provide the opportunity for the development of trust; and Erdem and Ozden (2003) conducted a case study into the affects of trust on team performance. Also, Clancy & Homer (as cited in Tocci) identified highly developed trust, current and available technology, and expectation of effective collaboration as three characteristics that make virtual teams function well (27). Jarvenpaa and Leidner concluded that trust could be established in teams that existed in only an online environment (1998, 33). Likewise, Panteli (2005) argued that computer-mediated interactions provided the opportunity for the development of trust (1) and noted that investment in building trust early can negate destructive team behaviour (4).

As discussed previously, little work has been conducted examining the formation of online learning communities (McConnell, 2006, 19); however, there have been a number of studies detailing the building of trust in online environments. For example, while Jawadi (2006) and Mezgar (2006) studied how trust is developed in virtual teams, Gibson and Cohen (2003) discussed the necessary conditions for trust development in an online environment (69).

Prior to the majority of work that was conducted in the development of trust in the online environment, Zucker, (1986) discussed three different modes of trust production:

1. Process-based, in which trust production is related to interaction, such as communication between individuals.

2. Characteristic-based, where trust production is linked to a social structure such as culture.

3. Institutional-based, in which trust production is based on formal societal structures, such as legislation. (60)

While Zucker originally applied these modes to trust in an organizational context, the connection between them and the online environment is clear. For example, online discussion groups, which provide the ability to discuss material and concepts relate to the Process-based mode; the culture created in the online classroom links to the Characteristic-based mode; and the larger educational environment within which the individual course or program operates, aligns with the Institutional-based mode.

Hardin (2006) stated that trust is cognitive, that is, we do not choose to trust. He argued that trust is dependent on the trustor's assessment of trustworthiness (17, 38), in that individuals possess knowledge upon which trust is based. I see some issues with this position in the context of online students. Specifically, when students are exposed to information about each other and assess it for personal relevancy, they can then choose to accept or reject the information based on that assessment. In addition, I would suggest that individuals categorize information differently depending on their individual preferences, values, and culture. Therefore, while they may not choose to trust, they will choose to find relevance in information to which

they are exposed and they will place the resulting knowledge into their own sphere of experience.

In addition to the cognitive perception of trust outlined by Hardin, affective and intended behaviour were included by Cummings and Bromiley (1996) to describe trust and they assessed those attributes in their research (305). Erdem and Ozen (2003) also discussed affective trust (2), describing it as a mutual, emotional relationship, demonstrated by concern and benevolence. The authors stated that while cognitive trust begins in the early stages of a relationship, affective trust is developed as the relationship grows and becomes more established.

Several scholars also argued that trust involves not only having the belief that an individual has the right intentions, but also the belief that a person is competent and can therefore fulfil the expected role (Erdem and Ozen, 2003, 2, Hardin, 2006, 17, Meyerson et al., 1996, 181). In addition, Mezgar (2006) clarified the distinction between trust and trustworthiness, noting that trust can be the outcome of trusting behaviour, such as taking risks, but trust should not be confused with trusting behaviour itself (5).

While this discussion has highlighted some of the theories of trust and how it is developed, I contend that there is additional complexity in our assessment of trust. More specifically, because trust is viewed in a very personal context, an individual's perceptions of trust may vary, ultimately making trust a complex construct to define. Because individuals have their own unique history, background and understanding of the world, a variety of relevant definitions of trust could result. Given the above, further exploration into trust and its relationship with online learning communities is required.

### *Conditions for trust.*

The following discussion targets current literature, emphasizing the conditions deemed necessary for the development of trust and trusting behaviour. Corritore et al. (2003), Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha (2003), Mezgar (2006), Nolan et al. (2007), and Panteli and Duncan (2004) suggested that a willingness to assume risk is necessary if trust is to be established. However, individuals in situations without risk may trust, but would not engage in trusting behaviour (Mayer et al., 1995, 724), because without risk, trust is unnecessary. In addition, scholars have commented that vulnerability is also instrumental to the development of trust, since without vulnerability, there is little at stake and consequently trust is not required (Jarvenpaa et al., 2004, 250, Corritore et al., 2003, 741, Erdem and Ozen, 2003, 2, Mayer et al., 1995, 712, Mezgar, 2006, 5).

### *Antecedents to trust.*

Jarvenpaa et al. (1998) studied the effect of repeated interaction between individuals in an online environment and its influence on trust development (53). In their research, they discussed trust in dyadic relationships, meaning those relationships between a trustee and a trustor. In addition, they wrote of trust on a collective level (31), such as an individual's trust in a group. In their own hypothesis, they chose to use three antecedents traditionally associated with trust, 1. Ability; 2. Benevolence; and 3. Integrity, as well as the trustor attribute of propensity to trust.

Meyerson et al. (1996, 181) and Mezgar (2006, 4) discussed the importance of defining clear roles and objectives; with these in place, individuals can achieve a common understanding. In addition, clarity of expectations has been linked to the ability to develop trust (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998). To demonstrate, when individuals

understand what is expected of them, it is easier to make a positive contribution to a task, and the expected level of involvement is established.

Powel (1990) raised the issue of expected future association with others and its effect on the ability of individuals to build trust (305). According to this criterion, students who anticipated a shared role extending into the future would have a significant amount at stake and may be more inclined to seek out information about others, thereby increasing their knowledge base and thus their propensity to develop trust. However, this position is contrary to Meyerson et al.'s 'swift trust' in which the authors argued that competent individuals with common short term goals and clear roles could develop trust quickly and maintain trust by engaging in highly active, generative, proactive, and enthusiastic behaviour (180-181). The tension between these two positions can be seen in terms of focus. While Meyerson et al.'s focus is on transitory trust, Powel's focus is long-term.

In addition to these considerations, communication was raised as a relevant factor by Feng et al. (2004) and Mezgar (2006), who believed it was critical for the development of trust. Although logically we may assume that if communication existed but was below expectation, a lack of trust would result. Further work in this area would therefore contribute positively to our understanding of trust development.

The willingness to depend has also been identified as a contributing factor in the development of trust (McKnight et al., 1998, 251). This should be distinguished from dependability on its own, since it is 'willingness' that is the distinguishing factor. If an individual is dependent, but has no choice, there would be little basis for trust. In addition, Jarvenpaa et al. (1998) and Meyerson et al. (1996) discussed the relevance of proactive tendencies as an antecedent to trust, so students who anticipate requirements and act early are more likely to have trust bestowed on them.

Finally, Lewis and Weigert, focusing on face-to-face trust building (1985), pointed out that the social context is critical to the development of trust, since without social relationships, trust is unnecessary (969). Furthermore, they postulated that shared social norms are important contributors to the development of trust (980). Although the authors did not explore online environments, the concept of social norms is equally applicable and could be divided into two distinct categories: 1. the social norms of the individual that exist prior to entry into an online environment, 2. the social norms developed by students as they engage in online activities together. Further exploration into social norms and the online environment is key to our understanding of community development in a computer-mediated setting.

### *Respect*

Mollering (2006), in his work on trust, found there was a connection between respect and trust in the minds of some of his research participants. As depicted by one interviewee in his study, the progression was shown to be first in getting to know someone, second respecting them, and finally building trust (165). Given this connection, further investigation was warranted. I therefore consulted close to thirty texts in the area of online education, team performance and community building before finding one that included any significant discussion on respect. On its own, I found this pointed to a gap in our current thinking. Had it not been for the early comments of Phase I research participants that respect was a key element in the development of community, I may have under-emphasized this component in my study. However, once highlighted, it led me to explore this aspect of human interaction in greater depth. This section will bring to focus some of the current thinking around respect, specifically how it relates to learning communities.

Prior to discussing the implications associated with respect and the learning community, a clear definition of respect is called for. The Oxford English Dictionary defines respect as “regard with deference; avoid degrading or insulting or injuring or interfering with or interrupting, treat with consideration” (Fowler and Fowler, 1975, 705). Implicit in this definition is the valuing of another individual, holding them in esteem and/or high regard. While later phases of this study will expand on this definition in the context of the students taking part in the research, the dictionary definition is used to provide a base point for the term.

In the context of Brown’s (2001) *Community-building Paradigm*, the author discussed the need to include strategies that create an atmosphere in the classroom that promote respect, along with openness and trust (23). Morrissey (2000) likewise, discussed the role of respect within the context of a professional learning community and argued that a community based on trust, support, and respect can have a positive influence on resolving some of the current issues that educators struggle with (19). Jonassen et al. (1998) went further when noting that, in addition to trust, support, and common goals, learning communities facilitate in the development of a respect for diversity (4). It is this last item that is particularly relevant for this research study as the focus on respect was identified by some participants as a critical consideration when examining the development of a diverse learning community.

Although Palloff and Pratt (1999) included respect as one of the key ingredients for the creation of a learning community (161), they focused their comments on the instructor-to-student elements of respect, rather than student-to-student respect. Bielaczyc and Collins (1999b) expanded on this context for respect in their discussion of the *Principles for the Design of Effective Learning Communities*, as they included the “Respect-for-Others Principle”, in which they

argue that being heard by group members, resulting from a respect for differences, leads to the expansion of knowledge for community as a whole. Since student-to-student respect is an area that may have implications on the development of trust and learning communities, further exploration is warranted.

### *Communication*

In an online learning environment, where technology aids student and instructor interaction, and individuals are separated in both space and time (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, 5), members seeking to establish a community face challenges that are not commonly found in the face-to-face environment. In particular, Aggarwal observed that communication patterns are changed (2000, 217); for example, there is a lack of spoken cues. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) conducted several studies into trust building in an online environment and noted that the slower rate of information transfer was an issue (4). The authors saw this as more significant than merely the ability to exchange social information effectively. In light of Jarvenpaa and Leidner's observations, and reflecting on the earlier discussion about the role of knowledge in the generation of trust, it follows that students in an online environment would have to work harder to develop a community. Considering this premise, along with Tocci's (2003) argument that poor communication skills were a major contributing factor to group ineffectiveness (23), the significance of undertaking further studies in this area is apparent.

Brook and Oliver (2005) discussed communication at some length when elaborating on the Process component of their model. They specifically discussed context, enabling, supporting, and moderating in relationship to student communication, and noted that providing a safe place, as well as having regular meetings, were critical elements to be considered when developing community (3).

McInnerney and Roberts (2004), in their paper discussing isolation in online education, made the argument that social context is a key factor in the success of the student. They further claimed that communication forums allowing students to interact socially in a 'warm up' phase assist students with the overall learning goals (77). This insight was particularly pertinent to my study and related to the three stages of community discussed by Brown (2001) in an earlier section of this chapter: making acquaintance/friends, gaining membership, and camaraderie (24). Logically then, a study that has the potential for contributing valuable insights in this area would examine whether or not a sense of community could be developed online with students who are scheduled to pursue their studies on-campus.

### *Diversity*

This literature review would not be complete without a discussion on diversity since it was one of the driving forces for the research. In the context of this study, diversity was the result of the cultural and ethnic backgrounds of the students, the variety of ages, as well as the experience and skill set that each individual brought to the classroom. The BCom Program normally had a few international students, usually less than ten percent, in addition to the Canadian contingent. These students traditionally came from a variety of countries and, if English was not their first language, they were required to pass a language competency test.

At the onset of the study, the university had accepted ten Chinese students into the program in special circumstances. These students did not have to pass an English competency test, and they were allowed to complete the program in two years, instead of the normal one year. This admission policy was not carried forward and the ten students were the only ones allowed into the program under this special provision. While these students did create an interesting dimension to the classroom dynamics,

this study involved a variety of international students, not only those from China. With the variety of backgrounds in the classroom, came some tension. Students had experienced challenges working on teams, engaging in classroom discussions and preparing group presentations. It was therefore important to explore some of the literature on diversity to gain a greater understanding of the current thinking in that area and how it might inform my research.

For example, Bielaczyc and Collins (1999a) discussed the need to respect each other's differences in the classroom (287). With this comes the assumption that the differences are already known, or that there is a means for discovering them. For students who meet on campus for the first time, and are immediately immersed into an intensive program of study, discovering these differences may be a task that is not only difficult, but also fraught with tension. Many of the tensions for the undergraduate students appeared to be the result of being placed on teams with others who came from different cultures, generations, and employment backgrounds. In order to overcome some of these initial face-to-face challenges, it seemed appropriate to investigate options for allowing students to explore these differences. Given the prevalence of the online environment in our society today, and the fact that students coming into the university use blended learning in their studies, it was logical to examine if and how an online platform could initiate the development of a learning community for a diverse student body.

Dawson (2006) noted that there has been a change in student demographics - from those who have traditionally populated the more conventional, brick and mortar institutions towards a greater number of part-time, older students desiring a more flexible approach to their learning (128). Although the students in this study were enrolled in a fulltime on-campus program, many held jobs, and were older than the

traditional undergraduate student, with an average age of 23 to 25. In addition, the classrooms were not only filled with more mature students, but students who also came from a number of different cultural and ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, the students were accepted into the institution with the expectation that they would normally have had at least three years' work experience prior to entrance.

Consequently, this combination of characteristics created a varied student population.

According to Gibson and Cohen (2003), students come to the online classroom from different nations, regions, organizations and professions, with the result that members may not share contextual understandings and some members may withhold tacit knowledge from others (9). Therefore, as discussed earlier, if trust is based on knowledge, withholding information would inhibit the ability of individuals to develop trust and, by extension, a fully functioning learning community. While Gibson and Cohen were discussing the online classroom, an examination of the characteristics of the students in this study shows that they are individuals representing a variety of backgrounds, similar to those noted by the authors. So it could be concluded that the arguments about understanding and knowledge put forward by the authors are equally relevant in my study investigating the use of online environment to support the development of a learning community.

Because there is a growing number of non-traditional students (Brown, 2001, 18), educational institutions need to stay abreast of the changing demands placed on them. Staying current implies a need for an increased awareness and appreciation of the range and complexity of student backgrounds. When discussing how to strengthen the learning community, Kilpatrick et al. (2003b) noted that the learning capacity of a community is enhanced if diversity is respected. They contended that if diversity is respected, trust is built, which results in an environment where risk taking is

encouraged (8). In addition, Jackson asserted that while diversity may make decision-making a more lengthy process, the quality of feedback is enhanced (Jackson as cited in West, 1996, 63). These arguments point to the value of understanding issues related to diversity in the classroom, particularly developing an increased awareness of the methods available to support students and encourage them to build a positive community using their diverse population as a foundation, thereby enhancing their educational experience.

### *Conclusion*

Given the action research approach taken in this study, it was expected that themes would emerge from the data as it was analyzed. As a consequence, this chapter contains not only a discussion of the meaning, significance and development of learning communities, and an overview of diversity, but also the emergent themes from Phase I of the study. Those themes: trust, respect, and communication, were explored in this chapter to provide an understanding of the issues brought forward by the Phase I interviews and focus group. Literature in those areas informed the latter phases of the study and contextualized the design of the online Bridge. Since an emergent approach was used, I chose to include additional components of my literature review in chapters 4, 5 and 6, when I discuss the findings of Phases I, II, and III. As a result, my literature review is not confined to the pages of this chapter.

Several gaps in current research were identified, some of which were not addressed in this study, but do provide some insights as to future direction for research in this area; these insights will be discussed in the last chapter of the thesis. This research study therefore focused specifically on if and how online technologies could be used to develop learning communities for a diverse group of individuals choosing

to study on-campus, what online activities are suitable for on-campus students, as well as perceived problems with the learning community model.

The participants in this study included staff and faculty, as well as undergraduate students from a range of cultural backgrounds, aged anywhere from their late teens to late forties, with resulting variability in employment backgrounds. While a few students had met previously, the majority had not met and were thus meeting for the first time in an online course. The literature that was examined pointed to the value of having a clear understanding of how diverse groups in the classroom could be supported so that the richness of their backgrounds might be used to strengthen the community. By viewing student differences as a positive quality, and encouraging them to build an inclusive learning community, a richer and more fertile ground for generating knowledge and understanding can be achieved.

At the core of the study was the desire to understand both positive and negative influences on the developing learning community. While a significant amount of research has been conducted in recent years on the development of online learning communities, exploring the use of the online environment for on-campus students is a less trodden path. As a result, one area that appeared particularly ripe for further exploration was determining if on-campus students could begin to develop a learning community in an online environment, and also what challenges they perceive result from working in a learning community. Given the focus on the benefits of the learning community model in current literature, a solid understanding of the disadvantages of the learning community model would expand our existing knowledge and provide insights that could allow institutions planning to use the model a means of avoiding potential pitfalls.

Furthermore, Laurillard (2008) noted that there is a wide variety of digital technology currently available, stating that most universities use it to support “information, communication and organizational transactions”, rather than using it to “improve the quality of the learning experience” (525). Seeking to explore some of the other uses of technology, this study sets out to determine if online activities are an appropriate means of developing learning communities for on-campus students. In this chapter, I explored learning community development by reviewing some of the current work in this area. While researchers have discussed ‘what’ is required for community development, there is room for greater detail in determining ‘how’ the community is built. By linking the ‘what’ and the ‘how’, this research aims to build on existing knowledge and provide new insights into the development and support of learning communities for on-campus students.

## Chapter 3: Methodology

### *Introduction*

This chapter describes the methodology used (1) to examine how online activities could be designed to support the development of a face-to-face learning community for students from diverse backgrounds, (2) to explore the steps that could be taken when developing such a learning community, and (3) to discover some of the perceived disadvantages of the learning community model. The chapter has been organized into five sections; the first section provides the rationale behind the research approach taken. An overview of the action research methodology is highlighted, limitations and delimitations are discussed, and the challenges faced are addressed. The second section outlines the research design, including focused discussions on aims, objectives, framework, participant profile, recruitment, and the scope of the research study. Section three reports on the data collection procedures, paying specific attention to the logic used for selecting each of the methods employed. In section four, the approach taken to analyze the data is examined, issues relating to ethical concerns are addressed, and the researcher's role as a participant observer is explored. The concluding section presents a summary of the research methodology as it applies to this study.

### *Rationale*

I would argue that in order to develop a research design that is not only appropriate, but also true to the researcher's philosophical stance, the researcher should explore his or her own epistemological beliefs. In this section, I will provide an overview of some historical perspectives on epistemology, leading to a more

detailed discussion of critical realism, a philosophy of perception to which I subscribe.

Rick (2006) noted the ladder-like interconnection between the epistemological stance, theoretical perspective, research methodology, and method/s of data collection, with epistemological stance as the first rung in the ladder. If we accept that this relationship exists, logically then, our epistemological stance becomes the foundation of our approach to the research process. In exploring my own perspective and its relationship to this premise, I examined some of the historical discussions surrounding the fundamental question, “how do we know?”

In the seventeenth century, John Lock proposed to answer this philosophical question, and it is argued that empiricism developed from his reaction to the views of Descartes, and like-minded philosophers, who believed that certain aspects of knowledge are innate. Thus empiricists argued that, “all knowledge, however various, can be analyzed into items of sensation” (Hanfling, 1981, 6).

Grounded in empiricism, the positivist theory emphasized the belief that the social sciences should attempt to develop scientific laws using the same processes as were used in the natural and physical sciences, thereby classifying the social world objectively (Greasley, 2006). In the nineteenth century, Auguste Comte, one of the founders of positivism, theorized that imagination was the main obstacle to the development of knowledge and that all true knowledge is based on observation alone (Larrain, 1979, 190). Subscribers to the positivist theory were numerous in the early twentieth century, when the Vienna Circle, influenced by Ernst Mach, used the phrase logical positivism (or logical empiricism) to address the concern about meaning (Hanfling, 1981, 7).

In the mid-twentieth century, Karl Hemple and his positivist contemporaries stressed the need to use deductive reasoning, where a researcher moves from theoretical ideas, or a set of given premises, to a logical conclusion (Crossan, 2006, 50). Here, the positivist researcher would systematically observe and measure behaviour and then record the results, which would be regarded as facts.

Later on in the twentieth century, a new theory was highlighted when Roy Bhaskar's text, *The Possibility of Naturalism*, was published (1998). In it, he stated that there was a unity in natural and social science research since the aim of each was to understand the structures, mechanisms, and processes that cause phenomena, but he acknowledged that both deductive and inductive approaches had value. The resulting theory, derived from the terms 'transcendental realism' and 'critical naturalism', became known as critical realism.

Critical realists held the view that reality can exist independent of our perception of it (Wikgren, 2005, 1), making it hard to differentiate between facts and values (Carlsson, 2006, 5). This can be contrasted with the positivist view, which assumed that knowledge is derived from observation of atomistic objects, events and regularities, where all the qualities of the objects are observable (Sayer, 2006, 11). The critical realist belief also differed from the idealist view, which postulated that reality is in our minds and does not exist anywhere else (Seabrook, 2006b, 1).

Critical realists acknowledged that while 'reality' was constructed, it was only partially negotiable (Palys, 1997, 412), which implies that reality exists independent of the researcher's analysis (Palys, 1997, 60). Therefore, to identify the existing reality in a complex array of participant perceptions and interpretations, the most effective analysis involves the researcher obtaining data from a variety of different

sources so that the evidence can be corroborated (Rudestam and Newton, 2001, 100); in other words, data triangulation is the most effective way to proceed.

From the critical realist perspective, the importance of triangulating the data is further highlighted when we examine the conflicting views of the positivist and the critical realist. In contrast to the positivist belief that discovering truth is the goal of science, critical realists believe that, even though the goal of discovering reality is inherently unachievable, we should continue to work towards it (Trochim, 2006, 2). Furthermore, since critical realists believe there may be an element of fallibility in any given data set, it follows that the likelihood of achieving a greater understanding of reality would involve using multiple measures. Consistent with the critical realist approach and its emphasis on triangulation, this research into learning communities used different methods to collect data from a variety of participants. As a result, common themes emerged, yet the unique perspective of each participant was preserved and considered. Cross analysis was undertaken to facilitate identification of common perceptions of reality.

In order to study reality, critical realists accepted both qualitative and quantitative paradigms and a variety of research methods, which is in stark contrast to the positivist emphasis on quantitative precision, with its reliance on gathering and analyzing aggregated data in a search for general truths (Palys, 1997, 422). Where the positivist is a strong proponent for the use of quantitative methods, the critical realist believes that the nature of the subject under study and desired learning outcome should drive the choice of methods (Sayer, 2006, 19). This logical approach suggests that a researcher would not use data collection methods solely because they are the most favoured by the individual, rather the researcher works towards clear predetermined goals using the most appropriate tools available. This aligns well with

the action research approach, which is not typically characterized by the data collection methods used, rather it is focused on problem solving and improving social conditions (Taber, 2007, 84).

In this research, the desired learning consisted of several outcomes. Consistent with the critical realist approach, the outcomes drove the choice of method; consequently both quantitative and qualitative methodology was appropriate. Surveys, resulting in descriptive statistical data, were used to collect information from students on the suitability of certain online tools in the process of learning community building. This information was needed to inform the continued development of the bridging course. Qualitative methods such as interviews and focus groups were used to gather opinions from students, faculty and staff about their observations on the building of trust and development of a learning community. These techniques provided a more in-depth stakeholder perspective to guide the process.

Egbo noted that, “as a philosophical framework, critical realism recognizes the importance of agency in research and sees social transformation as an essential outcome of research in the human sciences” (2005, 1). The transformative multi-phase nature of my research aligns with this posit and is consistent with Bhaskar’s argument that science is concerned with ever-improved ways of understanding the world and that social science is not only reacting to history, but is also shaping history (Olsen, 2004, 3).

At each stage of this research, the participants’ perceptions, opinions and thoughts were sought so that an understanding of their experiences could be developed. Each phase was built on the previous one, and the participants’ comments were considered as the Bridge course was developed and reviewed. Therefore, in addition to identifying commonalities, the data analysis was used to inform the

ongoing Bridge development, thereby facilitating changes that could transform the status quo (Bryman, 2004, 12).

Sayer noted that as we examine the social world, we must pay attention to the inherently complex layers and relational contexts (2006, 27). Mindful of this, I structured the data collection to maximize input from a variety of individuals taking into consideration their diverse backgrounds and personal beliefs. Untangling the complexities of the individuals' actions, understanding their contexts, and aligning their perceptions was a challenging task.

Another key aspect of the critical realist approach is the distinction made by Bhaskar (1998) between intransitive and transitive knowledge. Intransitive knowledge referred to objects under study, which could be the physical processes or social phenomena that always exist. Alternatively, transitive dimensions relate to the theories and discourses produced by people (Seabrook, 2006a, 2). If we hold that social phenomena refers to influential behaviour (Markey, 1925-26, 1), the intransitive dimension in this research could then be identified as the interactions of the individuals in the study. Conversely, the transitive dimension was the theory that online activities could assist in the development of a face-to-face learning community.

Given the preceding discussion on epistemological beliefs and theoretical underpinnings, and considering the central role of improvement and involvement (Robson, 2002, 215), action research was a natural fit for this study focused on examining ways to enhance learning community development by consulting with key stakeholders. Using a rigorous systematic approach, highlighting collaboration and change, action research served to facilitate transformation.

### *Overview of Action Research*

Believing that issues of social concern are best solved in real-life situations, social psychologist Kurt Lewin shifted the role of the researcher away from that of a distant observer to that of a researcher who had practical involvement in problem solving and knowledge production (Greenwood and Levin, 2007, 18). In the 1940s, Lewin proposed a process for action research that incorporated three characteristics: involvement of participants in the research process, democratic impulse, and contribution to social change (Hammersley, 2007, 169). Although Lewin initially used action research to improve organizational efficiency (Barab et al., 2004, 9), his methods have since been used extensively in education (Hammersley, 2007, 168), as well as in other disciplines where collaborative participation in real-life problem-solving is demanded.

While initial approaches to action research were focused on the researcher directing the path of change, the more commonly used approach now involves the research subjects themselves participating in the problem solving as co-researchers (Rudestam and Newton, 2001, 49). In the case of this research project, while some of the subjects were involved as co-researchers, due to logistical issues, other individuals were involved as subjects only. This will be explained in more detail in the *Limitations* section of this chapter.

Although touted by some as having developed a theory of action research (Anderson et al., 2007, 19, Herr and Anderson, 2005, 11), Lewin's most significant contribution could more aptly be described as a process for the conduct of action research. The process originally outlined by Lewin involved "planning, fact finding and execution" (Kemmis, 2007, 168). In contrast, the four steps more commonly attributed to action research today are planning, acting, observing and reflecting

(Robson, 2002, 217). Alternatively, while Fisher et al. discuss the use of planning, acting, monitoring, and evaluating (2003, 5), Stringer (1999) simplified the steps with his look, think, act approach to action research. Regardless of how the steps are described, there is no doubt that action research is a dynamic and reflective process, deeply seated in change.

Furthermore, while action research is sometimes referred to in current literature as cyclical in nature (Denscombe, 1999, Rudestam and Newton, 2001), Lewin's original approach could more appropriately be described as a spiral, since the elements are part of a continuous process, each step building on the last in an ever evolving spiral of activity. My research study involved a three phase approach, with each Bridge revision based on stakeholder feedback, making the spiral imagery appropriate.

In my view, because reflection is an overarching component of action research, it is integral to the entire process, not a distinct stand-alone step. Therefore, the steps used by Fisher et al. were more closely aligned with the research process used in this study than those steps others attributed to action research. Nonetheless, the steps used by Fisher et al. have a deductive quality as evidenced in the use of 'monitoring'. As a consequence, I substituted 'observing' for this step, resulting in the following steps: planning, acting, observing and evaluating. Given that discovery is an integral component of observation, the term 'observation' is more appropriately applied to the action research process I used than the term 'monitoring', with its emphasis on assessment and measurement. Figure 7 below shows how the process of action research for this study unfolded:

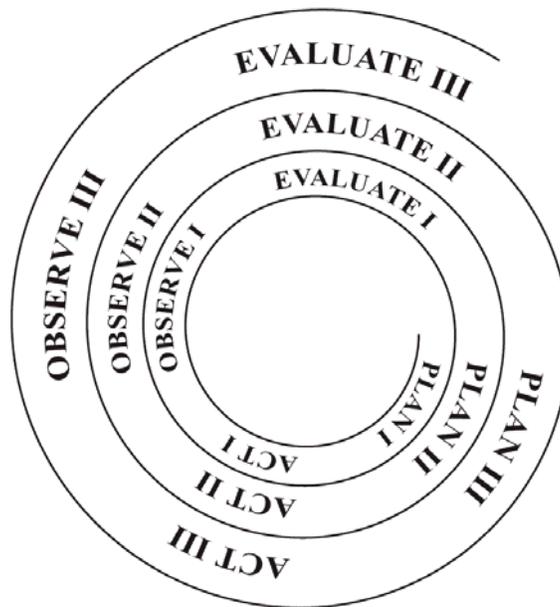


Figure 7: Action Research Spiral

Carr and Kemmis discuss three types of action research: technical, practical, and emancipatory (1986, 202). My research does not fit into either the first or second type, since technical action research can be defined as researchers using practitioners examining their own practices in light of external research findings, and practical action research is usually understood to mean outsiders working with practitioner groups on common concerns. More applicable to this study is emancipating action research, which typically respects the connection between social research and social action (Kemmis, 1993, 4). Fundamental to my work was the underlying thrust of understanding the issues faced by undergraduate students and exploring new ways to improve their experiences through collaboration with various stakeholders.

It is also worth noting that practical action research, as defined by Kemmis, involves a researcher who conducts the study without systematically developing self-reflection within the practitioner group (Carr and Kemmis, 1986, 203). This runs

counter to my belief that a systematic approach involving all key stakeholders in an action research study should be emphasized. By this, I mean an approach that builds on consultation with and reliance on a web of interrelated self-reflective stakeholders and follows a carefully planned and logical sequence of activity.

Early in 2008, as I reflected on this approach to action research, and on Reason and McArdle's comment that action research is "an orientation to inquiry rather than a methodology" (Reason and Bradbury, 2006, 1), I discovered work by Hamilton (2007) that helped shape my thinking. While Reason and McArdle highlight several schools of thought that elaborate on the basic process of action and reflection found in the action research spiral, it was Hamilton's discussion of systematic and structured inquiry in his paper on the scholarship of teaching and learning that most closely aligned with my own perspective, helping me contextualize the analytical framework I had chosen. In Hamilton's paper, this evidence-based approach emphasized the changes of perspectives and enhanced learning that can result when a practitioner examines the linkage between teaching and learning.

Looking at my research through this methodological lens provided me with an opportunity to examine the benefits of taking a systematic and structured inquiry approach to action research. I discovered that the change in perspective intrigued me. I was curious whether participants would experience any transformation themselves as they took an active role in the research; hence one of my interview questions in the last phase was directed at discovering if key stakeholders' understanding of learning communities had changed as a result of taking part in the research process.

#### *Limitations and Delimitations*

There were a number of restrictions associated with this research over which I had no control. In this section I will discuss these limitations, as well as the

delimitations (i.e. the restrictions that I deliberately chose) which affected the research approach. The limitations were quite general in nature, ranging from issues resulting from intensity of the program in which the students were enrolled, to the length of time over which the study took place. Delimitations were narrower in scope, mainly resulting from some practical decisions that had to be made as the research progressed.

One of the key limitations of this research was the program of study in which the students were enrolled. In the on-campus BCom Program, students complete the third and fourth years of undergraduate study in an intense 11 month period. As a result, most students were on campus for only a one year period, and during the year they had a very full schedule, with little time for activities other than study and paid employment. This meant that identifying students who were willing to take part in the study was challenging. Initially, I attempted to select students at random; unfortunately, I had so few students from the general populous willing to participate that a more viable option was to target the Cohort Representatives. These individuals were interested in bettering the student experience by, among other things, representing their fellow students on the Student Council. As a result, when they were asked to take part, they were predisposed to helping with the project since they understood the ultimate aim was to provide an enriched environment for undergraduate students.

Another strategy used to compensate for this recruitment challenge was the snowball technique (Palys, 1997, 139), in which one or two students who agreed to take part in an interview encouraged fellow students to take an active role. While this had the potential of providing some challenges, I believe that the data collected from the resulting student sample was a good representation of students in general as some

of the experiences they recounted were corroborated by staff and faculty, who had similar impressions of the impact of various activities.

Furthermore, because I was examining students' initial experiences in the BCom Program, the three phase study involved collecting data from a new group of students in each phase. This meant that personal preferences and perceptions were somewhat different for each group. Also, because the students in each phase had moved on in the program, no longer needing online learning community development activities, it was not possible to verify whether or not the Bridge revisions had met their initial requirements. In some respects this was a strength of the design, since it resulted in the involvement of a larger student population. But, in other respects, it meant it was not possible to affirm how the students in each phase would have responded to the revised Bridge activities, as they were no longer new to the program.

Another limitation was the inability to make certain changes to the BCom Program in the second and third phases, based on recommendations made in the first two phases. So, for example, when it was suggested that the Bridge course should be mandatory, it was not possible to make this change in time to allow the results to be tested, analyzed, and included in this study.

Additionally, while some of the subjects were involved as co-researchers, other individuals were involved as subjects only. This was the result of some restrictions inherent in the on-campus BCom Program. As noted previously, the research focused on the initial engagement of students in the intense 11 month undergraduate program. Because each phase focused on a different year's intake, it was not possible to have the students fully participate in all phases. As a result, the subjects who took on a co-researcher role were primarily staff, with students

participation limited to taking part in focus groups and interviews on a one time only basis.

One of the challenges of working on a study that takes place over several years is that the involved individuals experience changes to their job descriptions, go on leave, or accept promotions. The impact on this type of occurrence meant that it was difficult to identify individuals who would remain in the same work-related position. As a result, only one staff member was involved in all three phases, others were involved in one or two phases.

Originally when I started to think about how to approach this research, I had considered including all undergraduate students from the various programs across the university. When reflecting on the manageability of this option, I concluded that focusing on the BCom Program would be more logical. The on-campus BCom Program has the largest intake of undergraduate students in the university, with students starting the program in September each year. Because the university does not operate on a semester system, other undergraduate students enter the university at different points in the year; this would have created logistical challenges when trying to implement a university-wide Bridge.

In addition, I targeted the on-campus students, rather than the BCom online students. The BCom online program had much smaller intakes twice a year, and did not appear to have the same challenges when looking at student integration, possibly because they did not have the same level of face-to-face interaction as the on-campus students.

### *Challenges*

In addition to limitations and delimitations, there are certain challenges that are inherent when taking a primarily qualitative approach to research. In the following

table, I will examine some of the issues and discuss their relevance to this action research study:

Table 2: Qualitative Research Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

<b>Challenges Associated with Qualitative Evidence</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategies</b>
<p><i>Bias</i>  “tacit knowledge of a site tends to be impressionistic, full of bias, prejudice and unexamined impressions and assumptions” (Herr and Anderson, 2005, 35)</p>	<p>With the knowledge that I entered the research process with a pre-determined understanding of the issues, I strove to remain cognizant of this potential weakness as I worked with the stakeholders, so that their own perceptions would remain impartial. However, as a participant observer, one aspect of my involvement in the study was to critically reflect on the emerging issues; at times this resulted in a shared perspective with the participants. I found that self-examination was the key to remaining as objective as possible, while still allowing my own impressions to add value to the study.</p>
<p><i>Group Dynamics</i>  “the group dynamics may interfere with complete or accurate data” (Barab et al., 2004, 69)</p>	<p>Group dynamics were potentially an issue in one of the two focus groups that I conducted with international students. On this occasion, one of the participants surfaced as self-appointed spokesperson for the group. This appeared to be the result of a healthy social connection with the individuals in the group, as they lived on campus in a closely knit community. However, being concerned that the individual may only be voicing his own opinions, I took care to include others in the questions and, while the group frequently echoed the views expressed by the spokesperson, I was satisfied by the number of challenges and contradictions that the other participants were very capable of voicing their own concerns. The other focus group had a different dynamic, with most of the participants appearing comfortable speaking out. Although there were a few participants who were quieter than the majority, when we went around the table with the questions, these individuals were willing to speak up.</p>
<p><i>Subjectivity</i>  “qualitative research [is] too impressionistic and subjective” (Bryman, 2004, 284)</p>	<p>Taking a systematic approach to the data analysis, resulted in openness and transparency in each area of focus. Using Atlas.ti™ as a tool to assist in management of the data allowed me to reduce the reliance on my own impressions.</p>
<p><i>Reliability</i>  “the replication of the study under similar circumstances” (Rudestam and Newton, 2001, 98)</p>	<p>I strove to achieve a coding scheme that was transparent; one that would be easy for others to understand, thereby allowing them to reach similar conclusions to those I reached.</p>

<b>Challenges Associated with Qualitative Evidence</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategies</b>
<p><i>Validity</i>  “Whether the findings are ‘really’ about what they appear to be about” (Robson, 2002, 93)</p>	<p>In order to address validity concerns, I included several checks in the research process. Firstly, I gathered data from a variety of participants, with the goal of exploring different views and opinions. Secondly, I incorporated some team Bridge planning sessions at critical stages in the study; this provided me with the opportunity to debrief with colleagues. Thirdly, the staff and faculty interview transcripts were sent back to the individuals to verify their accuracy and allow the participants to clarify and/or correct the data collected. Fourthly, deep probes were used in interviews and focus groups to ensure the participants’ experiences had been fully explored. Finally, the three phase design of the study served to reinforce some of the earlier findings, as well as allow some of the participants the opportunity to explore the concepts further.</p>
<p><i>Generalization (External Validity)</i>  “a widely shared view that [generalizability] is unimportant, unachievable, or both” (Hammersley, 2007, 182)</p>	<p>While the subject of this study had elements in common with other situations, therefore leading to conclusions that could be generalizable, I would encourage others to review the specifics of each individual case and determine the appropriateness. Because my research approach resulted in a thick description of the experiences and perceptions of the participants, it will be possible for others to see crossovers. However, this does not imply that the results are generalizable in their entirety; rather that discretion should be taken when looking for conclusions that hold external validity.</p>
<p><i>Transparency</i>  “It is sometimes difficult to establish from qualitative research what the research actually <i>did</i> and how he or she arrived at the study’s conclusions.” (Bryman, 2004, 285)</p>	<p>By taking a structured approach to the data collection and analysis, as well as fully explaining the methods used and the reasons for their selection, I strove to disclose and clarify key aspects of the study.</p>

Despite the potential shortcomings, taking an action research approach was particularly relevant for this study because the purpose was not merely to generate knowledge, but also to create the opportunity for transformation by the participant group. The desire was to provide an experience where individuals could be part of a process that would lead to an improved environment for the stakeholders, where the

community itself was empowered to take an active role in change (Herr and Anderson, 2005, 1).

### *Research Design*

The research was designed using a systematic and structured inquiry approach within an action research framework. In this section, I will outline some of the key features of the design, preceding this with a discussion of the aims and objectives of the study.

#### *Aims*

Given the challenges that had faced on-campus undergraduate students from diverse backgrounds as they worked in the classroom, the overarching aim of the study was to determine whether online activities could support the development of a safe, supportive on-campus learning community. If it was determined that online activities could be used in this manner, then the supplemental aim was to identify which specific online activities would be helpful when building a learning community for on-campus students. The intent was to develop a framework for learning community development, as well as to explore perceived disadvantages associated with belonging to a learning community. The objectives that led to the realization of these aims are outlined in the following section.

#### *Objectives*

The objectives were as follows:

1. To identify the specific problems that faced the students as they worked together in the classroom.
2. To investigate possible causes for the problems identified.

3. To explore the learning community concept and determine how it could be used to counteract some of the negative student experiences.
4. To examine perceived disadvantages of the learning community model.
5. To determine what activities best support the development of healthy learning communities.
6. To seek evidence to support the use of online technologies in the development of on-campus learning communities.
7. To compare the learning communities that developed over a three year period based on faculty and staff perceptions.

The table below outlines the specific objectives for each of the three research phases. Some of the Bridge activities were different in Version I and II because each new version of the Bridge was built based on data collected from the preceding phase. Therefore, because I wanted to determine the applicability of the newly added activities, certain objectives in the table below are shown more than once. Also as students interacted with the Version I and II Bridge courses, they developed a greater understanding of its capabilities than did students in Phase I, who had no Bridge. Phase I and II students were therefore able to recommend new activities.

Table 3: Objectives of the Three Phase Study

Phase	Type of Data Collected	Participants	Specific Objectives
1	Interviews, Focus Group	2005 students, staff and faculty	To determine undergraduate issues and concerns, as well as to identify the possible causes of problems identified. To gather input on appropriate activities for an online bridge.
<b>Bridge Version I</b>			
2	Interviews, Focus Group	2006 students, staff and faculty	To obtain stakeholders' perceptions of disadvantages associated with belonging to a learning community. To determine the effectiveness of the Version I online Bridge in supporting the development of a learning community. To gather input about online activities that aid in the development of a learning community.
2	Survey	2006 students	To discover whether students used the Bridge. To identify Bridge activities that were useful in developing trusting relationships.
<b>Bridge Version II</b>			
3	Interviews	2007 students, staff and faculty	To determine the effectiveness of the Version 2 Bridge in developing a learning community. To explore participants perceptions of disadvantages of the learning community model. To obtain input on the types of online activities that were be effective in developing a learning community. To obtain staff and faculty's perceptions of the 2005, 2006 and 2007 on-campus learning communities.
3	Survey	2007 students	To determine if students used the Bridge. To discover the Version II Bridge activities that were useful in developing learning communities.

*Framework*

Burns (2003, 35) discussed an eleven step process for action research which aligned with my own three phase approach: (1) exploring, (2) identifying, (3) planning, (4) collecting data, (5) analyzing/reflecting, (6) hypothesizing/speculating,

(7) intervening, (8) observing, (9) reporting, (10) writing, and (11) presenting. The main thrust of this approach is an inductive plan for action. Mindful of the exploratory nature of my study, I adapted Burns' approach as follows:

Table 4: Framework for the Three Phase Study

<b>Burns' Step</b>	<b>Activity</b>	<b>Context</b>
1	<i>Explore</i> experiences of on-campus undergraduate students	Phase I interviews and focus group
2	<i>Identify</i> areas of concern and key stakeholders	Phase I data analysis
	Develop research question/s	Literature and Phase I data
3	<i>Plan</i> and implement intervention	Version I Bridge
4	<i>Collect</i> data	Phase II survey, interviews and focus group
5 & 6	Using <i>reflective</i> practices, consider appropriate modifications ( <i>speculate</i> )	Phase II Data analysis
7	Revise and implement <i>intervention</i>	Version II Bridge
	Collect data	Phase III interviews and focus group
8	Make <i>observations</i> based on final examination of data	Phase III data analysis
9, 10 & 11	<i>Report</i> results, <i>write</i> and <i>present</i> final paper	Thesis

As is apparent, from the table above, some of the steps of Burn's framework have been merged and others added. While the process outlined above is not entirely true to Burn's framework, it serves as a logical foundation for the three phases undertaken in my study.

#### *Participant Profile*

It is important for an action researcher to ensure that all stakeholder groups participate in the exploratory research that defines their specific problem (Stringer, 1999, 49). For this study, background work was done to ensure all stakeholder groups were consulted. This began with an examination of the key areas of the university that were affected by students who are part of on-campus undergraduate programs. As

demonstrated in the figure below, key stakeholders in the process were identified as the students, the BCom Program Office, University Life, faculty who worked with the students, and the Team Coach.

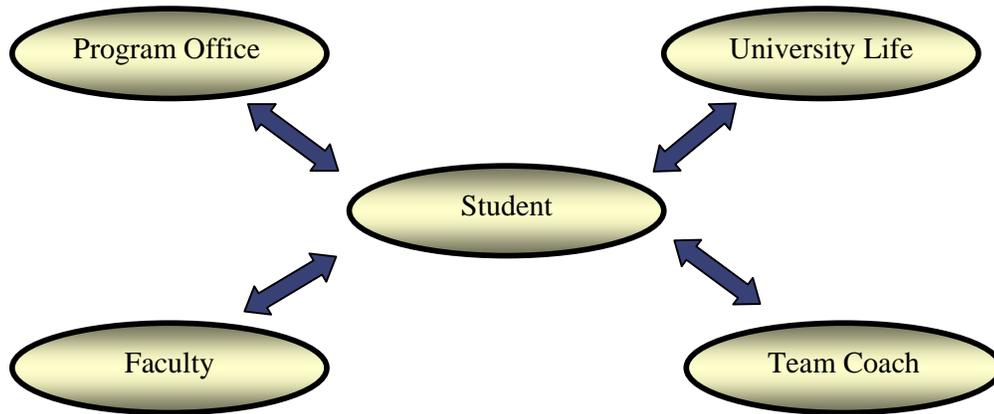


Figure 8: Key Stakeholders

When this study started, early in 2006, the configuration of the BCom Program Office was such that it employed four Program Associates, one Program Coordinator, and one Program Director. However, later that year, the Program Director role was discontinued, and the Program Coordinator was promoted to a new role, Program Manager, thereby taking on some of the responsibilities previously held by the Program Director. As Program Manager, the individual had responsibility over the administrative issues for the BCom Program, which included working directly with students. For the first phase of this research, in order to get a big picture view of the issues faced by the BCom students, I engaged the help of the Program Director during the final few days of his time in that role. For subsequent phases, I asked the Program Manager to provide her input, thereby obtaining a broad overview of student issues from an administrative vantage point. While the Program Associates were often the first ones to hear about issues facing students, the Program Coordinator/Manager

and Program Director were usually the ones that got involved in determining the root cause of the issues and how they could most reasonably be resolved.

University Life played an important role in the non-academic life of the university students. Charged with aiding students as they worked through their studies, University Life employees engaged in discussions with students about the many challenges undergraduates faced at the university, both inside and outside the classroom. This made the role of University Life a key one for this study as its employees had a clear understanding of not only what barriers to learning students were confronted with, but also what social pressures they faced as they worked together in their teams and cohorts. I therefore chose to engage the help of the Manager of Student Affairs, operating out of the offices of University Life.

Key to any student's experience at the university level are the faculty members with whom they work on a regular basis. While each student and faculty member will have issues that are unique to their own situation, it is understandable that many problems that surface would have some universal elements. Therefore, in order to gain a spectrum of faculty perspectives, each year a different faculty member was chosen to discuss the on-campus experiences they were having with students in the cohorts they had taught. All members were Associate (Adjunct) Faculty, teaching on contract, but each one had a close relationship with the university and had not only taught several courses at the undergraduate level, but also assisted in course management of these courses. The role of the Course Manager was one of an overseer of several courses in a subject area, ensuring consistency in content and quality of instruction.

In addition to faculty, program staff, and University Life employees, the Faculty of Management had an individual, the Team Coach, who was responsible for

ensuring both undergraduate and graduate level teams were fully supported. The Coach provided teams with one-on-one counselling as well as guidance for the teams as they worked their way through their respective programs. The Team Coach not only provided students with appropriate tools to use as they began their team work, but also had team check-ins throughout each term to follow up with each team's progress. It is this individual who was often approached when teams faced difficulties; he worked with them to overcome challenges and supported them as they tried to manage what were sometimes seemingly irreconcilable differences. As a result, this individual was a vital contact when attempting to understand the issues facing the undergraduate students in this study.

Finally, but by no means the least significant stakeholders, were the students themselves. As researchers have noted, there is a shift in higher education demographics (Pittinsky, 2003, 17, Dawson et al., 2006, 128); more students involved in higher education are older and have been in the work force for a number of years. In addition, some students making the transition into universities today have been absent from a formal educational setting for several years and come from a variety of backgrounds. The undergraduate students involved in this study were taking the upper level courses of a BCom Program. Over the years 2005 to 2007, the students typically averaged 23 to 25 years of age upon entry into the program, with students arriving on campus from a variety of domestic and international locations. It was this student demographic that presented challenges for students, administrators and faculty, in part because students at the university worked intensely on teams and were expected to participate in presentations and classroom discussions. The educational model adopted by the university was collaborative and experiential, relying heavily on the

individual's ability to take part in classroom discussions and to interact meaningfully with class-mates.

### *Recruitment*

Once the key stakeholders had been identified, work commenced with recruitment of the research participants. In 2006, when the initial recruitment took place, my role at the university was that of a core faculty member in the Faculty of Management, responsible for overseeing accounting courses. As such, I had working relationships with individuals identified from both staff and faculty perspectives but had no supervisory role with any of those chosen to take part in the study. In addition, I did not teach the undergraduate on-campus students, nor have any responsibility for their grades. In April 2008, my role as faculty member changed to that of administrator. At that time, there were only two individuals interviewed with whom I had what could be termed as a 'power position'. One of these was an associate faculty member who reported directly to me; the other was a student whose grades I was responsible for approving. In both cases, each individual was made aware that their involvement was entirely voluntary and that neither their involvement, nor lack of involvement, would have any affect on their promotion or evaluation at the university.

Consequently, for all but the one associate faculty member, there was no reporting relationship with faculty or staff at any time in the study, but I had collegial relationships with both. Other than the one student who was interviewed after April 2008, none of the students who took part in the study had any involvement with me in any capacity at the time of their participation in the project. As a result of my working relationship with staff and faculty, gaining the necessary support from colleagues was relatively easy as all individuals wanted to make a positive change to the existing processes and systems. Students were harder to engage; my perception was that much

of their unwillingness to volunteer for interviews/focus groups was due to the intense nature of the program, leaving them little free time. I solicited help from the Acting Dean, faculty members, programs office staff, and University Life employees, as well as making classroom visits to explain the project and its significance to undergraduate students and the university, but had a great deal of difficulty recruiting students.

Because of the problem around obtaining student participants, incentives were offered. Initially, students were given lunch/dinner vouchers so they could save time on meal preparation, thereby allowing them time to take part in the interviews and focus group. But when the logistics of this particular incentive meant it was difficult to offer the vouchers, I gave the students a small honorarium (\$20 to \$25 each). The compensation was not as payment for their time, rather to allow them to have easy access to purchasing food after the interview so they could go quickly back to class, to team meetings, or to their paid work.

### *Scope*

In order to clearly define what was included and what was excluded in this study, this segment outlines the scope of the work that was conducted. The study started with examining the experiences of students who entered into the BCom Program in 2005 and concluded with the 2007 intake. The three phase study covered on-campus students, but did not incorporate any data collection from students who were pursuing their BCom studies in an online format. Neither graduate students, nor any students outside the Faculty of Management were included in the study. All the students included in the research had been accepted into the undergraduate program, no restrictions were placed on age, sex or ethnic background of student, rather, a broad demographic was targeted.

### *Data Collection*

There were three main phases to the data collection and analysis. In the initial phase, one focus group with international students and several interviews with domestic students were held to identify issues that may have affected their ability to become a fully functioning learning community. Interviews were also held with administrative staff and faculty to obtain their views on the undergraduate learning community. The resulting data set was analyzed by coding it to reflect emerging themes, thereby identifying areas which could be pursued in a comprehensive and systematic manner (Robson, 2002, 79). The results of the analysis were used to create an online bridging course (Version I) for international and domestic students, to provide an opportunity for them to work together prior to attending on-campus classes.

In Phase II, one focus group and several semi-structured interviews with students who had completed the online bridging course were held. The focus of this round of data collection was to obtain feedback from the participants on the effectiveness of the online Bridge course as a forum for the development of a learning community. In addition to qualitative methods, an online survey was conducted to obtain information on student backgrounds, including age, ethno-cultural background, country of birth, and familiarity with online social networking technologies. In addition, open-ended questions were asked about the impact the Bridge had on students' on-campus experiences. Again, faculty and staff were interviewed and the results of focus groups, interviews and the survey were used to aid in the development of the Version II Bridge course.

The Phase III data collection was constructed in a similar way to the second phase, with semi-structured interviews and an online survey. This time, however, all

students took part in interviews, as the logistics of conducting a focus group with the students provided too challenging given the combination of time-intensive course work and their part-time employment commitments.

Both qualitative and quantitative methods were chosen as I wanted to obtain data from a wider population than would be possible if only qualitative methods had been used. Using both methods improved methodological triangulation and thereby provided greater rigour to the study (Robson, 2002, 175). Incorporating both qualitative and quantitative data types enabled me to overcome some of the limitations associated with using qualitative data alone. For example, I was able to develop greater multidimensional perspectives, as well as provide a richer more complex analysis of the students' experiences (Palys, 1997, 16).

The table below summarizes the type of data collection for each phase of the study:

Table 5: Data Collection for the Three Phase Study

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Total
Focus Group	7	7	0	14
Interview Students	3	6	18	27
Interview Staff	4	4	4	12
Survey	0	59	63	122
Total	14	76	85	175

### *Qualitative*

Because this research was largely exploratory by nature, I wanted to avoid focusing on what was initially interesting to me about the issues. Instead of concentrating on predetermined categories and coding schemes, I wanted to allow themes to emerge from the data (Palys, 1997, 79). This desire for an emergent approach led me to pursue primarily qualitative methods. Interviews and focus groups were the main vehicle for data collection, with semi-structured, open-ended questions

enabling the participants to more fully explore the concepts, and allowing me to probe more deeply to obtain thick, rich data.

Upon further examination, I determined there were additional reasons why qualitative research methods with an action research approach were a good fit for this study. Firstly, incorporating an action research approach resulted in a study that supported and enabled participants as they provided direction and implemented plans, rather than being passive subjects of the research (Leedy and Ormrod, 2001, 153). As a result, the research was not constrained by predetermined categories; instead themes emerged from the data. Secondly, using a qualitative approach allowed me to gain an understanding of participants' perceptions and interpretations (Palys, 1997, 423) and, as a consequence, I had a greater understanding of the unique viewpoint of each individual.

#### *Quantitative*

James et al. (2004) note how the addition of quantitative methods could heighten the strengths of qualitative data collection and analysis and vice versa (168). In consideration of this, I wanted to obtain the views of a wider population than qualitative methods alone could accommodate. As a result, I decided to collect descriptive data that would provide greater insights into the perspectives of students who were provided with the opportunity of working on the online Bridge course. The primary purpose of the resulting surveys was to find out what activities students engaged in and what they found useful as they prepared for their on-campus experiences.

As discussed in the *Challenges* section, triangulation of data was one of the strategies I adopted to mitigate potential validity issues. By providing students with a survey and compiling some descriptive statistics from the data gathered, I was able to

obtain a broader perspective on the Bridge course, thereby increasing the credibility of the data and findings.

### *Data Analysis*

Analysis of the qualitative data was approached by following a number of integral steps that allowed me to become increasingly familiar with the data. The steps outlined below are explored in greater depth in Appendix A:

1. Transcribe the audio tapes. In Phase I of the study, I transcribed all the interview and focus group tapes myself. I found this allowed me to reflect on my own role as a researcher, as well as discover certain aspects of my interviewing technique that could be improved. In Phases II and III, due to time constraints, I engaged the help of a transcriptionist. An example of an audio tape transcription from Phase I is included in Appendix A.
2. Replay the audio tape. After each transcription, I listened to the audio tape once again and reviewed the transcription for accuracy.
3. Highlight text. When reading through the transcripts, I would use coloured font to identify key themes as they emerged from the data. In Appendix A, I have bolded and italicized the type to demonstrate text that would have been coloured.
4. Import data into ATLAS.ti™. Each interview and focus group transcript was then imported as a primary document into software designed to aid in the analysis of qualitative data. Appendix A provides an example of this process.

For the quantitative data, because I was looking at descriptive statistics only, I used Excel to create tables and graphs that allowed me to analyze the data collected.

### *Ethical Issues*

As outlined in chapter 1 of this thesis, this study took place at a Canadian university and involved undergraduate on-campus students. My primary role at the university was as a faculty member teaching accounting and finance. In this role, I had the necessary support of the university administration that allowed me to ask for the students' permission to take part in interviews and surveys. I did not teach the students that took part in the study and, other than one student at the end of the study, I had no influence over their grades or progress at the university. I worked with the faculty and staff at the university who participated in the interviews. Again, other than one individual at the end of the study, I had no influence over their promotion or progress at the university. With regards to the student and staff member over whom I had some influence, I told each individual, both verbally and in writing that, "you may feel a level of obligation to participate; however, I want to assure you that your participation is voluntary and will in no way affect your academic standing/promotion at [the university]". On each occasion, the participants appeared at ease and expressed a lack of concern by my role in relationship to their own.

A formal ethical review was completed and satisfied the requirements of the university Research Ethics Board (see Appendix B for ethical review and data collection instruments). A copy of the ethical review documentation was then presented to the University of Bradford. The following points outline some of the key ethical considerations:

1. Research participants would sign an informed consent form.
2. Participants' identity would be confidential and any comments that were made by participants would not be directly attributed to them, unless a prior agreement had been made with the individual/s.

3. All the raw data would be kept in locked filing cabinets, and/or on password protected computers.

4. The level of risk for participants associated with the data collection was minimal, so no safeguards needed to be incorporated.

5. If an individual wished to withdraw from an interview, they would be allowed to do so and any records pertaining to that participant would be destroyed.

6. To ensure ethics are considered throughout the study, the research process would be continually monitored.

#### *Participant observer*

Because I am a reflective practitioner, I wanted to participate in the research, not as a distant observer, but as an individual who could take an active role in the dynamic process that was unfolding. Making use of both a qualitative approach and an action research direction meant that my role as a participant researcher was included within the larger framework of the research focus (Morvaridi, 2001, 4).

When I first embarked on this research into undergraduate learning community development, I did not consider taking an action research approach. It was only as I began to form the multi-phase research plan, that I saw an alignment with action research. As I engaged in discussions with colleagues and explored the literature, it became apparent that this orientation was a good fit for my study. The action research spiral provided a meaningful framework, and the repetition of steps allowed me to fully immerse myself in the work.

As I followed the action research path, I discovered I was involved in a project that was both dynamic and transformative on several levels. I enjoyed engaging in conversations with student participants and collaborating with colleagues as we planned the Bridge course and Foundation activities for the second and third phases of

the study. Faculty and staff worked on the project with enthusiasm, using data that had been gathered to propel the project forward. In each phase, we held meetings to discuss the results and explore ways to implement the suggestions made by interview and focus group participants. In the planning step of the second phase, the short time frame we were operating in hampered our ability to incorporate some of these recommendations. As we examined the advice participants gave on ways to increase student engagement in the Bridge course, our desire to include newer technologies, such as Second Life, conflicted with the lack of time available as well as with the resources we possessed. There were some compromises, but the team worked hard to incorporate as many of the participants' suggestions as possible, filtering out some of the more impractical ones.

Using an action research approach allowed me to grow as a researcher. I found there was much to learn about engaging participants, creating environments where they would put forward new ideas and discuss their experiences in a meaningful way. As I replayed the interview and focus group tapes, I gained a greater understanding of my own weaknesses and strove to improve my techniques as the research progressed. Initially, I found that participants were not always focussed on the questions asked; I struggled if a participant's answer did not appear to address the question. However, as time passed, I began to realize that these digressions were, in fact, a valuable part of the data – providing richness and depth, allowing me to gain insights into the unique world of the participant.

Furthermore, I found new probes emerged as I reviewed the data, probes that allowed me to gain more vibrant answers from participants. At first, it seemed almost paradoxical that as participants strayed further from the questions I asked, they provided more valuable data; data that gave me greater clarity and understanding of

the issues. On reflection, however, this began to seem logical: it was I who sought to fully understand the issues, while it was the participants who lived and worked with those issues.

While the research was personally rewarding, there were also times of frustration and discouragement. On occasion, it was necessary to revise carefully made plans; from this, I concluded that flexibility is fundamentally important to the successful implementation of an action research study. Because participatory action research implies, by nature, that the researcher must fully engage and understand the issues, it was critical that I followed the lead of the research participants, instead of forging ahead without considering their valuable input. At planning sessions, each member's input was acknowledged and discussed by the team. While we respected each other's opinions and background, negotiation was still an important component of our interaction. Fortunately, the members of the design team were highly motivated to create a solution that would not only satisfy the requirements of the study, but also allow the students to successfully achieve their personal goals by taking part in a productive, supportive, and safe learning environment. It was with this design team that I fully appreciated the benefits of working with individuals who were not only knowledgeable in their area of expertise, but also encouraging and pleasant to work with.

Because I was curious how some of the research participants felt about the project they had been involved in, I asked faculty and staff if their own understanding of learning communities had changed as result of their involvement in the project. They agreed that they had an improved understanding of how learning communities could be developed, and further, some saw connections between trust and learning community development that they had not previously considered. In addition, through

their contributions to the Bridge course and their commitment to Foundations activities, faculty and staff were more involved in building a solid base for undergraduate learning community development.

I did not ask the student participants to comment on the transformative nature of the project. However, the creation of the cohort mission statement, discussed further in chapter 6, demonstrated that students were actively engaged in building a learning community earlier in their studies than the students from previous intakes. The mission statement that the Phase III students produced provided an insight into their level of commitment to the community, as well as showed how they viewed their own role in the continued success of their peers.

In conclusion, while I learned a number of things through participation in this project, one key observation is that, just as change is integral to an action research study, a willingness to embrace change is necessary on the part of the participant observer. Being flexible and accommodating, as well as being patient, respectful, and persistent, provides an opportunity to gather data that is enlightening, thus enabling the researcher to engage in a dialogue that can provide new depths to our current understanding.

### *Summary*

To conclude, in this chapter I have provided an overview of the action research approach taken when studying the perceived disadvantages of the learning community model, exploring how online activities could aid in the development of learning communities for on-campus students, and examining the steps that could be taken in developing a learning community. Highlighting not only the aims and objectives, I also examined the research framework used and took a careful look at the

limitations and delimitations that created the boundaries within which the study operated.

Both qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were employed, which allowed me to explore in-depth perspectives providing many rich and authentic insights, as well as reaching a wide audience to obtain descriptive statistics. As a result, data was triangulated, increasing internal validity.

An inductive approach to qualitative data analysis was used, with actions taken to mitigate a variety of the challenges that can result when using an action research orientation. Rationale for using action research included an examination of my philosophical orientation as a critical realist, as well as my belief that taking an active role in the study would contribute to a transformative solution for the stakeholders.

## Chapter 4: Phase I Results and Discussion

### *Introduction*

In this chapter, the qualitative methods used in Phase I of the study are outlined, framed by the action research approach discussed in chapter 3. Data were gathered in one focus group and seven interviews held with faculty, staff and students at the university. Both focus group and interviews were audio taped to ensure the authentic thoughts and perceptions of the participants were captured, thereby enabling accurate coding and analysis. The audio tapes were transcribed into Word documents, converted to .rtf files and imported into ATLAS.ti™ software for coding using a content analysis approach.

Stemler (2001) wrote that content analysis can be “defined as a systematic, replicable technique for compressing many words of text into fewer content categories based on explicit rules of coding” (1). One of the key steps in Krippendorff’s (2004) approach to content analysis was “developing categories” (343). In light of this, I embarked on an extensive analysis of the interview and focus group texts. As noted by Wenger et al. (2005), in qualitative data analysis these categories are not priori (37); instead the categories identified in my study were emergent. Using a process of reading and re-reading the texts in an iterative process, I determined appropriate categories that moved the study forward, while being mindful of the need to consider the transferability of the results.

I used the action research steps identified in chapter 3: plan, act, observe, and evaluate, to frame the results described in this chapter. But, before beginning my analysis of the data collected, I will start by including a brief discussion on the thematic concern, which, as explained by McTaggart (1997), is “a commitment to

inform and improve a particular practice” (30). The thematic concern both contextualizes the research and provides a succinct description of the motivation that compelled me to take the path I followed.

#### *Thematic Concern*

Because I worked at the university that is central to this study, I was aware of and understood the concerns of many undergraduate on-campus and online students. However, since I was initially interested in areas related exclusively to online studies, I did not consider the on-campus students as a relevant group for my research. This changed in 2006 when the Acting Dean of the Faculty of Management brought an issue to me for consideration. Based on his recommendation, I engaged in discussions with individuals who worked with the BCom students in various capacities at the university. As a result, the thematic concern of this action research project was identified as follows: *developing a stronger sense of community amongst the on-campus BCom students.*

In Phase I, student, staff, and faculty perceptions of the undergraduate experience were explored. The intent was to discover key concerns, as well as to obtain input on potential actions that could be taken to mitigate problems. In Phase II, an examination of participants’ impressions of the usefulness of the online activities included in Bridge Version I was undertaken. The aim was to explore concerns the participants had regarding the learning community model, as well as to find out if the Bridge activities were relevant to the development of trust and a learning community, and seek areas for improvement for future versions of the Bridge. The purpose of Phase III was similar to that of Phase II. In Phase III, however, the Bridge Version II was the focus of the research. The Bridge Version II included additional activities and tools based on recommendations made by Phase II research participants, and there

were follow-up activities for students once they arrived on campus. The focus of this chapter is the four steps of Phase I of the study, plan, act, observe, and evaluate. A section at the end of chapter 6 will include my reflection of the research process as it unfolded for all three phases of the study.

*Plan*

When this research plan was first conceived, the decision was to involve three intakes of BCom students, as well as the faculty and staff who worked with them. Because of the complexities of using a three phase approach, clarification is provided in the table below. Table 6 outlines the activities and the time period for each of the phases:

Table 6: Research Activities

<b>Phase</b>	<b>Data</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Timeframe</b>
1	Interviews, Focus Group	2005/06 students, staff and faculty	August 2006 to February 2007
<b>Bridge Version I Implemented</b>			
2	Interviews, Focus Group	2006/07 students, staff and faculty	April to November 2007
2	Survey	2006/07 students	February 2007
<b>Bridge Version II Implemented</b>			
3	Interviews	2007/08 students, staff and faculty	October to May 2008
3	Survey	2007/08 students	September 2007

Several motives for using a three phase plan have been identified in earlier chapters. Issues such as increasing validity, allowing participants to explore the concepts in greater depth, developing themes that emerged from earlier phases, as well as completing several revolutions of the action research spiral have all been discussed previously. In this chapter, the focus is on the first of these three phases, with the intent of identifying the pertinent details underlying the plan that was developed, as well as elaborating on the plan itself.

The first group of students involved in this study entered the university in September 2005 and were expected to complete their undergraduate degree in August 2006. Therefore, when the research planning process was taking place in the Spring/Summer of 2006, these students were well over half way through their studies. The process of developing interviews and focus group questions, obtaining ethical review permission, and ensuring the project was viable from an institutional perspective took several weeks; however, by August 2006 the focus group and interviews were finally underway. This meant that the students participating in the study were close to program completion and therefore had a wealth of experiences upon which to draw.

The original intent was to hold two focus groups, one with domestic students and another with international students. Given there had been some tension between domestic and international students, I felt it important to hold separate sessions as I wanted participants to feel free to express their concerns and fully voice their opinions. Organizing the focus group with international students was relatively straight forward because many of the 2005/06 international students lived in an on-campus residency area called Global House.

However, it was very challenging to find a time at which the domestic students could meet as a group, since most domestic students were not in residency accommodation. After several attempts to engage the domestic students in a focus group, I opted to conduct interviews with the cohort representatives on an individual basis. The cohort representatives were members of the student council who had chosen to represent their classmates. They brought issues and concerns to the foreground both on council and with administration, when necessary. Because they represented their cohorts, I felt they would have a solid understanding of many of the

issues that had surfaced throughout the year, and when contacted, three of the four were agreeable and available to meet me for one-on-one interviews.

In addition to gathering the thoughts and opinions of the students, I felt it important to include key staff and faculty as they were important stakeholders and their perspectives would strengthen the study. Consequently, after the student interviews and focus group had been held, interviews were arranged with the Team Coach, the Manager of University Life, the BCom Program Director, and a faculty member who had taught the students.

#### *Act*

This phase of the study was primarily exploratory, so did not entail any intervention. In addition to exploring the lived experiences of the participants, the goal was also to develop strategies that could be used to mitigate some of the problems that were identified. As a result, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences over the period September 2005 to August 2006. Because the informal conversations that had taken place prior to the start of this study had highlighted the diversity of the students' backgrounds, as well as the students' relationships and lack of trust as items for consideration, the main thrust of the focus group and interview questions was directed towards issues relating to trusting relationships. Questions were asked about the students' previous experience working in multicultural environments; they were also asked what activities had helped them get to know their classmates when they arrived on campus. In addition, students were asked about times when they had developed a trusting relationship with other students and what had led to the development of trust in each case. Finally, students were asked to think about what online activities could help them build trust with other students. For further reference, Appendix C contains the interview and focus group questions.

The interviews that were conducted with staff and faculty had a similar focus. These participants were asked about their perceptions of student preparedness, whether or not there were any pre-established groups entering the new on-campus environment, issues of trust and how it was exhibited, the types of problems they had seen emerge, how trust related to learning community development, and strategies for allowing trust to develop in both on-campus and online environments. The specific questions are contained in Appendix C.

### *Observe*

In this section, I discuss the qualitative data that was collected. By including students, staff and faculty in the study, a variety of perspectives were obtained. The following categories emerged from the data collected: (1) Preparation for Learning, (2) Trusting Relationships, (3) Community Building, and (4) Working on Teams.

Within each category, several themes were identified. The following sections of this chapter include a description of each category, as well as a discussion of the themes that emerged. Direct quotations have been included in the narrative as they capture the lived experiences, perceptions and opinions of the participants, and serve to illuminate each emergent theme. The participants' words quoted in this chapter are exactly as stated by the individuals; however, filler words and expressions such as "sort of", "um" and "like" were removed to enhance the flow and, in a limited number of places, an additional word or phrase was inserted to contextualize a participant's comment. Participants' identities were protected through the use of an alpha numeric tag.

#### *Category 1 Preparation for Learning*

In this category, there were three key themes identified: online activities, previous experiences, and international experience. Students provided their

perspective on how prepared they felt when they first attended the university. They expressed concerns, discussed what they believed worked, and suggested activities that could be used in the future to help students as they adjust to the university culture. In a similar way, staff and faculty discussed what they experienced with the students who entered the university, highlighting challenges and expressing their opinions on the general preparedness of the students.

*Theme i: Online Activities*

The students who participated in the study discussed some of their experiences with the discussion board they were provided with. This discussion board was given to the 2005/06 students so they had a means of connecting with other students who were entering the program. The students were not asked to take part in any specific activities, but were given the option of opening a new discussion thread and/or responding to threads started by other students. For students who used the discussion board, it appeared there were both positive and negative implications. For example, one student talked about his ability to get to know other students, but he also noted that the discussion board may have had a negative impact on his ability to work with students who did not take part in the online discussion:

*I used it, and I think, a small, maybe half a dozen used it actively before [arriving on campus]. And I think when I came to school, a lot of the other students didn't know about the board or know how to use the boards, so, their ability to react early on was non-existent. And now that I look back at it, a lot of the same people that I had the ability to interact with early on, and say, 'hey, listen where are you living, I'm going to be there next week, I can look at that apartment for you'. Those types of relationships that were built early are the same relationships I have today, and likely took away from my ability to share energies with other peers in the program. (Ph1Stu3)*

Another negative aspect of the discussion board was expressed by one student when she discussed how she felt like an outsider because she had not used it prior to her arrival on campus:

*I didn't understand all the technology, and all the online stuff was really foreign to me. And so I didn't get it until I got here, how to use the student discussion boards and stuff, and other students had been doing that – had been getting together and things, and I was totally, I was like, 'whoa, whoa, I've missed all this stuff, all these people are getting to know each other and I don't know anybody'. (Ph1Stu2)*

A different student discussed how feelings of being overwhelmed could have been minimized if there had been an orientation, allowing students to discover more about their program of study before arriving on campus:

*As new learners, we're overwhelmed with everything we have. We don't have qualifying questions, questions that are really meaningful ... there needs to be a better, easy environment for us to ask questions in and collect information on the program, and more than just the program - everything around the program. (Ph1Stu3)*

Scagnoli (2001) discussed the benefits of orientation for online students, suggesting ways in which the orientation could be designed for maximum effectiveness. She noted that orientation should include three main areas: technological training, team formation, and course information (25). While her focus was on online students, her observations are equally relevant for on-campus students. Participants in Phase I of this study discussed the benefits of including some orientation activities prior to students arriving on campus. As a strategy designed to help minimize feelings of being overwhelmed, and to create an environment where students could start to obtain answers to their questions, some participants suggested Bridge activities that they believed would benefit individuals beginning their studies in 2006 and later years. For example, a staff member suggested the following:

*Some kind of pod cast, some kind of discussion, followed up by some kind of action. I think that would be a way that would start to get people at least thinking and orienting themselves in that way. I don't know that people are yet really ready to share of themselves and they don't have relationships before they get here, many of them don't, and so they might start to build relationships with [the university] and their program and with each other. I think it takes getting everybody together in some way. (Ph1Staff1)*

Also, because, as one student noted, “*people are curious about appearance*” (Ph1Stu3), some participants discussed the benefits and potential problems that could be associated with posting photographs. There were essentially two different perspectives – those who thought photographs had a negative connotation because “*people have a tendency to judge*” (Ph1Stu3), and those who thought that the benefits outweighed the challenges, “*as much as we get negative impressions of pictures, we can also get positive impressions if we know what they look like*” (Ph1Staff4).

However, given the static nature of photographs and discussion board postings, several individuals thought it would be important to use some kind of synchronous tool. A staff member suggested, “*SKYPE or something like that, to be able to communicate*” (Ph1Staff4). And a student took this a little further when noting that, “*a picture, I think, [has] little, little value. Real-time TV, where you can see gestures, you can see sincerity, you can see emotion*” (Ph1Stu3). In this last comment, the student combined the desire to see the person with the need to connect in a synchronous environment.

But, with synchronous tools in mind, one student cautioned about potential problems pertaining to the geographic distribution of students and cautioned that, “*there should be a rule about time, since [there are] different time zones*” (Ph1FG1). This ties in with the comment made by DeSanctis et al. (2001) regarding the suitability of asynchronous tools to individuals when people are working in multiple time zones (81). Acknowledging that choosing one tool may not work for all students, one participant expressed the opinion that there should be “*multiple ways of communication – chat, posting, email*” (Ph1FG2).

When discussing whether or not starting students with online activities could be effective, a number of ideas arose. One staff member thought an online component

could help reduce the volume of information students were expected to absorb when they took part in Foundations, the on-campus orientation week:

*There's so much information there, information overloaded, in Foundations. Where possibly, if something is started beforehand online, then they can really have a sense of what it's really like ... provide a context for them when they get here, it might be an easier transition. (Ph1Staff2)*

Another staff member believed that an online pre-campus course could be used to challenge students to think about what they could contribute, rather than what they could take away from the experience, “before they get here we should be getting them thinking about, ‘what do you bring to this community, ask not what your cohort can do for you’” (Ph1Staff1). But, there was also the acknowledgement that an online Bridge could not be a stand-alone unit, it should, at a minimum, be integrated with the on-campus orientation, “tie [it] in and if it can be something that leads into Foundations and leads into one of their first courses it would be better, I think it would be more relevant” (Ph1Staff2).

This same staff member was also of the opinion that, “it would be very important to make it mandatory; it would have to be part of your experience” (Ph1Staff2). Farrell (2004), when discussing a mandatory library orientation for college students, noted that making an orientation mandatory creates a formal mechanism that enhances the students ability to succeed (53). In addition to the reasons provided by Farrell, one participant in this study noted that if the online pre-campus course was voluntary, some students would not take part:

*If you make it voluntary, a certain percentage, it's probably not a small percentage, will not do it. It's just, they're not getting a grade, they don't care ... if you want to get engagement, you have to require engagement ... you have to make it compulsory. (Ph1Staff1)*

As part of a discussion about the type of information that should be included in an online bridge course, students drew strongly from their previous experiences and

discussed practical issues, “*it would be great to have a presentation on all the areas at [the university] that you can volunteer for*” (Ph1Stu1). In addition to volunteer activities, students suggested more pragmatic concerns, for example:

*There could have been more on what location you should be working in ... how much time and room you’re going to need for study ... if you look for work, what kind of work should you do, how much time should you commit to that work ... when can you expect stress, how can you deal with the stress.* (Ph1Stu3)

However, one staff member did not believe that an online bridge course could be responsible for building a community. Instead, the participant felt the value of the Bridge would be in its ability to prepare students for the community they would build when they arrived on campus:

*I’m not entirely sure that a bridging program will necessarily create community. However, a bridging program might create some of the enabling conditions that will allow a community to be built more effectively once they’re here. And I think that’s the key ... it can’t in and of itself create that community but it certainly can add to the capacity and create ... a greater likelihood that people will find that sense of community and that connection.* (Ph1Staff1)

A student had a similar concern about the online environment and the connection you could create with another individual, “*you don’t feel gestures, I mean, I could probably speak one word, but typed it could have thousands of meanings, but when I say it, it may only have one*” (Ph1Stu3). Another participant did not specifically state developing community online was unfeasible, but did see limitations to the online environment:

*There are elements that easily establish when you see a person face-to-face and you chatting with that person. You can tell right away whether you like that person or you don’t like that person or there’s something about that person you’re not comfortable with, and that’s a little hard on the internet to address.* (Ph1FG4)

However, despite the potential challenges of the online environment, one student thought that in both online and face-to-face interactions, he could establish

trust, “*I would have equal ability to trust somebody when that relationship is online vs. face-to-face ... I don’t think it’s any easier for me to make trustworthy decisions on somebody I’m face-to-face with versus somebody I’m online with*” (Ph1Stu3). This is supported by Jarvenpaa et al.’s (1998) work into building trust on virtual teams, when they identified several strategies and behaviours that aid in the development of trust online (53).

And a different student went on to talk about what happens after you have talked with someone online and are then able to meet with them in person. He introduced the idea that meeting someone online can result in building respect for them and getting to know them in greater depth than, perhaps, a face-to-face environment affords:

*Beyond the name and the font colour, we don’t even know anything about this person. But we create a picture and then we, we treat them with the same amount of respect or whatever. And it goes both ways. Now, sometimes when you meet afterwards, that results in a disappointment. But, on the other hand, a lot of times, because of that assumption, you’ve gotten to know this person better.* (Ph1FG2)

In this section, a variety of views were presented that provided insights into the participants’ perceptions of the benefits and limitations of the online environment if used to prepare students for on-campus studies. In the following section, participants’ voices are heard as they discuss the impact that students’ previous experiences can have on class members in a face-to-face classroom.

#### *Theme ii: Previous Experiences*

While this theme was not discussed in as much depth as the previous theme, it was obvious that some participants felt that a student’s background prior to attending the university was fundamental to his/her expectations and affected his/her conduct while at the university. Participants had two distinct, and diametrically opposed views: some felt the students benefited from exposure to the post-secondary education

that they had experienced prior to entering the university, others felt these experiences had not prepared the students adequately. First, we will examine a comment by a participant who thought that some of the students were prepared:

*The strongest of the students at [the university], I would suggest, come from the community colleges or [similar] institutions ... [these students are] comfortable with the material ... not afraid to discuss things, to disagree, to challenge the text book's position on things. (PhIStaff4)*

Conversely, some staff/faculty thought that the type of education that students had taken part in previously did not prepare them for the on-campus experience:

*I don't think they are prepared ... I think a lot of them are used to what we call the mug and jug - they sit there, they listen to the lecture, they regurgitate the facts, they get their grade. And we don't do it that way. And even though we might say we do it differently, until you experience it, it's hard to know exactly what we're talking about. (PhIStaff1)*

Another staff member commented on the implications to program staff with regards to the perceived lack of preparedness, “*they start complaining about the amount of work, ‘We weren't told about this’ ... so there's a resentment starts to build up, or push back*” (PhIStaff2). This resentment could negatively impact both students and staff in the program. Students could feel overworked, and staff could spend a great deal of time with students who had concerns about the workload. Related to the discussion on workload, is the following theme, *International Experience*. Working on a team with classmates from different backgrounds can be challenging as team members work on course deliverables.

#### *Theme iii: International Experience*

While this theme did not receive a great deal of attention, it nonetheless appears critical to our understanding of the issues faced by the students as they began their on-campus studies. In this final theme of Category I, we will examine one staff member's perceptions of students' preparedness for learning, contextualized by the

team work in which students must engage. Challenges, as well as benefits, of the international experience are highlighted:

*I think [international students] would say they were well prepared, I don't think that ...I don't think anybody was well prepared ... I don't think the international learners were as prepared with the language and what their expectations were for team work, but I also don't think the Canadian learners were prepared for the team work and what the value of the international experiences would bring. (PhIStaff3)*

By surfacing these concerns, this staff member has highlighted one of the reasons an online course placed at the start of the program could add value to the BCom students, staff and faculty. If students are better prepared, as well as educated about the benefits of working on teams with international members, it could be expected that some of the challenges the participants faced would be reduced.

I have presented concurring and opposing views in this section examining the category *Preparation for Learning*, clearly showing that while there is consensus around some critical concerns, individual perceptions and roles within the university play a key part in each participant's view of the issues. The ability to see these perspectives and build on them was critical to my understanding of student and staff experiences and to the development of strategies designed to mitigate some of the participants concerns.

### *Category 2 Community Building*

In the category of Community Building, three main themes emerged: communication, culture, and Global House. Global House was a university residence area that embraced international and domestic students alike in a culture of cooperation, support, and active pursuit of learning. In the focus group and interviews, students discussed their experiences as they worked with others in their program, and staff commented on the community they saw emerging as they worked with the students.

*Theme i: Communication and Language*

In the interviews and focus group, there were many comments from the participants that highlighted their on-campus experiences relating to communication and language, which links with DeSanctis et al.'s (2001) work. The authors also identified a connection between deep focused communication and high performing teams (81). In Phase I of my study, both staff and students identified language as a factor that inhibited students working together effectively. One international student captured her feelings well when she said, *"I am treated as a second language sitting here"* (Ph1FG3). Conversely, a domestic student talked about feeling unprepared, *"I would have liked a little more information on the range and the diversity of the people. Because I didn't realize how, how much language barriers there would be"* (Ph1Stu1). Staff noticed problems with on-campus students, and one individual talked about how domestic students would complain:

*A lot of the students I have worked with, that were domestic, would come and complain that, 'I came for a BCom, I didn't come for an international experience, that's not why I'm here. No one told me I was going to have somebody that couldn't speak English on my team; it's not why I'm here'.*  
(Ph1Staff3)

Staff members who worked with international students whose first language was not English perceived some negative impacts for both international and domestic students. While discussing motivation, the following participant believed that some students looked for the easiest way to complete tasks, and they would exclude fellow classmates who did not speak English as a first language, even if it meant forgoing an enriched learning experience:

*Thinking about that international aspect and not thinking that there is an inherent value in working with somebody and it's also as though the language barrier shuts off any, any opportunity to work together and I ... think we are inherently looking for easiest path, you know the path of least resistance. And the path of least resistance is working with the person who is going to pick up my language and get to the point really quick. And, when there's a language*

*barrier there, it obstructs my path. It doesn't seem to matter what value you might bring, I don't have the time or the patience to get there. If I've got four people I do communicate well with and one that I don't, well, I'm just going to factor out that one I don't, because overall, rather than just say, 'Oh, no, it's really worth my time because that person is brilliant and I could learn from that person'... It's a case of you don't know what you don't know. So you don't know that that person you're not talking to is absolutely brilliant or has so much to contribute. (Ph1Staff3)*

This staff member also commented on the alienation some international students felt in the classroom:

*This one woman she just didn't want to come to class because she was tired of the eye rolls and tired of people automatically assuming that what she was going to say was not worth listening to and it was so much of a struggle to get it out and then her learning experience was shut down, but then I think everyone else's learning is shut down. (Ph1Staff3)*

In this staff member's mind, not only did the international student's learning suffer, but it also resulted in a decreased learning experience for the entire class, a point shared by Volet and Ang (1998, 9). A student echoed this sentiment, adding that people from other cultures bring different perspectives and valuable practices to the classroom, yet they often feel ignored, *"it's sort of ironic that probably the people who are from the culture where team is in their blood, that people over here stand [to learn] the most from, they're undermined because they have language barriers"* (Ph1FG2). Another student agreed, she appeared to have given up trying to contribute in the classroom as she said, *"here it's always language problems, I cannot do this. Even if I [don't] have problem understanding English, how to properly explain myself, I still have problems, so I just abandon it"* (Ph1FG1). This is closely aligned to Norton's (2001) work in which she discussed one of the reasons second language students did not participate in class was because they did not want to be labelled 'disadvantaged' (159).

Also, expressing concerns about how international students were treated in the classroom, the following student indicated her ability to do well in the program was

irrelevant given her English language challenges. She also believed that it is the background of the people in the classroom that can exacerbate situations that were already ripe with friction:

*I can say the experience in my first quarter it depends on what kind of people ... on what kind of family they came from. It doesn't matter my ability, who I am, I really feel discriminated in my first team. And it was a big issue and they didn't care, and once I had embarrassing things to say, because I don't do well in English ... it's really a really sad situation ... it's not just a language issue, it's ignorance here of others. (Ph1FG3)*

This speaks to students respecting each other and the skills they each have to offer. In addition to respect, McElhinney and Murk (1994), in their work with graduate students, listed maturity as one of the qualities needed if learning groups were to be successful (1). This was confirmed by the observation of the following staff member, who noted that maturity was one of the factors contributing to the inability of students to communicate effectively:

*I think age plays a role in the BCom and often they don't have a language, or understanding, or an ability to communicate some of the things that are happening maybe on an emotional level, [they] lack the capacity to be able to talk about it in a way that's meaningful. (Ph1Staff1)*

In addition to issues in the classroom and on teams, one student identified a different aspect of communication that had created problems. This participant perceived a lack of communication between the program office and the students, and believed this had led to student negativity. With nothing to block its further development, this negativity had spread to others in the cohort:

*Between the students and the Faculty, I'd like clear communication, because now there's all these rumours and people talk and they get each other excited and negative. Negative is so much easier to spread ... so if there had been direct communication and more a liaison or something between the students, and not just the Class Reps. Someone else, between the students and the Faculty it would have been a lot different. (Ph1Stu2)*

There are many different dimensions to the communication challenges faced by the students, faculty and staff in the BCom Program. Some were perceived to be

the result of language barriers, others the result of maturity, yet others were brought about by process issues. All, however, created problems for those connected to the BCom Program. In the next section, I will discuss the perceived impact of culture on the development of the students enrolled in the BCom Program.

*Theme ii: Culture*

In this section, participants' narratives are provided to highlight the thoughts and opinions that were brought to the surface regarding the impact of culture on the development of a learning community. Although the cultural aspects of community building were raised primarily by international students, I will begin with one domestic student who was given advice by an alumnus of the BCom Program. Based on the alumnus' experiences as a BCom student himself, he had an understanding of what might be ahead for his friend when he offered the following advice:

*'Don't come with expectations and don't judge'... that advice took me a long way ... I didn't judge. I took people for face value, my experiences for face value, not comparing it to any experiences I've had in the past, which I think a lot of people will try to do. (Ph1Student3)*

Although Volet and Ang (1998) stated that inter-cultural contact had to be formally planned and implemented if social cohesion was to happen (9), it is apparent from the above student's comments that it is not always so. Indeed, having an open mind can minimize some of the challenges and create an environment where students can get to know each other informally.

The ability to have an open mind was also in this international student's thoughts when he discussed the positive impact of not being judged based on skin colour or culture, *"it goes a lot deeper than culture, because if I feel like they're not going to judge me because of my culture, the colour of my skin, I feel like they won't judge me on other things as well"* (Ph1FG2). Furthermore, having an open-mind was considered important by the next student, who linked the feeling of being

disconnected from others in the classroom to having a closed mind. He saw reduced educational value for classmates who were unable to take an active part in the community:

*If they don't have the ability to interact with people, they're going to have a very tough time ... they have to have the ability to either have an open mind about it or be prepared to work on dealing with it. Otherwise they won't be informed; they won't be able to take away as much as other students will.*  
(Ph1Stu3)

According to Robertson et al. (2000), isolation is one of the most significant problems encountered by international students (89). Therefore, if we link the student's perception regarding open-mindedness to the research undertaken by Robertson et al., we can see that the desire and ability to work with others is critical to mitigate isolation, and to achieving the maximum benefit from the educational experience.

Other students talked about the adaption that was necessary when leaving your own culture and country to move to Canada, *"I think the most important thing [is] you cannot change people; [the] only way you can feel comfortable is to change yourself, to suit that environment"* (Ph1FG5). And another student talked about his own cultural values, how the emphasis on sharing, as well as understanding how your actions affect others, can lead to a cohesive community:

*Now within culture it depends, there's some cultures that, for instance, within my culture, we believe in living in community, so what affects one person affects the other person, so we have very strong values on sharing as well as the feeling that community brings together. So, those are the things I look for, it's that kind of similarities that I look for.* (Ph1FG4)

Related to earlier comments on judgement and open-mindedness, as well as to the impact skin colour can have on how welcome people feel in new situations, some international students talked about the difficulties associated with changing, and the choices we make as individuals working with others from different cultures:

*You have your way of looking at things; they have their way of looking at things, but at the end you going to be part of that society and it's very hard to abandon everything you've gotten used to in your life, the way you've always lived your life, and suddenly you begin to live as a new person ...you may be at a competitive advantage if you have a skin colour that's similar, so at that point you feel a lot more welcome than if you look so different by the colour of your skin and we can't help it, but everyone has, in the back of their mind, a sort of a prejudgement, of people. And, until they've really exposed themselves to that person and begin to speak to them, their view may be based on their past experience, what they have seen in the past, and that's very hard to change, because everywhere we go, we are judged based on how we're dressed, how we look, and the way we talk, everything we do ... some people will just say outright, 'no, if you are not going to behave the way I do, do the things I do, then we can't be friends'. That's fine, I just walk by. (Ph1FG4)*

So, while some people expected the student to change, to conform, he did not accept that position, and would not welcome those people as friends. This speaks to what, Volet and Ang (1998) observed in that it was the international students who were expected to change and adapt to the new culture (14). However, the position of the Phase I student does demand further exploration if we examine the implications of the student's reaction on both individuals and the community as a whole.

To finish this section on culture, we will hear from a student talking about her own discomfort when faced with people who were not friendly, as well as her solution, *"I learn if someone will ignore me or treat me badly, I will do the same thing to him. So, maybe that's the way I can feel more comfortable. I will ignore him"* (Ph1FG5). Sadly, when social cohesion does not happen, as evidenced by this students comment, valuable learning opportunities are lost (Volet and Ang, 1998, 9).

### *Theme iii: Global House*

As discussed earlier in this chapter, in the *Online Activities* section, an important issue for students at university was the location of their housing. At the university in this study, twenty-six students lived in an on-campus residence called Global House, which had a communal kitchen and living room where students could gather to eat and exchange experiences. Many of the students who lived there were

international, or had international experiences. As one staff member noted, it was more than just a place to stay, it was a community, filled with people who placed trust in each other, *“there was definitely a trust that was created within that community, but again, they’re living together, they’re eating together, they’re helping one another ... so huge trust”* (Ph1Staff3).

That students formed a community in this way was not surprising when we examine the work of Schmitt et al. (2003). They noted that the international students in their study tended to find a social connection which was based on “not who they are, but on who they are not” (9). The authors stated that some international students found their cultural differences were relatively insignificant when compared to their collective differences from the host country, and they therefore based their new identity on their common differences.

With a compelling image of how students interacted with each other, this staff member illustrated the camaraderie that was felt in the Global House residency:

*They were relaxed, not scared to speak up, not scared to share ... in the living room area of Global House, the teasing banter that would go back and forth between a couple of Chinese students that would never speak in class ... you could just see it would never happen in class.* (Ph1Staff3)

An international student also emphasized the welcoming environment found in Global House when he said, *“everybody at Global House is very accepting, very open, very welcoming. Whether they are Canadian or otherwise ... the environment there is...very different”* (Ph1FG2).

A staff member’s comment provided insights into the contrast between the comfort students felt when they were in Global House with the level of comfort felt in the classroom, when she noted that, *“I actually heard people say, ‘I don’t feel safe in class’”* (Ph1Staff3). This statement was validated by one of the students who lived in Global House, who talked about what it felt like to be in the classroom:

*Desperately wanting to go back to our fourth floor after school because we feel safe there ... no matter who we are, how grade we have, what colour we have, we just same there on our sofa, watching TV and having fun. (Ph1FG3)*

However, as the staff member mentioned, there may be a cost associated with having a community that is close, “*you build one community that’s too tight and all of a sudden, somebody’s not part of Global House. Are they excluded – did that create a division?*” (Ph1Staff3). This builds on the work conducted by Volet and Agn (1998) in which they discuss the effort that should be placed into course programming to ensure inter-cultural contact takes place (17). While careful academic programming is important, it is only one step in a process aimed to develop an inclusive community of students, providing inclusive social programming might also expand and strengthen their connections.

This question of division was echoed by a domestic student who talked about some of the Global House activities that were conducted for students. Even though all students were invited to the activities, she implied that many of the other students did not take part, either because they did not wish to, or because they perceived the main emphasis was on engaging the international students, “*Global House on campus does a very good job of doing programs and activities for the international learners, but it doesn’t really involve a lot of the other students. Everyone’s invited, but there’s no real push*” (Ph1Stu1).

Given the preceding discussion in this category on *Community Building*, I will offer some final words of advice from a student aimed at sharing some of the things he had learned:

*Let go of whatever you think you are, whatever you think other people are, just let go of everything, everyone is in the same place that you are. They don’t know where you’re coming from, it’s not important to them where you’ve come from. And just, just show them that you have the ability to work and learn, and that’s all your peers need to know. (Ph1Stu3)*

In this section, I have discussed how communication, culture, and the residency Global House were perceived by research participants to have had an impact on the community that developed over the year. As a necessary ingredient in the building of a community, participants identified trusting relationships. Therefore, in the next section, I will explore some of the issues that were brought forward regarding trust.

### *Category 3 Trusting Relationships*

This category received the largest number of comments from participants, due in part to the casual conversations held prior to the start of this study. In these conversations, several individuals had discussed their impressions of the issues that faced the BCom students, speculating that lack of trust may be a contributing factor. This is supported by DeSanctis et al.'s (2001) comment that forming trust is closely connected to developing a group identity (81). Because of the potential connection between trust and the problems students experienced, research participants were asked to discuss their perceptions of issues related to trust; for example, how it was developed and what type of actions demonstrated that trust existed in the classroom. One staff member provided his thoughts on these topics, highlighting some of the problems he had seen. He captured the importance of trust for the undergraduate students when he said, "*trust is going to be the antidote*" (Ph1Staff2). In other words, if we could build trust between students, some of the negative issues they faced when attempting to work together would be reduced.

In the analysis for this category on trusting relationships, six themes were identified: grades, pre-established groups, respect, inhibitors, development and evidence. Before beginning the discussion on these themes, I will first provide some general comments that contextualized trust for the participants.

The following staff member discussed trust as it related to students coming to the university from some local community colleges, where some of the students had been taught by the instructors who also taught at the university in this study, “*coming from these colleges ... they would have a trust among themselves if they knew each other that way ... so they come, knowing more of the culture, more prepared*” (Ph1Staff2). Another staff member discussed the benefits of studying in a trusting environment saying, “*I think you can learn something in any situation, but you learn more if there’s trust*” (Ph1Staff3).

Students also talked about their trust of the instructor, how it was viewed in isolation from other factors, “*the trust with the instructors was separate and there was never any question of, of feeling like an instructor might leave or might quit, or might get fired half way through, nothing like that*” (Ph1Stu1). Here the student was referring to how trust of the instructor was not influenced by external variables such as administrative issues that may have created some friction.

After discussing some of the general comments provided by participants on the topic of trust and trusting relationships, we move into the next section, in which I spotlight the key themes that developed.

#### *Theme i: Grades*

A number of participants discussed the impact of graded course work on the students’ ability to extend trust. There were specific issues around the participation mark and team work because a component of each final course mark was based on the extent and quality of a student’s participation in the classroom activities, as well as on team deliverables. It was the international students who were the most prolific in their comments on the topic of grades. For this international student, the grades issue appears to have contributed to an avoidance of domestic students in the classroom:

*Our grade is not so high and if, because our background, because our culture, Asian culture, you don't usually speak up. So the people perceive us as very quiet, very shy ... it was very uncomfortable situation. So if I felt ... the people from Canada, the local people think, 'Oh, they are different, they don't accept', so I try not to be with them. (Ph1FG6)*

On the same topic, another international student emphasized that, despite what some domestic students appeared to think, the international students could produce good work, “*international students are capable of doing a good job. So that's really important thing. So, I don't want to change your mind, how you see me. I just let it go on and don't care*” (Ph1FG1). This student appears to express a lack of concern with how others viewed him, but in the interview it appeared to be more a feeling of resignation.

Another student also believed that language competency was not an issue when he made the following insightful comment about the difference between wanting to learn and wanting a good grade:

*I don't think that has directly to do with whether or not [international students] understand English; I think there are a lot of people in this school who just have that attitude, regardless of their language or cultural background. I know a lot of people in this school had the opposite attitude which is yours and mine, where we don't really care about the grade. We're here to learn, because we want to take skills ... I don't really care what grade I get, but a lot of people here don't care what they learn or what's taught in class, as long as they fulfil the requirements. They're looking for compliance. (Ph1FG2)*

The following student agreed, expressing a feeling of hopelessness, “*because they speak the language they get good grade, but they don't want to learn ... they hate this subject. And they don't want to build anything, they just want to pass ... and it's useless*” (Ph1FG3). Again, as the comment was made, a feeling of despair lingered. However, it was not all negative because, as one student found, his team members extended trust, “*so we got success, the people they all trust me, they trust me, am people doing good job*” (Ph1FG1).

The following international student talked about the relationship of respect and grades, but did not see a connection between the two. Instead, she saw a strong connection between good grades and trust:

*They respect me, but I can't say they trust me to do the work on the assignment because ... they are looking for people who they trust who can write a good paper and get good marks. It's practically all about good grades and how they build; this is what builds the trust. (Ph1FG3)*

From a staff member's perspective, grades were seen a little differently. The students' perception of their ability versus the instructor's perception of competency did not appear to be aligned, "*there's a huge problem with grading, everybody thinks they're an A student*" (Ph1Staff4). The lack of alignment between perception and fact had larger implications, as this participant noted, "*not being able to match their grade expectations – it hurt the trust*" (Ph1Staff4).

In this section, I have brought forward some of the students' perceptions about how grades were linked to trust, as well as the opinions of faculty who saw a strong connection between grade expectation and trust. In the following section, I will examine the participants' thoughts on the impact of pre-existing groups on the student community.

#### *Theme ii: Student Groups*

Within the *Trusting Relationships* category, the theme of *Student Groups* emerged. Participants brought forward a variety of comments about the groups that students had formed prior to entering the BCom Program. In addition, the cliques that were established as students became more familiar with their new environment were discussed. Because some students came from the local community colleges, they knew each other, their instructors, and the type of educational environment in which they were about to study; other students did not have these common points of reference. In the following discussion, I will highlight some of the challenges, as well

as perceived benefits, that resulted from both the pre-established groups and the groups that developed as the students worked at the university, as well as the impact this had on their ability to build trusting relationships.

I will start this section with a comment from one staff member, who speculated about the variety of reasons for the formation of the groups, "*there are some groups that form culturally and there are some groups that formed romantically, there are some teams that stay together very tightly that outside of the classroom, sort of walk out together. Yes, there are definitely groups*" (Ph1Staff4). It was apparent, however, that not all students wanted to stay together. One international student travelled to Canada with others from her home country, but she made a conscious effort to branch out and meet new people:

*I saw [students from my home country], but they were sitting together. But I tried not to go there, because I wanted to get out, I wanted to know, or I thought, 'I have to know new people to study this place', because the people I knew were all international student from Asian background ... the first day I saw more white people, so I felt very, 'OK, I have to, I have to be, part of them, I mean, I have to be, accepted by them to complete this program; otherwise, I can't do well'. (Ph1FG6)*

A domestic student appeared to have a similar technique as she noted, "*Most of the friends that I made were not people I knew before*" (Ph1Stu2). Although, the following domestic student, based on her experiences working with international students at another university, appeared to disagree with this approach. She noted that there was a tendency to opt to work with people who were alike, rather than those who were different, "*there were lots of international students in the class ... but as friends you often go to those who are similar, so I didn't have a lot of experience working with international students*" (Ph1Stu1).

Rotigel (2006) noted that cliques were one of the challenges faced by students working in a cohort-based environment (6), this is confirmed by the experiences of

some of the participants in Phase I of this study. For example, this international student discussed how other people's reactions made him feel:

*People sort of group up, clique up and only hang out with the people that are just like them and if I see that in a group, if I go into a room of 30 people, and people only hang around with people that are just like them, that feels very uncomfortable and I feel like I'm not welcome and if there is going to be prejudice based on what they see ... there are some people that when I approach start to talk, they are really cold and especially sometimes they are interested, but as soon as I start to tell where I came and what my experience is, it's kind of shocking, scary, something what they didn't experience, that they didn't want to hear, they don't want to know, they don't want to leave their happy bubble or something. (Ph1FG2)*

He also talked about the energy he would feel when he walked into a room for the first time:

*There is a certain energy I can sense. If I go into a room and I sense that there is that sort of thing and everybody's head is sort of in their own clique, then it's difficult to break that even if you tried... well I've found that if I go and approach someone and try to talk to them, 'Hi', they're like 'Hi, what do you want?' kind of attitude. Where as when they're open, they're sort of looking at you and saying 'Who are you?', kind of thing, even without saying anything, there's this expression, this energy about them, and it just welcomes you in. So I feel that if it's already closed, I find I couldn't do anything. (Ph1FG2)*

The same student commented on personal investment. He felt that the investment was higher for the international students, who had come a long way to go to the university, than it was for the domestic students who had sometimes only come across town:

*There are some people who are from [this city], you know, who have friends who are coming here from their old school. Like, take for example, they went to [community college] with a whole bunch of people who transferred to [the university]. They have friends, and you have people like the people in this room. Some of them are coming from the other side of the planet and don't know anybody on this continent. You know, and so I think for priority wise, I'd say that it's more important for some of us to make friends [than] for some of them and, and it is, we're not on the same page. I mean, you know, we're looking, 'Hey, let's get along, let's meet people' and they're like, 'I don't care, I have lots of friends'. (Ph1FG2)*

However, the following staff member noticed that even though some students stuck in their own group, some others, who had experienced the community college

environment, brought with them a positive, inclusive attitude, “*they went out of their way to try to create or recreate the experience they’d had at [the community college]. [One community college] group, I think, just supported themselves a little bit because they were all good buddies*” (Ph1Staff3). In the same staff member’s opinion, the ones who were more inclusive appeared to want to build on the good experiences they had had at community college. Although she also noted that some students only wanted to stay in their group, with students who had similar experiences:

*Because they knew this could be good and, ‘let’s make it bigger. Let’s make the group bigger and invite people into our group’ as opposed to the ones that were making little marks. And then the non-pre-established ones said, ‘oh, you’re like me, let’s get together’, we’re all from [this city].* (Ph1Staff3)

The following student appeared to identify with the inclusive faction, although he did note that there were cliques initially, “*yes, we have to be around these people, we might as well be friendly, that’s what I think. Especially with your teammates, let alone the people in your cohort. But definitely the cohorts in the beginning were definitely cliques*” (Ph1Stu2). However, one staff member did not appear to notice any cliques in the classroom, seeing it instead as more of an issue with after-class activities, “*I don’t see a lot of cliques developing; I think they tend to be pretty good about mixing and matching. It’s more about the social circles that may develop, than where they necessarily came from*” (Ph1Staff1).

Interestingly, another staff member did see cliques develop, but did not see anyone excluded, “*I didn’t find any negative aspects of the cliques. I didn’t find people being left out*” (Ph1Staff4). While this appears somewhat contradictory, the staff member appeared to be saying that even though there were cliques, people were free to join them, and so they were not exclusive.

I will end this section with a staff member’s comment about the benefits of pre-established groups, “*there’s also some positive attributes to it, because there’s a*

*sense of comfort and familiarity that they bring to it that I think helps them adjust*" (Ph1Staff1). So, while some challenges appear to have surfaced due to pre-established groups and with cliques forming after students arrived on campus, there can also be benefits.

*Theme iii: Respect*

In the following discussion on the relationship of respect to the formation of trust, I have included several comments from participants highlighting their perspectives. We begin by looking at the opinions of two international students, "*if members of a team respect each other, you find that things will go a long way smoothly*" (Ph1FG4) and, "*if people have respect, it's really easy*" (Ph1FG1). Both of these comments serve to illustrate the importance of respect in the development of trusting relationships, which is supported by Mollering (2006), in his work on trust. Mollering noted that there was a connection between respect and trust, with one of his interviewees stating that after getting to know someone, respect is built first, followed by trust (165).

Another student was more explicit when describing the connection between respect and people's ability to extend trust, "*if there's no trust, there's no respect, those things are somehow tied together. Once you've got one of them, you've probably got everything*" (Ph1Stu3) and, "*either you're respected or not, when you're respected, you get trust, you get so many things. If you're not [respected], you're very meaningless*" (Ph1Stu3). This comment illustrates not only the link students felt between trust and respect, but also the sense of insignificance that accompanied a lack of respect.

The following student highlighted the teacher's role in establishing a respectful environment. The student had experienced some problems with team

members using language disrespectfully. She was offended by the language, but it did not appear, from an earlier comment, that the student thought the issue had been addressed satisfactorily by staff, “*I think if teacher will say straightforward, ‘this is not supposed to be, this is the school environment and this is our plan and this [foul language] is hurting and we have to respect each other’*” (Ph1FG3). In this comment, the student expresses a feeling of let down when she felt that something that concerned her was not dealt with appropriately. In the next section, leading on from this comment, I will examine participants’ observations about other concerns they had with regards to circumstances that inhibited the development of trust.

*Theme iv: Inhibitors*

Under this heading, I will discuss factors identified by participants as having contributed to either a delay in the establishment of trust, or a loss of trust that was already established. I will begin this section by including the thoughts of one staff member who talked about what happened on teams that did not appear to have high levels of trust:

*Teams that don’t have a lot of trust and stay very safe, they tend to be very controlled, they’ll tend to have less level of engagement and dialogue with one another when it comes to exploring a case or the subject and will meet quickly and assign rolls and put it together. So, their presentations are less cohesive, they take less chances, they tend to stay in the box and not do much above and beyond what’s expected. (Ph1Staff1)*

He then went on to discuss a particular team dynamic that evolved, and the impact it had on the team members:

*There are the controlling people that – there’s sort of a list of archetypes and this is the one I call the rhinoceros, who, because they are afraid that the other members of their team might impact their grade or standing negatively, assume control and manage everything and then get frustrated because they’re managing everything and no-one’s stepping up to do it. And so, there’s that dynamic, they don’t trust that the other people will be able to do the job to the extent that they think it should be done, or to the level it should be done, or the way they think it should be done, so they seek to control it themselves. On the other side we have the breach of trust where somebody doesn’t feel that*

*their work is valued, or that their voice is heard. So they begin to withdraw and become disengaged. (Ph1Staff1)*

This staff member, as well as one other, discussed the impact stress had on students working together. According to this staff member, in some cases, students questioned whether or not the program was appropriate for them, “*stress causes instability, and instability creates the potential for the breach of trust*” (Ph1Staff1). And another participant commented on the impact stress had on trust, “*stress was probably the biggest issue in dealing ... with team mates. Not knowing how to regain trust or their team mates don’t trust them and then going back to [ask], ‘do I fit in the program?’*” (Ph1Staff3).

Some staff members talked about the link between culture and the building of trust, “*cultural make-up inhibits trust*” (Ph1Staff4). The following participant provided an example of a team issue resulting from cultural misunderstanding and lack of willingness to talk about areas of concern:

*It seemed to be cultural misunderstanding or culturally based ... we had a very trying three hour meeting with a lot of yelling and screaming and one against the other three, and there was no way this was coming together ... the one individual was wearing facial jewellery, and, as professional consultants consulting, you’re not going to go in and present to your client dressed in a certain way. But instead of asking about it and talking about it, it was assumed that this individual wouldn’t be changing. (Ph1Staff2)*

While one staff member talked about what she had seen happen throughout the year when students were labelled either positively or negatively, “*you were happy with your team or not happy with your team depending on rumours you’d heard previously*” (Ph1Staff3), another one linked unintentional actions to trust:

*A lot of unintended messages build or break trust. If a team member doesn’t show up for a meeting, or is always late, that belies trust, that breaks the trust. It’s more often the unintended messages, because of who I am, in my personal experiences, that breaks trust, more than the intended messages. (Ph1Staff4)*

Related to the earlier discussion on communication, the following international student emphasized the role of English language skills in the development of trust, “*here, it doesn’t matter what I tell, what kind of paper I bring, what kind of assignment my mark is, they don’t trust, they see only me as I don’t speak proper English*” (Ph1FG3). As this student observed, the perception that an international student could not speak English correctly sometimes meant they were not trusted. This aligns with Robertson et al.’s (2000) observation that language competency is a “key to successful integration” in the classroom (101).

Looking from a different perspective, the following domestic student talked about how the changes at the university had affected trust:

*There’s a lot of ... distrust with [the university] in general. Because this year there was so much transitioning of top level faculty, so the learners, including myself, but I can speak for a lot of learners, were very concerned as to what was going on with the university... a lot of people were very angry and felt out of the loop, like they didn’t know what was going on. (Ph1Stu1)*

She went on to talk about ineffective communication:

*I think [communication] should have been stronger. There were emails sent out saying what was happening, but for some reason learners felt they weren’t getting the whole truth. There was something missing ... just because of the magnitude of how many people were leaving and shifting of the high level faculty people. (Ph1Stu1)*

The following student had a similar concern. In her comments, however, she highlighted the role of the university in students’ self image, “*people would probably feel powerful and want to maybe work harder and [be] more motivated because, ‘I’m part of this amazing organization’, and I definitely think people’s self confidence is so focused on how they identify with their school*” (Ph1Stu2). She went on to discuss how a perception of dependency influenced the ability to trust, “*it felt like people were being dependent, if felt like you couldn’t trust them because they just knew you would finish it*” (Ph1Stu2). Also talking about how people interact with each other,

the following student discussed the importance of acknowledging other people's efforts:

*A big picture on trust is how people deal with your feelings, who gives you trust. I mean, when you do something of what you've perceived as meaningful, if it's not addressed in an equally meaningful way, it removes trust ... You could do something nice and someone not say, 'thank you'. That takes away a level of trust. (Ph1Stu3)*

So, the participants in Phase I had many different perspectives on issues that could potentially inhibit the development of trust, ranging from stress to cultural background. Moving forward, in the next section, I will highlight some of the comments about the development of trust.

#### *Theme v: Development*

This section on development of trust and trusting relationships covers issues such as attributes of the physical environment that promote trust building, key behaviors that support the development of trust, and the role of previous experience in building trust. I will start with a discussion on attributes of the physical environment that promotes trust. One staff member discussed how it was important to create an environment where trust could be established:

*I go in a room before the session and I rearrange furniture and I have them sitting around in pods instead of in lectures and that alone, the physical environment, creates more of a an effective container for the dynamics in the room. (Ph1Staff1)*

He then went on to talk about how an inclusive environment could be created by listening to students, welcoming their opinions, *"I listen well ... I engage them in a lot of dialogue, which tends to create a good environment within the room. I invite their opinions and respond to them"* (Ph1Staff1). This individual talked about the need to place trust in a wide variety of individuals, *"not only do they need to trust each other; they have to trust us as their facilitators, as their Program Managers, as the Directors"* (Ph1Staff1). Just as Bender (2003) observed, students often need to

“feel recognized and acknowledge by the instructor” first, after which, they can go on to build trust with each other (54). The implication here is that the university staff and faculty are equally important to students as they build trust.

There were many varied examples of what participants felt was needed for trust to be developed and maintained. For example, this domestic student noted that, “*timeliness – that is very important. A lot of people are late and hand in things late. That’s a big thing for me*” (Ph1Stu1). Another person stated that, “*communication I think is huge for me, and consistency*” (Ph1Stu2). The next student commented that he, “*really base a lot of trust on deliverables ... [and] reinforcement is substantial in maintaining trust. You need to know that either you’re acknowledged, what ever your actions were, or that there’s value in what you did*” (Ph1Stu3).

The next student also identified the role that values played, “*I felt that this person was, had a similar standards and expectation about grades and the university and, although we’re from very different backgrounds, just kind of similar values and things like that*” (Ph1Stu2). But, for the following staff member, predictability and perceptions were important, “*predictability - you do what you say you’re going to do. Ah, and that is a very high value in terms of team performance ... people’s perception as to an individual’s level of engagement*” (Ph1Staff1).

Interestingly, the following staff member believed that, “*the good looking people always had the most trust ... there were other students who were less of what you’d call classically handsome that had less of the class trust ... so, that was developed in the womb*” (Ph1Staff4). While this perception was not reflected in any other participants’ comments, it does provide an interesting perspective.

Taking a different position, the following international student emphasized the importance of an open mind, as well as disclosing some personal information, when building trust:

*The ability to have an open mind. To be able to accept what's different. It doesn't mean I necessarily have to adopt it, but just give everyone an opportunity to say something, their point of view ... when it comes to building trust, I think when you disclose information of personal nature, you expect that person to be forthcoming as well and the issue is about whether or not they will maintain that confidence. (Ph1FG4)*

This can be linked to DeSanctis et al.'s (2001) observation that, "trust is communicated through sharing personal emotions and expressions of belief in others' competencies" (81). While the authors were discussing how individuals act once trust has been created, the student's comments show how personal information can also be important to the building of trust.

In light of all the ideas noted above regarding what is necessary to establish trust, the following staff member's thoughts are pertinent as they highlight the overarching role of cohesiveness, "*trust can exist no matter what's going on around it if the team comes together*" (Ph1Staff4). However, in examining what happens once trust has been developed, the next staff member commented on the positive impact a breakdown in trust could ultimately have, "*if the breach happens early enough that they're able to resolve and then work through and then continue together, then it's capable to heal, and even create a higher level of trust once they've gone through it*" (Ph1Staff1). So, even though something potentially negative has happened, there can be a positive outcome.

Here, the participant discusses the impact previous experience has on the ability and desire to extend trust:

*If you get people in a cohort who have had positive experiences with international learners, they're on a team, and can frame the experience positively, then people are willing and comfortable to buy in. If you have*

*people who have had negative experiences, they bring that bias and it creates a very difficult barrier for our international learners to break through. If they're already put in a box as someone who doesn't have the skills, or doesn't know enough, or who can't contribute, then they become very quickly marginalized and the cultural prohibition, especially from our Asian learners, make it very difficult for them to break through that, and as a result they become withdrawn and disengaged. (Ph1Staff1)*

The following domestic student agreed with the above statement with regard to the relevance of previous experience, and thought that trust was possible “*if you have trust in the previous experiences in being able to deliver, or in their ability to perform*” (Ph1Stu3). On a related topic, this next participant highlighted how personal perspectives at the start of a relationship could impact the overall experience:

*I've seen things where someone on the team actively sought out and sought to engage our international learners and they had a very satisfactory experiences, whereas I saw others that saw them as a burden to be dealt with and so it wasn't a very satisfactory experience. (Ph1Staff1)*

Linked to an earlier discussion, the staff member quoted below talked about perceived connections between every system in the university:

*The BCom [students] suffer from what admin does, from what the registrar does, from what the online instructors, the whole thing is integrated. We have an integrated program, but we're not an integrated institution, so if we can't integrate ourselves ... then we're our own worst enemy. I think that's possibly an institution wide piece. So I'm a new learner, a prospective learner who applied. If I had any issues from the time I apply, then trust is being eroded. [If] admissions is a problem, or the system is slow and I'm coming from my perspective or my life and it's instantaneous computer access and speed and if anybody screws up... that is going to work to erode that trust. (Ph1Staff2)*

This was supported by another staff member who commented on the role of the frontline staff, “*in my view the strength of this university is [our receptionist] at the front desk there, that greets people when they come in the front door every day. If you don't have that frontline, you've got nothing*” (Ph1Staff4). A student agreed:

*You trust, perhaps, your team mates more [if] you trust that the university only lets in people that are capable. So you can trust these people, you know. Whereas when you don't trust the university ... 'who's this person? I don't trust them because who knows who they let in here'. So, definitely, if you trust*

*the organization, it will absolutely be reflected in how you interact with other students. (Ph1Stu2)*

From this we can see that all the systems within the university that touch the student have the potential to destroy their ability to develop trust.

Alternatively, the following staff member discussed how tensions between students and their instructors can contribute to the building of trust:

*I saw some real lack of trust between the students and the instructor. I can't reflect on whether there was any lack of trust between the students, except one of the things about the boot camp mentality, is that if you build a wall between the instructor and the students, you can build very strong trust within the student unit. (Ph1Staff4)*

From this comment, we can see that conflict can have positive implications with regards to developing trust.

Also, in the focus group, a discussion developed around trust between people from different cultures “*you have to let other people know your ability, what is good and bad. Most Canadians who live in Canada can do their work by themselves, but if you let them know what you are good at, then, maybe they trust you*” (Ph1FG5).

Another student discussed the impact a lack of prejudice could have when building trust, “*in a multicultural environment, if I see evidence that there is not prejudice ... that goes a long way to build trust ... I feel comfortable that they're not judging me because of my culture or because of the colour of my skin*” (Ph1FG2).

Although the following two students had a similar view of how trust may be extended, they each approached trust in different ways. The first student noted that, “*there's two different ways of trusting people – usually other people have to build your trust, or you trust them automatically ... I trust people automatically and found out very quickly that there were certain people to trust and other people not to trust*” (Ph1Stu2). The second student talked about her experiences with another student she had just met and how they developed trust:

*I think that there is two types of people, ones that trust right away and ones that you need to earn the trust. And I'm more of an earning the trust person. I don't give it out right away and this person just consistently did what they said they were going to do and I could rely on them. And, lots of individuals in the programs would say, 'I will get you this project by 10 PM tomorrow night', and it's not there and you don't see it 'til the next day. And I'm a stickler, I don't stand for that. I do things when I say I'm gong to do them and this person did that, did exactly that. So, I built trust very quickly with this person and had a good feeling, a good relationship because I knew that no matter what she said she would do, it would be done. (Ph1Stu1)*

A staff member agreed with the students' perspective on trust, putting it in the context of team work, *"I think that most teams start out with a fairly high level of trust with one another and it's through action or inaction that that trust becomes eroded"* (Ph1Staff1). As can be seen from this discussion, individuals have different ways of extending trust, but, nonetheless, the result appears to be the same. While one of these approaches may result in trust taking longer to establish, trust is still built or denied based on similar criteria. After discussing the development of trust, the next logical topic is to discuss how the participants could identify when trust had been established.

#### *Theme vi: Evidence*

In this final section under the category of Trusting Relationships, I have included some of the participants' comments about things they saw that led them to believe trust existed. Starting with what happened outside the classroom, it was apparent that teams who developed trust also communicated with each other after class, *"teams that have a good trusting relationship, more often than not, will talk to one another between classes, will sit down and have a conversation together or will just generally interact with one another on a fairly consistent basis"* (Ph1Staff1). When considering their work inside the classroom, staff commented that students who trust others showed *"more willingness to ask questions without taking a negative perspective first ... based on their presentation of materials a comfortableness in how*

*they organized themselves versus looking at four or five separate entities that are not integrated”* (Ph1Staff2). Another staff member commented that,

*Teams that have a high level of trust will take risks, they’ll come up with an idea that’s different, out of the box, or they’ll come up with concepts or they’ll go to a different level of analysis because they are willing to step outside and they know that they’re not going to be judged for. You know, they have a comfortable level or status in the team, so they can come up with a stupid idea and not have to worry about how that is going to impact them. And some of their stupid ideas turn into real gems.* (Ph1Staff1)

Panteli (2005), Jarvenpaa et al.(1998), Tocci (Tocci, 2003), and Corritore et al. (2003) all identified a connection between risk and trust, just as the staff member above noted. The following participant also found that once the trust had been achieved, and risk has been taken, there was a greater potential for depth of discussion. So, just as the ability to take risks was related to trust of classmates, those who exhibited trust were more likely to be genuine, *“international students, if they were present, if they were laughing, if they were enjoying themselves, if they were being themselves, that was trust”* (Ph1Staff3). This could manifest itself in the students’ ability to bring their personal lives into the classroom,

*They would bring things in from their outside careers that would be really embarrassing to them sometimes. Jobs they had lost, or when they’d screwed up at work ... everybody could show their laundry and, and it really helped the learning of the others to recognize these people in the class are just a bunch of people with backgrounds, they have histories, they have families.* (Ph1Staff4)

From this section, it is apparent that there were a number of ways trust was evident in the classroom. The desire of students to communicate with each other outside of class, risk-taking, and openness were all noted as ways students demonstrated that they had trust in each other.

#### *Category 4 Working on Teams*

While this is the category that received the least amount of direct commentary, there was a significant amount of relevant discussion on teamwork throughout Phase I

and much of this has been included in previous sections. In addition to this section, there are references woven throughout this chapter that deal with team-related issues such as comments about communication challenges that emerged while students worked with classmates on teams. To start this section, I will provide some context on student teaming from two participants' perspectives, beginning with a staff member's comments about the need for the institution to provide students with information on the expectations for team work, "*In terms of the level of teaming, I think we could be more explicit around our program expectations of attendance and engagement*"

(Ph1Staff1). More specifically, a participant confirmed that students in general did not appear to understand the extent of the services the team coach could offer:

*People don't see him as a resource. People only go to him if there's a very big problem. So, it needs to be communicated more so that he's seen as the mediator; maybe he should be viewed as more like the helper, a resource.*  
(Ph1Stu1)

It is apparent that, while many of the teams function on their own and manage the challenges often associated with team work without help from staff, there are a few more complex issues that require the input of the team coach. It is some of these issues that I will examine in the following section on team problems.

#### *Theme i: Team Problems*

Before discussing, in any depth, problems found on the BCom teams I am including a comment from a domestic student. This student was reflecting on her reaction after taking part in a game intended to show students how comfortable they could become in familiar situations. The exercise was intended to mix up the students so that they could have a chance to work with others in their cohort and form wider relationships, but appeared to have an opposite effect, "*if anything, that just made people just want to hang around their team more. I remember we were like, 'yes, our team, yes, we're going to stick with our team'*" (Ph1Stu2). I include this comment as

it emphasizes the strength of the team, while also showing how the team can inhibit the development of wider communities. This is an interesting point to reflect on as we move into the following discussion, which focuses on some of the problems faced by students as they work in a team environment.

One staff member commented about the students' apparent lack of preparation for working in a team environment. While this comment is also relevant to both the *Preparation for Learning* and *Community Building* categories, the overriding theme relates to team problems: *“people come in thinking, ‘I’ve worked ... on teams’, but I don’t think the intensity and the communication was something, maybe, they were prepared for”* (Ph1Staff3).

The following student discusses the complexities that may play out when teams are comprised of students from different cultural backgrounds, pointing out the key role respect plays in team dynamics:

*That’s an element that is very important because the school emphasizes team building and working as a team, and when you begin to put into perspective the cultural complex of that team, you then realize that there are people who share certain values or individual tendencies where they have no regard to the cultural background of the person they’re talking to and no interest to conform themselves or change the words that they would like to use to convey their messages, and that sometimes very offensive to someone with a different background. Not respecting their personality, their character within the team, just does not create good dynamics within the team.* (Ph1FG4)

As staff talked about teams, engagement and accountability surfaced as key concerns:

*The primary area of concern was issues of engagement and accountability. So, by that I mean are people doing the work that they said they were going to do when they said they were going to do it, to the quality that it was expected to be done, and are people actually showing up for meetings and that kind of thing. The problems around teams were generally around those areas and issues of what usually descends into the definition of social loafing or free riding.* (Ph1Staff1)

This staff member went on to note that the breakdown of trust had a profound effect on all team members:

*Trust is, is breached and so they become disengaged and therefore are treated even more marginally because they disengage and then they become free riders because that separation has occurred and they just don't care and the team either carries on, or they try to deal with it. (Ph1Staff1)*

And then this participant discussed the impact of individual personalities on the team, “*one person is standing on their academic high horse and the other person is disengaged because it's not the right environment for them to participate*” (Ph1Staff1). This is reflective of some earlier discussions in this chapter which address alienation, where students who do not feel accepted in the classroom disengage from discussions.

Another participant talked about an extreme situation when students could no longer function on their team effectively. Not only did it affect their work as they prepared for a competition, but it also affected the class, “*the case competition team encountered some difficulties and that created an impact on the class and, in order for the class to function effectively, the one member was placed in another team in another class for the term*” (Ph1Staff4). So, it is apparent that individual differences can adversely affect the class as a whole.

The next student raised the issue of accountability, including a suggestion that she felt might reduce some of the problems:

*I think that, that you should be, with proper regulation, be allowed to kick someone off your team. Because there is so much unaccountability going on in teams, where people just get pulled through the program because of their teams and although the teams are supposed to set very strict rules, no one does because you don't want those negative feelings happening. You don't want people angry at you. So, people just let it slide. (Ph1Stu1)*

The participants' comments in this chapter provided a rich context for the study and built a solid foundation for the second phase of the research. In the

following section of this chapter, I will explore these comments demonstrating how they were used to propel the project forward.

*Evaluate*

The main objective of this phase of the research was to explore the lived experiences of the participants, as well as to develop strategies to mitigate some of the problems they encountered. While the research questions found in chapter 1 of this thesis are answered through the analysis of Phase II and Phase III of the study, the results from Phase I provided insights relevant to the development of the online Bridge course and informed the second phase of this study. In the table below, I have summarized key insights and noted how they informed Phase II.

Table 7: Key Insights from Phase I

<b>Category/Theme</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Inform Phase II</b>
Preparation for Learning		
Online Activities	Suggestions for online activities and tools that could be appropriate for the Bridge: Discussion areas Synchronous tools Information on housing, books, location of services Photos, webcams	Aided in the development of the online Bridge course by providing insights on the types of activities to include.
Previous Experience	There were two fields of thought. Some participants thought that the students' previous experience was not adequate to prepare them for the on-campus experience and therefore had a negative impact on both students and staff. Others thought that students who engaged in community colleges prior to entering the university had some relevant insights that were helpful.	Provided insight into the need for preparing students for the on-campus experience.
International Experience	It appeared that international students thought they were prepared for their education, but the language and cultural issues created some obstacles.	Supported the need for the Bridge course.

<b>Category/Theme</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Inform Phase II</b>
<b>Community Building</b>		
Communication & Language	Language was identified as a factor that inhibited students working together effectively; problems associated with communication created friction in the classroom and on teams.	Supported the need for allowing students to work together prior to studying in the classroom.
Culture	In some cases, different cultural values and practices appeared to have impeded the development of an inclusive community. Although there was evidence that some students had embraced diversity and worked hard to create an inclusive environment.	Provided insights into the challenges found in the classroom.
Global House	A high level of trust was built amongst the students living in Global House, to the point that it was seen by some as a refuge from the classroom. Some participants felt the on-campus residency contributed to the polarization of the students.	Pointed to the need to provide an opportunity for students to meet each other before arriving on campus.
<b>Trusting Relationships</b>		
Grades	Participants identified concerns regarding the perception of grades. Some felt that the desire on the part of individuals to achieve a high grade had a negative impact on the ability of students to develop trust.	Contributed to an understanding of the drivers behind some of the challenges found by students in the face-to-face classroom.
Student Groups	A variety of opinions were expressed. Some participants did not see any evidence of cliques, and others thought that even though there were cliques that had developed, they were not harmful. Other participants believed that there were clearly cliques and that they had a negative impact on the students' ability to build trusting relationships.	Aided in identifying some of the problems found by students when they arrived on-campus and took part in the Foundations week.
Respect	Most participants agreed that there was a clear link between respect and trust. In addition, respect was conducive to the effective formation of trust.	Background information.

<b>Category/Theme</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Inform Phase II</b>
Inhibitors	Participants discussed issues that resulted from a lack of trust, such as low levels of engagement, negativity, and the desire to take control. Stress, not meeting expectations, cultural values, previous experiences, the classroom environment and dependency were identified as negative implications of the lack of trust.	Afforded insights into the issues that arose when trust was not built.
Development	Several factors were introduced that were believed to influence the development of trust. These include: physical environment, meeting expectations, timeliness, similar values, physical appearance, and personal perspectives.	Aided in an understanding of how trust could be developed, which ultimately helped in the development of the Bridge course.
Evidence	Trust was seen to be evident in how well students related to each other outside the classroom, risk-taking, deeper analysis, laughter, sharing past successes and failures.	Background information.
<b>Working on Teams</b>		
Team Problems	The need to use the team coach as a resource was noted. It did not appear some students were ready for the intense team experiences. The whole class was negatively impacted when team members did not work well together.	Underscored the need to provide students with the opportunity to develop skills that could allow them to work together effectively.

Because research participants in this phase of the study were not using any of the Bridge activities, they could not comment specifically on whether or not those activities could aid in the development of a learning community. Instead, they commented on their previous experiences, and provided their opinions as to whether online activities could be useful in overcoming some of the obstacles by developing trust and learning communities.

While some participants stated they did not believe an online bridge course could result in a learning community for on-campus students, all participants saw benefit to including such a course as a component of the BCom Program. Consequently, the next step was to formulate a practical action plan. With only a few weeks to prepare, it was understood that the first version of the Bridge course would be minimal. Yet, there would be an attempt to incorporate some of the ideas and suggestions put forward by the participants. Over the next few weeks, the Bridge was developed and, on September 5, 2006, it went live to almost 150 students enrolled in the on-campus BCom Program. Participants' suggestions for discussion areas, practical information on the university, as well as the opportunity to post a photo, were all provided in the first version of the Bridge. A more extensive description of the Version I Bridge content and activities is provided in chapter 5, where an analysis of the findings of Phase II of this study is located.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I explored the first phase of my study, providing highlights from the data that was collected. An action research approach was used to frame the results, after first exploring the thematic concern. Using content analysis allowed me to analyze the data in a systematic manner, placing an emphasis on the iterative process of reading and re-reading the interview and focus group texts. Four categories emerged from the data; within each category, relevant themes were developed. The categories were: Preparation for Learning, Community Building, Trusting Relationships, and Working on Teams. After examining the categories and exploring the themes, I provided an evaluation of the findings. In this evaluation, I discussed how the Phase I findings allowed me to move forward with the study and plan the Bridge course that was to be the basis of Phase II of the research.

## Chapter 5: Phase II Results and Discussion

### *Introduction*

In chapter 4 students' experiences with online discussion areas were outlined, as well as participants' suggestions for using the online environment to develop trust and learning communities. In this chapter, I will discuss how the findings from the first phase of the study were used to construct an online bridge course for students entering the BCom Program. In the first phase of the study, qualitative data alone was gathered; in the second phase, I included an online survey in order to collect additional data of a quantitative nature. As a result of the survey, both quantitative data and qualitative data were secured. In addition to the survey, one focus group and ten interviews were held providing the opportunity to obtain in-depth qualitative data. In this chapter, I will highlight the data from the second research phase, using comments provided by participants to illustrate their real world experiences, thoughts, observations and ideas.

The methods of data collection and analysis that were described in chapter 4 also applied to the second phase of this study. The tools used for data collection in this phase are provided in Appendix D. As with the analysis carried out in the first phase, categories and themes emerged from the data, and the four steps of the action research process were repeated. I will therefore begin by describing the planning process, and then continue on to discuss the action, observation and finally the evaluation that constituted the Phase II action research steps.

The aims of this phase of the research were to explore the stakeholders' perceptions of learning communities and trust. In addition, I wanted to examine how effective Version I of the online Bridge had been in supporting the development of

trust and a learning community. Furthermore, I hoped to gather input from participants about the relevance of the online Bridge activities to the development of the on-campus learning community; and obtain participants perceptions regarding disadvantages of the learning community model.

### *Plan*

In Phase II of the study, the first version of the online Bridge course was constructed building on the Phase I findings. In Phase I, participants made specific suggestions for activities that could be included in the Bridge. While time constraints meant that the first version of the Bridge was quite basic, incorporating only a few tools, an attempt was made to follow the recommendations of the Phase I participants by providing meaningful, relevant activities.

A design team was brought together, initially composed of a representative from University Life, a faculty member from the School of Communication and Culture, an instructional designer and myself. The main focus was on including tools and activities to support the expressed preferences of Phase I participants, tools that were expected to support trust and community building. After the first two meetings, the BCom Program Manager was asked to join the design team and the faculty member from the School of Communication and Culture left. A series of meetings were then conducted with the newly configured team. An overview of the resulting Bridge course is provided in the next section of this chapter, *Act*.

The students who were involved as participants in Phase II were from the 2006 intake of BCom students, starting the online Bridge course in September 2006. In total, six domestic students were interviewed, as well as one faculty member, the BCom Program Manager, the Team Coach, and the Manager of University Life.

Seven international students took part in a focus group and 59 students participated in a survey.

### *Act*

After careful planning, the Bridge to BCom, Version I, was implemented in September 2006. As noted, due to time constraints, the first version of the Bridge course contained only a few of the tools and activities suggested by Phase I participants, but it was a concrete starting point and something that the design team thought could be used as a foundation for later versions of the course. Features of the Bridge included:

- A news forum where the course facilitators could post messages to the students,
- Unit overview and outcomes materials,
- Readings related to teams, collaborative learning, and learning communities,
- A Glossary of Terms, which defined some of the commonly used language around learning at the university,
- A chat room, where students could engage in synchronous text-based discussions.
- A discussion area where students could post asynchronous comments to other classmates.

The course schedule contained two units, each containing two activities in which students could take part. A table providing the Schedule of Activities for the first Bridge course is shown below:

Table 8: Bridge Version I Schedule of Activities

Date	Schedule of Activities
<b>UNIT 1: Getting to know [the university]</b>	
Sep 5 - 8	 Activity 1 <b><i>Orientation to Online Learning</i></b>
Sep 9 - 13	 Activity 2 <b><i>Web Introductions</i></b>
<b>UNIT 2: Learning at [the university]</b>	
Sep 14 - 17	 Activity 3 <b><i>Biography</i></b>
Sep 18 - 22	 Activity 4 <b><i>Post a Picture</i></b>
Sep 23 - 29	Survey <b><i>Let us know about your experiences in this Bridge Course</i></b>

The first activity was a self-paced tutorial that provided an orientation to learning online at the university; this activity provided an overview of the learning platform and some of the online tools, as well as services that were available. Students were introduced to webmail, discussion forums, and assignment drop boxes, as well as being shown how to log on to the server and gain access to the Help Desk.

The second activity was interactive. Students were asked to start a discussion thread in the *Web Introductions* discussion area, following the instructions shown below:

In 200 words or less, introduce yourself to your fellow learners. In your introduction, you could include information on where you live, what you like to do when you are not working or studying, and anything else you think may be of interest to others. Review the introductions posted by others and post questions or make constructive comments, where you feel

it is appropriate. In this way, you can begin a dialogue with your fellow learners that will serve as a basis for your interactions when you arrive on campus.

In this discussion, there is no limit to the number of posts you can make, but please be considerate to others and keep a few points in mind with respect to netiquette:

- 1) Keep each posting brief, i.e. no more than two paragraphs at a time. Just as no one likes the idea of one person monopolizing a face-to-face discussion, brief postings ensure that this does not happen on-line.
- 2) Please encourage others to participate and invite their comments and discussion on your postings.
- 3) Always respect other learners' perspectives and points of view, even though they may not be the same as your own. Different and unique points of view can do a great deal to enrich discussion and creative thought.
- 4) Most of all, have fun...

For the third activity, students were asked to create a biography of no more than 300 words. The biography was posted to an online area that was accessible to all students, faculty, and administrators in the program. The students were asked to include the following:

- Your full name
- Any information that you are comfortable sharing with your classmates and instructors. For example:
  - What would you like people in the community to know about you?
  - What is your professional background?
  - What success would you like to share?
  - What is your educational background?
  - What hobbies and/or sports do you like to engage in?

The fourth activity, designed to allow students to work in smaller groups, included the following instructions:

On a new discussion thread, post a picture you find interesting and representative of yourself in some way, but hard for others to immediately identify. Include a one line "clue" with your post. A couple of examples are: the clue to accompany a photo of a pear could read "two of a kind"; for a photo of an elbow, the clue could read "a type of macaroni". Your picture might be:

- part of an object
- taken very close up or very far away, or from an unusual angle
- distorted or edited

View others' pictures and reply to their message with your best guess at what their image is. To begin with, you are working in small groups we

are calling "tables". Later, the other tables will be opened and you can view everyone's pictures and discussions.

To summarize, the Version I Bridge took place over an 18 day period. In total, there were four structured activities, a news forum, overview and outcomes materials, readings, a glossary of terms and a chat room. In order to assess the usefulness of the Bridge activities, an online survey was presented to students who had taken part. In the survey, questions were asked relating to frequency of use, the impact the Bridge had on students' on-campus experiences, as well as its effectiveness in building trust. A full copy of the survey is included in Appendix D.

### *Observe*

In this section I discuss both qualitative and quantitative data that was collected. While there were open-ended questions in the focus group, interviews and in the online survey, the latter tool also included questions which made use of a 5 point Likert scale, resulting in descriptive statistics that serve to provide data collected from an expanded stakeholder base. In this section, I first examine the quantitative data, making use of charts; this is followed by an exploration of the qualitative data, from which four categories emerged. Within each category, several key themes are highlighted.

### *Quantitative Analysis*

In this section, I display the quantitative data collected from the 59 students that took part in the online survey. One hundred and fifty four students started the BCom Program in 2006; therefore, 38% of BCom students volunteered to take part in the survey. At the time of the survey, the students were approximately half way through their program of study, with a very intense workload. While I had hoped for a higher participant rate, I was not surprised that the level of involvement was less than

half the population base. The results of the numerical component of the survey are descriptive, and the charts included in this section provide information on the use of Bridge activities.

There were two stages to the survey. In the first section, questions were asked about the students' age, gender, ethno-cultural background, preferred language for reading and writing, and online activities they had participated in previously. The second section contained questions specific to the Bridge which only students who took part in the Bridge were to answer. The purpose of the first section was for use in a presentation given at a conference in Canada and is not included in my thesis as the findings do not serve to inform my research questions. Of the 59 students that took part in the survey, 41 completed the second section. The first graph, Figure 9, displays the percentage of the 41 remaining respondents who used, as well as those who did not use, the various features of the Bridge. The results show the Bridge features listed in order of those used by the highest percentage of participants on the left side, moving to those used by the lowest percentage of participants on the right side.

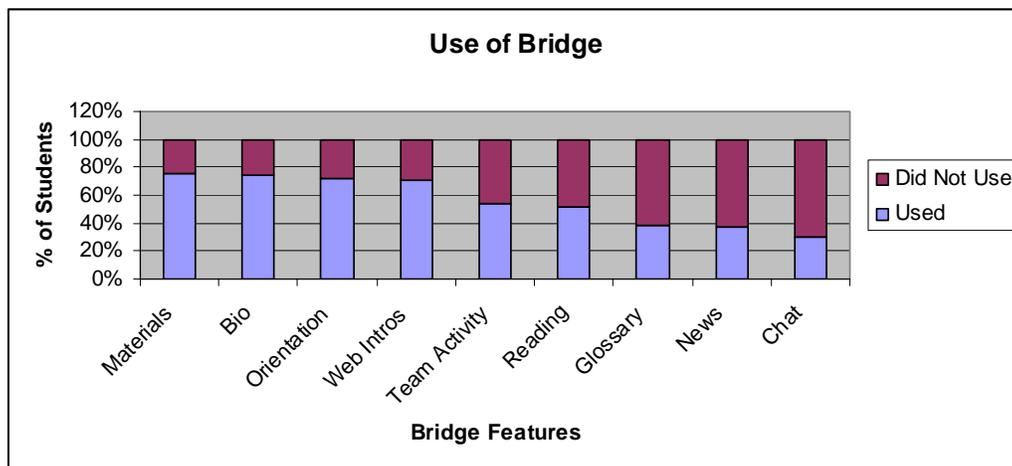


Figure 9: Use of Bridge

From the data in Figure 9, we can see that the unit overview and outcomes materials were viewed by the greatest percentage of participants, with the chat room

being used by the smallest percentage of participants. The top four features used were the materials, the biography, the orientation and the web introductions, all of these features were used by 70% or more of the participants. The five least used features were the team activity, readings, glossary, news and chat, all of which were used by 54% or fewer participants.

In the next chart, Figure 10, the percentage of the 41 students who thought features of the Bridge helped them build trust are displayed. Starting on the left with the features participants thought were more helpful in building trust, progressing to the right with features participants thought were less helpful. Approximately one third of all participants checked the “neither agree nor disagree” box for the questions relating to trust building.

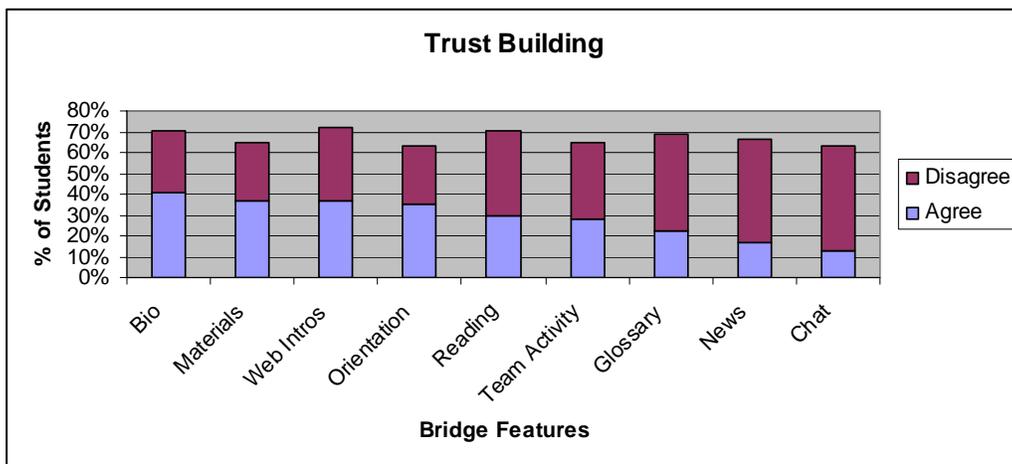


Figure 10: Trust Building

As is demonstrated in the graph above, participants felt the biography activity was the most useful in building trust, while the chat room the least useful. The four top features were the biography, outline and outcomes materials, web introductions and the orientation to online learning; 35% or more of participants either agreed or strongly agreed that these features were helpful to them when building trust with other students before coming to campus. Conversely, the assigned reading, the team

activity, glossary, news and chat features were the least helpful in building trust, with 30% or fewer participants finding they disagreed or strongly disagreed that the features were helpful building trust.

In addition to collecting numerical data, the survey also included open-ended questions to allow participants to add their comments and observations. As a result, the following section on qualitative analysis will include some of the data collected from the survey, in addition to that collected from interviews and a focus group. Quotations taken from the survey are given the alpha/numeric tag (Ph2Survey).

### *Qualitative Analysis*

In this section of chapter 5, I will report on the qualitative findings from the interview, focus groups and survey. The narrative that follows includes many quotations from the participants to illustrate their observations and allows the reader to create an understanding of their lived experiences. Participants' identities were protected through the use of an alpha numeric tag and, as with Phase I, categories emerged from the data collected; within each category, several themes were found.

### *Category 1 Transition into Learning*

As Yorke (2000) discussed, the transition into higher education from secondary school, as well as the transition from the workplace, can be challenging for some individuals (2). This makes it necessary for students to make some adjustments if they are to succeed. While Yorke's research mainly considered individuals who were entering into the first year of undergraduate education, her observations are nonetheless relevant to this study because the students who participated in my research were all facing a new educational experience. In addition to being new members of the university's student population, the education model used at the university was not the traditional lecture-based format frequently found in the North

American post-secondary classroom. As this participant noted, “*we are asking them to do different things than they’re used to experiencing, in terms of critical thinking and analytical skills and the ambiguity that goes with our teaching and learning model, so I think they’re often unprepared for that*” (Ph2Staff2).

In exploring the students’ experiences as they made their transition into their new post-secondary environment, two themes emerged from the data that was collected. First, as noted in the previous paragraph, participants commented on the preparedness of student during the first few days in the classroom. Second, participants discussed the pre-established groups that existed and the impact these groups had on both the individual and the classroom as a whole.

*Theme i: Preparation*

Reeves and Reeves (2002) noted that there are challenges associated with using core pedagogies of one culture when teaching to those with different cultural values. This was supported in comments provided by staff members who noted that some international students suffered from culture shock in the classroom. In addition, some of the Chinese students did not have the same knowledge of Canadian business as their Canadian contemporaries. So, the pedagogical challenges noted by Reeves and Reeves were compounded by the lack of Western business knowledge held by some of the international students. As one staff member commented:

*They were completely unprepared to work in a Western culture with Western knowledge. In terms of their accounting and finance experience, they were grounded in an entirely different model and didn’t even know that until they got here, and so I would say they were singularly unprepared for what we threw at them - through no fault of their own.* (Ph2Staff2)

Another staff member saw language as a barrier to learning, which some international students struggled to overcome:

*They arrived here and they were looking at the first page of their textbook and not knowing what it said - the first sentence. And saying to their domestic*

*mate, 'What does this mean? What does this say?' That's harsh. That was hard for them."* (Ph2Staff1)

Unfortunately, these language difficulties had an impact on how the students worked together both in the classroom and on their teams. With that in mind, the following international student noted:

*Some students they say, 'bravo', they recognize the effort, but other students, they don't take your input, they think because you are a second language student, your inputs are not valuable and so it's a matter of frustration, because you put all the hard work and then at the end of the day, they will erase it and change it to their own work.* (Ph2FG)

So, not only were international students challenged by studying in a foreign language and with pedagogies different from those they were used to, but also some of their classmates compounded their frustrations by minimizing their efforts.

#### *Theme ii: Pre-established Groups*

Hurtado and Carter (1997) discussed the experiences of Latino students in their first, second and third years of college in the U.S. and the impact the students' experiences had on their sense of belonging. While the research was limited to Latino students, similarities between this and other student groups could be expected. Interestingly, the authors found that students who belonged to student organizations exhibited relatively high levels of a sense of belonging with the larger community (335-336). Although further research in this area would be worthwhile, Hurtado and Carter's existing research points to community benefits when students engage in smaller select groups.

Building on this premise and in light of comments that emerged from the first phase, I engaged Phase II participants in discussions about the impact of pre-established groups on the community in general. Several participants in Phase II commented on this phenomenon, providing a variety of views about what they saw. A staff member stated that, "*there's definitely cliques in this group*" (Ph2Staff1) and a

domestic student provided her perspective on those cliques, noting that their existence sometimes went unnoticed in the classroom:

*[There are] people coming from other schools ... they're a really tight knit group of people 'cause I guess they all came here and saw the school together and applied together ... and you could see them all together, but it's such a diverse mix of people here ... you didn't see all the cliqueiness. (Ph2Stu6)*

This student's observations tie in well to Hurtado and Carter's discussion, as the student appeared to say that even though the small groups existed, they were hidden when students worked together in the wider classroom. However, another domestic student had a slightly different perspective when she commented on the impact the pre-existing groups had on the first few days at the university:

*Well a lot of local [people] are here. So right away, 'oh hey, I know you', or 'we used to go to school together', so right away ... I would say it hindered [community development] ... there would be tables of people talking like they'd known each other for years. (Ph2Stu1)*

So, while pre-existing groups might benefit the larger community over a period of time, I suggest that initially, these groups have an adverse affect on the formation of community. While it appears the impact can be minimized in time, it does represent a hurdle for the community as a whole to overcome.

On another level, the following student talked about cliques that developed as the students worked together:

*One thing about the school, there's a lot of cliques ... that formed very fast ... when [the students] got here and the common interests and then that's pretty much what establishes your pile of friends is the first cohort you're placed in ... 'cause you're with them every day. (Ph2Stu4)*

From this student's perspective, the cliques that pre-existed were in some ways supplanted once the students began working together in their classes, which informs Hurtado and Carter's findings, as well as the observations made by other participants in Phase II of this study. As seen by this student, the wider community was responsible for the creation of some newer small groups. So, while pre-

established groups initially influenced the wider community, once classes began, the wider community began to influence the creation of new groups.

### *Category 2 Bridge Course*

Hurtado and Carter (1997) noted that if students were to feel a sense of belonging in college, it was essential that they receive some form of orientation (339). Lysaght (2007) discussed the link between receiving an orientation to university tools and processes and effective learning. While Lysaght provided students with an orientation CD, a somewhat static tool, his premise that students need some form of introduction if they are to successfully engage with the culture of the university is nonetheless relevant to my study. In the next section, I will discuss the Bridge course, Version I, which was provided to students in the second phase of my research.

#### *Theme i: Activities and Attributes*

Students who took part in the first version of the Bridge reported a variety of experiences. As Bridge designers, we expected some activities would be more useful than others to trust and community building in the online environment. Nonetheless, students' use of the activities, as well as their comments about effectiveness of the Bridge, was surprising in some respects. Some materials, such as the overview, learning outcomes, and resources, that we initially thought would be used only for informational purposes, were found by some students to be effective in establishing trust. In this section, building on the Phase II quantitative analysis, I provide the thoughts, feelings, and observations of the survey, interview, and focus group participants as they reflected on the Bridge activities.

One of the students surveyed commented that, "*the process was really confusing; the site needs to be modified for easier use!*" (Ph2Survey). This may have been one of the reasons students did not engage in the Bridge activities. However,

some students took part in the process with apparent ease. As a result, one of the most popular activities was the biography, where students posted some information about themselves, as well as a photograph. The biography was more formal than the web introductions. Typically, in the biography activity, students posted a little information about their background, what type of jobs they had held, as well as their educational background. One student liked this activity as “[it] was great because you see the more school side of people” (Ph2Stu5). Another student also liked this activity, commenting that:

*I like the biography thing ... I need the face and name and some of the experiences, so you see who you relate to. And then when you do have that time when you're trying to get to know people, you kind of gravitate to people who are like you and who you know have the same interests. ... I was surprised when I saw that, I was like 'yeah, that's cool' (Ph2Stu2).*

Yet another student also liked the biography, finding that “the photograph was extremely important. Without the photographs, it probably would have meant nothing” (Ph2Stu6). A different student thought that the biography section could have been modified, “instead of bios, have predetermined fields with required responses, i.e. name, favorite movie, place of birth, etc.” (Ph2Survey).

The web introduction was also popular as it allowed the students to engage in conversations with each other, rather than simply post their biography. As the following student observed:

*I feel that the not so formal one was great because I think the students interacted more with each other because of that ... When it was formal, I think it was great because you'd see the academic. But I think if it was just formal ... people may not have had that interaction with each other. (Ph2Stu5)*

However, this student also noted that she did not want to be the first person to post, so she “would check all the time ... and once other people started, then I started” (Ph2Stu5). Attitudes such as this one may have ultimately resulted in a lower overall participation rate in the Bridge.

Although the BCom Program Office did inform students about the Bridge course, the following student stated that, *“many people did not know about this before hand, so make sure everyone in the program is aware of this before coming on campus”* (Ph2Survey). So, it is apparent that the communication sent to students about the Bridge should have been clearer to ensure they received the appropriate information.

The lack of student involvement in the team activity, which asked students to post an unusual photograph, surprised the Bridge developers. But, this student explained why she did not take part stating that she *“was stunned about that because I couldn't think of an unusual photo”* (Ph2Stu5). However, she went on to say that:

*The news forum was good because you'd just keep up-to-date with what's going on and you'd feel more in the loop, I guess. The overviews and having a little bit ahead was really great 'cause then you'd know what you're getting into.* (Ph2Stu5)

After commenting on activities in which they had taken part when using the first version of the Bridge, some participants suggested activities they thought would be useful to include in future versions of the course. Several activities were mentioned repeatedly. For example, some students wanted very practical information such as, *“How to buy books and where to live ... every student is going to go there”* (Ph2Stu2), and *“maybe links to all the stuff that you want, like outside, external restaurants and stuff like that”* (Ph2FG). While other students wanted the opportunity to hear from alumni who had completed the program, *“maybe some biographies from people who had just finished the program like that, so they could give you some advice”* (Ph2Stu3).

An international student had a suggestion for a different kind of practical information, something that would give students coming from other countries a better understanding of the local business environment:

*I think that would be a good idea that international students have support, kind of guidance to show them around ... so show them the business environment on the Island so that they can get more familiar. So when they are in class, they know what they are talking about. (Ph2FG)*

Now that I have explored some of the Bridge activities used by students, I will move into the next section to gain some clarity around the perceived benefits of the Bridge.

*Theme ii: Benefits*

Pascarella et al. (1986) report on the orientation practices and resulting integration of college freshmen, noting that increased student commitment and reduced probability of voluntary withdrawal are benefits of such practices (157). Further, Robinson and Burns (1996) explored how orientation programs can enhance student learning. While the primary purpose of the Bridge was on trust and community building, the students were also receiving an orientation to the university culture and expectations, which makes these scholars' observations relevant to my study. Considering their comments, I examined the specific features of the Bridge course with a focus on identifying how they could contribute in a positive way to the student experience. In this section, I will explore some of the benefits of the Bridge course, through the eyes of the participants.

Students and staff alike commented on why the Bridge contributed to a positive experience. One staff member noted that, *"they were definitely more prepared for week one, quarter one, this year than last. Or the year before ... I think that the Bridge at the beginning, before they came, was good. Definitely"* (Ph2Staff3). In addition to aiding preparation, students found the Bridge helped them feel comfortable in their new environment, as this student noted:

*I think it was that you just make a connection before you get here. So when you do get here, you've already established the, 'hi, how are you, how have*

*you been doing?’ And you’re almost just a little bit closer ... so it’s that comfort thing. (Ph2Stu5)*

Some students used their experiences on the Bridge to reach out to other students and arrange face-to-face meetings when they arrived at the university. One participant talked about her friend who “*made plans to meet up with some of the girls that she’d been talking with and so they all met each other*” (Ph2Stu6). Even though not all students took the extra step and arranged to meet on campus, some talked about how the Bridge helped them connect with the university as well as with fellow students. As this participant commented, “*I definitely found that it was like building almost [a] community, [a] culture with your school ... just like feeling like you’re a part of this ... it just felt like the program actually cared about you meeting other people*” (Ph2Stu3).

Some students discussed who they contacted when they took part in the web introductions activity. They commented on the desire to get in touch with individuals who shared common interests, had travelled to the same countries, or grew up in the same town as they had, typically stating that, “*I didn’t randomly post to just a random person ... there was something common with everyone I posted to*” (Ph2Stu5). The following student used the photos in her search for someone her age:

*We just found we had a lot of common interests. We were about the same age. I just saw her picture and, ‘oh she looks nice’. I actually, not even kidding you, looked through photos to find someone who I thought looked like my age ... I just narrowed her down to being someone I thought that ... would have most in common with me. (Ph2Stu3)*

While some domestic students used the photos that were posted online to look for people with whom they had something in common, the international students in the focus group did not discuss similar experiences. Although, the following international student did note that he was in contact with individuals online, he stated that he communicated with people from different cultures, qualified his comments by

saying not everyone finds this easy to do, *“I had emails from different cultures and stuff like that, I enjoyed talking. So for me, it’s not that bad, I can talk to a random person just like that. But it doesn’t work the same for each individual person”*

(Ph2FG).

Even so, many students enjoyed the opportunity *“to interact with people who are sharing the same feelings (nervous, excited, scared...) as we were. It encouraged communication, which was a great start to a year with 150 new people”* (Ph2Survey). This ability to communicate with new people was identified by one student as *“really cool, because otherwise I would have been sitting here on the first day not even knowing a soul”* (Ph2Stu3). This student went on to discuss the person with whom she talked online, saying that *“we just sat together and everybody thought we had been friends forever”* (Ph2Stu3). Other students agreed that the Bridge helped them start some conversations that ultimately led to relationships with other students:

*I don’t think I would have necessarily went up and talked to her once I found out who she was if we hadn’t talked on there. I guess it did make me ... have trust in someone, I guess, once I had that connection with them ... maybe not too much... it got it going... it definitely started the relationship because I think I talked to the people I posted to quicker once I got in orientation.*  
(Ph2Stu5)

Certain students felt they were able to build, or start to build, relationships with other students prior to arriving on campus, *“it helped to develop some key relationships amongst myself and other students”* (Ph2Survey). However, others stated that, *“it made me feel a little more familiar before arriving, but did not really facilitate any relationship building prior to or while at [the university]”* (Ph2Survey). So it is obvious that each individual had a very different experience and took something different away from the time they spend on the Bridge. Nonetheless, as evidenced by participants’ comments, many students did find it useful and some noted that it allowed them to have a greater understanding of the educational institution

where they would be studying. As this student commented, the Bridge “*helped me to understand [the university] and its philosophy. As well, I could read up on my classmates beforehand and find out what their background and experience is*” (Ph2Survey).

It is apparent from the discussion in this section that students used the Bridge as a way to start conversations, begin relationship building, and establish a connection with the university. However, while the Bridge was effective for some, others found there were challenges. In the next section, I will explore some of the problems associated with the Bridge.

### *Theme iii: Challenges*

Online learning is not without problems and while challenges such as pedagogical issues relating to evaluation are not relevant to my study, other issues are particularly pertinent. Yoon (2003) discussed key challenges such as poor social interaction, lack of technical expertise, and support issues as some of the key problems associated with learning online (28). Even though the students in my study did not take the Bridge course for credit, some still felt discomfort with the online environment and the expectations placed on them. In this section, I will discuss the specific problems students experienced when they encountered the Bridge.

From the beginning, there were problems with the students not understanding the relevance of the Bridge, as one student commented “*it was not made clear to me that I needed to visit this space upon my enrolment*” (Ph2Survey). Even though the university emailed all the students upon their enrolment in the program, providing a link to the Bridge, it appeared that there was so much information in the initial email, that the link and its significance were lost.

In addition, another problem was with technology. As this student noted, *“it took me at least five tries to get in, to get things working”* (Ph2Stu1). Even though this student did ultimately gain access to the Bridge, others may not have been as persistent. In fact, one student stated that s/he did not take part in the Bridge activities because *“I found the layout to be not user-friendly and the site was awkward to find”* (Ph2 Survey). Another student commented that s/he needed to know more about the Bridge, *“let us know what it is and why we have to use it”* (Ph2Survey).

Even when students understood the rationale behind the Bridge and were able to successfully gain access to it, some did not have a favorable impression. As this student observed, *“it was a huge burden”* (Ph2Survey). One student found the Bridge added to the stress that she was already feeling about starting the BCom Program:

*Some things that almost scared me a little were having sending out things on the news forum, like read this, read that, have this prepared ... I'm going to be unprepared coming to school ... sending out the information on doing these readings ahead of time and everything when I couldn't even get a hold of the book ... I felt like I would be not prepared compared to other people.*  
(Ph2Stu3)

Other issues students raised did not appear to contribute to obvious discomfort for them, but provided evidence that some students were not comfortable using the Bridge for explicit relationship building. For example, this student noted that *“it's kinda hard to build friendship on the Bridge ... it's pretty hard to start an open conversation with somebody you don't know through online”* (Ph2Stu4).

In the focus group, the international students had several issues with the Bridge. Perhaps one of the most significant was that they felt left out, as this student stated, *“they ignored the international [students]”* (Ph2FG). And, even though one of the intents of the Bridge was to begin the process of establishing trust, the following student believed there were limitations with the online environment in that *“they're only going to say the good things about themselves”* (Ph2FG). Another student agreed

that there were limitations, noting that for him the Bridge was missing purpose, “*trust building happens in the day-to-day grind. How [the] Bridge was supposed to do this is beyond me*” (Ph2Survey). A domestic student agreed that there were limits to building trust online, where you can not see the other person:

*This doesn't really build trust in anybody. I think you need to see somebody face to face... to build trust. It is ... hard when you're trying to build an online learning community, 'cause you don't see that person, you don't know who that person is.* (Ph2Stu4)

In addition to problems related to trust building, a student observed that while some people like to talk online, others prefer to get to know someone before going online. As this student commented, some people “*just don't want to interact, or share information or maybe talk about it online because they don't know you, they don't see you*” (Ph2FG).

Even though some students did not appear to be overly stressed by the Bridge and “*just poked through it but never really engaged in it*” (Ph2Stu2), other students were, “*so busy at that time that I just didn't really care ... it wasn't worth marks, it wasn't ... worth anything ... I was just like, 'this is a little too much'*” (Ph2Stu6). The result for both these students, and others like them, was that they did not actively participate in the Bridge.

Several students who participated in the survey expressed similar thoughts about the Bridge, one stating that the “*Bridge to online learning was useless*” (Ph2Survey), while another elaborated on why s/he thought it was useless, “*the Bridge added nothing to my on-campus experience. To be perfectly honest, I thought it was invasive and a complete waste of time*” (Ph2Survey). Yet another participant appeared to understand that our intent was to provide students with something meaningful, but his/her message was still clear:

*Although I am sure it was meant to be helpful, [the] Bridge had no affect on trust-building for me. If it was meant to be an indoctrination technique, it failed. If it was meant to initiate trust-building, it also failed. (Ph2Survey)*

Based on student feedback, it was apparent that work had to be undertaken if the Bridge was to be more accessible and inclusive. In addition, students needed to be informed of the benefits of actively engaging on the Bridge. A key focus of the Bridge was the hope that it could be used to begin to develop trust and build a learning community. In the following section, I will look at a wide array of participants' comments about the relationship between the Bridge and learning community development, as well as general issues relating to the learning community.

### *Category 3 Learning Community*

Wegerif (1998) stated that, "without a feeling of community, people are on their own, likely to be anxious, defensive and unwilling to take the risks involved in learning" (48). In a few words, Wegerif captured the importance of the learning community model, in which the environment is student-focused and collaborative. In this section, I will explore some perceived advantages and disadvantages of using a learning community model. I will also examine how the research participants defined the term 'learning community', as well as the perceived impact of the cultural backgrounds of its members. I will start by examining how participants defined the term and how their definitions aligned with the theory.

#### *Theme i: Defined*

In a fully functioning learning community individuals work in an environment that embraces continuous learning, students take shared responsibility for their education, and "members are involved in a collective effort of understanding" (McConnell, 2006, 19). In addition, Palloff and Pratt (2005) identified the critical elements of community as: people, shared purpose, guidelines, technology,

collaborative learning, reflective practice, and social presence (8-9). In this section, I will expand on these and other scholarly observations by examining the research participants' lived experiences.

One student captured the essence of the community, stating that it was, "*a body of learners coming together for a mutual goal. Enlightenment*" (Ph2Stu1). This aligns closely with Palloff and Pratt's observation that shared purpose is one of the key elements of the learning community. This student went on to comment on the experience they had in the classroom, "*our first cohort was unbearably supportive*" (Ph2Stu1). While the student used the word "*unbearably*", she contextualized her comment by talking about the "*amazing group of people*" and the "*positive atmosphere*" in the class, confirming that the experience was an uplifting one

Another student defined a learning community as "*a group of people coming together and just building their ideas off of one another*" (Ph2Stu6), which is reflective of McConnell's comment that:

Learning in groups and communities suggests forms of learning that are collaborative in nature, where students share their understanding of what is to be learned, cooperate with each other, provide support and engage in relevant and meaningful processes that help motivate them and that require higher-level cognitive and emotional skills' (McConnell, 2006, 7).

Staff participants also provided thoughtful observations on the learning community model. One staff member noted that a teacher is:

*Working to create the environment where people feel interconnected, where there's a degree of trust that exists, that is people can be themselves without worrying about how they're going to be judged by peers ... they can speak their truth without fearing that it's going to be mocked or disregarded or unimportant.* (Ph2Staff2)

This staff member's comments about the interconnectedness of individuals in the learning community and the role of trust are closely linked to Roberts and Pruitt's

(2003) discussion of learning communities where encouragement, engagement, and active learning play an important role (6).

One participant noted that *“everybody [is] involved in learning. Including the people who are doing the facilitation. Including the people who have written the information. It’s a two-way or multi-way dialogue. It’s not one directional* (Ph2Staff3). While this implies the learning community consists of more than merely students in a lecture hall, it does not speak to the individual concerns of the students. When examining this dimension, McConnell (2000) stated, “in the learning community, there is a mixture of working for oneself and on one’s own issues and concerns, and working with others on their concerns and issues” (116). As we examine the multi-layered aspects of the learning community, the following participant’s comments are particularly meaningful:

*A learning community is everything from the physical evidence to the goodwill in a sense of the organization delivering the products ... part of the learning environment that is a presence that you can feel inside the class, inside an institution.* (Ph2Staff4)

From this examination into the different ways the term learning community has been defined by the research participants, I will now move on to discuss the advantages of using the learning community model. In the following section, the perspectives of research participants as they relate to benefits of this model, as well as the observations of scholars, will be explored.

#### *Theme ii: Advantages*

As participants spent a significant amount of time in the student interviews discussing experiences in the Bridge course, they were not specifically asked to explore the advantages of the learning community model. However, staff members were asked to comment on their perceptions of the advantages. In the following

dialogue, I examine both the staff members' observations, as well as comments from the scholarly community.

One staff member noted that a functioning learning community encompasses, *“a feeling of connectedness, of support, of engagement. A feeling of belonging”* (Ph2Staff2), which aligns with Anderson's (2004) observation that in times of need, community members can find support in their relationships with their peers (184). The same staff member went on to comment on other important aspects of a learning community, such as the sense of identity, noting that the instructor had a part to play in:

*Creating a degree of safety and comfort and support for learners, a place to try things out that you might not try out in other places because the risk is too high. And a feeling of connection because we're walking a similar path together, so there's a sense of identity with a group that I think is important.* (Ph2Staff2)

While Pitinsky (2003) did not specifically mention the role of the instructor when he wrote, “beyond the four hours of instruction each week per course, it is critical that the environment across the campus sparks interactions that foster a sense of reciprocity and trust” (218), it is implicit in his comments that the learning community is not merely a room on campus, or a discussion area in an online classroom. This shared belief that a learning community extends beyond the physical environment transports it to a deeper, more meaningful level.

Bransford (1999) noted that “Participation in social practice is a fundamental form of learning. Learning involves becoming attuned to the constraints and resources, the limits and possibilities that are involved in the practices of the community. Learning is promoted by social norms that value the search for understanding” (xi). While Bransford's observations are insightful, the following staff

member cautioned that the social environment must be safe, thereby allowing members to make the mistakes that are conducive to learning:

*When I think about the learning environment, it has to be a safe learning environment ... it's safe to do mistakes because that's what learning means. Being in a position where I can make mistakes without being judged as inferior ... and really be yourself, caring less about what people think you are.*  
(Ph2Staff4)

One final observation by a staff member mirrored McConnell's (2000) observation that, "the success of cooperative groups depends on each member feeling responsible for the success of the group" (119). The context for the participant's comment, "*they were willing to take responsibility for the other learners*" (Ph2Staff3) was a scheduling mix up when the instructor arrived late to class. Some students had left, but as soon as the instructor arrived, the remaining students quickly texted those who were no longer in class. Within 15 minutes, the students had returned and the class continued uninterrupted. It is instances such as this one that provide evidence that the learning community is operating effectively, with students concerned about their fellow classmates and willing to act on their concern. Moving on from this discussion of a learning community at its most effective, I will lead into a discussion of perceived disadvantages of this model.

### *Theme iii: Disadvantages*

In this section, I will examine participants' comments addressing the negative aspects of the learning community model. One individual in particular had extensive contact with students and a wealth of experience dealing with their challenges in the environment in which they studied. The knowledge base of this individual makes this section particularly insightful. The issues raised are genuine and authentic, based on several years' interaction between students and participants.

The advantages of learning communities are numerous and well documented. For example, Bransford (1999) discussed the role of norms in achieving a sense of community, as well as the benefits experienced when he wrote, “students, teachers, and other interested participants share norms that value learning and high standards. Norms such as these increase people's opportunities and motivation to interact, receive feedback, and learn.” (xvii). However, the following participant raised concerns specifically about norms, how they could work against the individual and ultimately be detrimental to the community as a whole:

*Being a member of a community implies a degree of responsibility to adhere to the norms of that community, or risk being on the outside, and so someone who is not a member of the community, especially if it's a strong community, will often feel ostracized or isolated, and so it becomes a lot harder to become a participant in a community, especially if they have well-formed and strongly held values that don't leave room for others ... there are sometimes communities that will engage in activities that individuals might not necessarily [do] on their own, but groups, in a rush of energy or focus or whatever sometimes go off on misguided directions and sometimes that can cause trouble downstream. (Ph2Staff2)*

In addition to norms, social aspects of the learning community have been discussed by several scholars as a powerful positive force (Bransford et al., 1999, Hiltz and Goldman, 2005, McConnell, 2006). Again, this participant offered an argument to illustrate how the social elements of the community could serve a destructive purpose:

*Teams that become too socially attuned to each other, tend to be less productive because they're unwilling to challenge each other for fear of upsetting the social contract, and so that degree of social connection doesn't necessarily serve the academic needs of the program ... if the social connection is more important than the learning, then it destabilizes the learning environment and then the learners' focus is less on the things that we're trying to accomplish and more on how well they're getting along and who's going out with who and where the party is, and so in an academic environment, ideally people are willing to challenge each other's ideas and confront inconsistencies, and question. When people are more focused on their status socially, they're less inclined to want to challenge those things. (Ph2Staff2)*

He went on to discuss potential problems that could arise if students do not feel connected or involved socially:

*If I'm not particularly socially inclined and so I feel removed from that social gathering, then I might also feel removed from the program as a whole, and more disengaged because I don't fit in ... and so a lack of engagement on that social level may create more opportunities for people to disengage academically. (Ph2Staff2)*

This participant then talked about the importance of individual “fit” with the learning community model.

*Some people are self-interested beyond what I would consider to be a reasonable level. That is, they're here for themselves and don't particularly care about what somebody else is doing here, and they're here because they want to get their degree and that's what they care about. And their commitment is to furthering their own self interest, before furthering of the interest of the community or the cohort or the school or the program, or their team members. And so those kinds of behaviours, where people place themselves ahead of the success of others, can undermine, in pretty significant ways, the degree of trust that people have in that community. In every group, there's a social contagion agent, or agents. There are a couple of people who tend to impact the emotional climate of the group, and so if one of those people is all about me, is one of those social contagion agents, you can create a cohort that becomes highly individualistic and uninterested in the success of each other or the group, and just in it for themselves, and so it can have a pretty substantial effect on the community. (Ph2Staff2)*

This particular disadvantage raises the question of whether or not the learning community model is appropriate for everyone and, if it is not, how would we assess personal fit? While this is interesting to consider, my research did not follow this direction but it would make a meaningful study in the future.

Another staff member raised a concern about student expectations and stressed the confusion that can arise if students are used to working in a more traditional lecture based environment:

*From people who have come from the model that is more lecture-style ... I've heard the, 'why am I paying this when we're teaching ourselves' ... that instructor didn't do anything. They didn't teach us anything ... when in fact they did. They facilitated that learning but [the students] don't understand what they've learned. (Ph2Staff3)*

Based on the comments included in this section, it is apparent that an awareness of the potential destructive forces associated with social aspects of the learning community is desired if the learning community is to be a positive academic experience.

*Theme iv: Development*

Despite potential threats to the effective implementation and continued operation of a learning community, as discussed in chapter 2, literature points to its many benefits for the students who engage in this type of environment. Consequently, components of my study focused on the building of the community, examining participants' observations on the tools and techniques that could be used to aid in its development.

First, I will focus on the perceived benefits of using the online Bridge course. As this staff member noted, *“the Bridge to BCom, where it started to raise those questions [about learning communities], through the Foundations where they were discussed and then something came out of it, I think go a long way towards establishing that sense of community”* (Ph2Staff2). And, the following participant, when asked if there were any observed differences between the 2005 and the 2006 students, said, *“they seem to be better... I would like to think that it has to do with the whole learning community thing. I would really like to think that. I don't know for sure but that's about the only thing that has been done differently”* (Ph2Staff3). So, while there were no clear conclusions at this stage in the research, participants believed the online Bridge did contribute positively to the development of community for the on-campus students.

Moving on now to an exploration of general comments from participants about the development of a learning community, I will begin with a comment made

by McConnell (2000), who stated, “People learn best when they have the opportunity to work with other people, through the process of cooperation and collaboration” (2). Mirroring this observation, one staff member commented on the inclusiveness of the learning community, with roles for instructor and student alike.

*Through creating opportunities for people to exchange ideas, to take ownership of the learning experience, to become responsible to themselves and to each other... I think we learn from each other and I would like to see learners and instructors as part of the same community with different roles and different functions. (Ph2Staff2)*

Related to this observation about the inclusive nature of the learning community, Fernback and Thompson (1995) stated, “communities seem more likely to be formed or reinforced when action is needed, as when a country goes to war, rather than through discourse alone” (Fernback and Thompson, 1995, 19). This is an interesting observation and one that was verified by the following student’s reflection on some of the negative experiences the class had and how these experiences contributed to the development of the community. In his words, “*it’s always easy to grow camaraderie around hating something*” (Ph2Stu1). Another student, discussing the same problems, supported those observations, “*it strengthens the cohort ... we go to our class rep ... tell him go to admin, put our concern in ... as a cohort, we’re all cohesive on our feelings*” (Ph2Stu6). And, while it is not desirable to have negative interaction between the students and administration, it is interesting to turn this around and see how it can impact a community of students in a positive manner.

In addition to discussing administrative issues, several students discussed the implications of socializing with their classmates, seeing the development of the learning community as a phased approach “*It’s easier to connect, I found, on a social level ...and then work with them academically, rather than vice versa*” (Ph2Stu5).

While the social aspect of community development was seen to strengthen the community, it was, perhaps, at the expense of some learning:

*We all just had the common goal of wanting to have fun, but do well and if having fun at the same time as doing well sacrificed our grades a little bit, then we were all okay with it. Because we felt that like relationships and networking with all these people this year was almost as important, or if not more important, than your degree. (Ph2Stu3)*

The observations made in this last comment lead to the question about the duration of the learning community, i.e. when does it cease to exist? Is it merely something that terminates with the student's convocation, or does it continue after the program of study has been completed? Do the relationships made and contacts developed lead to a longer lasting community, perhaps leading into something more akin to the Community of Practice discussed in chapter 2? These questions will be discussed further in the final chapter of this thesis.

Turning now to the varied background of the students in the study, one of the focus group participants talked about the attitude of individuals who came from outside Canada. In his words, *"I think a lot depends on you as a person, on your attitude and stuff like that. If you're from different countries and different backgrounds, you tend to put in more effort"* (Ph2FG). A domestic student talked about the unique perspective that the international students brought to the classroom, emphasizing ways of successfully integrating students into the community, *"and the ideas a lot of international people come up with, I don't think of ... it was good to have them spread out throughout and not letting them always sit together ... and not letting them always go work together"* (Ph2Stu5). This comment is aligned with McConnell's (2000) observation that, "in a learning community there will always be a variety of ways of doing and thinking" (119). And, even though some of the comments from students pointed to the administration's need to do a better job at

explaining the benefits of working with students from a variety of backgrounds, it is gratifying to note the students themselves saw the benefits and embraced the differences. This leads into a discussion about the impact cultural background has on the learning community.

*Theme iv: Culture impact*

McConnell wrote about the benefits a community can see if its members embrace their varying backgrounds, “in a learning community, differences are seen as a cause for celebration, rather than a problem. The learning community allows individuals to address issues of minority interest ... ensuring that minority interest and people are not marginalized” (McConnell, 2000, 118). An interesting and pertinent observation and one that leads to the problem of how best to communicate these benefits to the students involved in such a community. It also raises the question of whether the community our participants saw was a fully effective learning community, or one that was only partially formed. While keeping this in mind, I explored the issue of cultural background in the classroom, examining both student and staff perceptions.

In fact, a great deal of discussion ensued around cultural background of the BCom students. Staff and student participants had much to contribute to this aspect of the discussion. At times, it appeared that cultural tensions undermined the development of the learning community. For example, this staff member noted that, “*some students feeling like they weren’t respected, because of their culture or ethnicity*” (Ph2Staff1). At other times, it appeared to contribute to the success of the learning community, “*the people with different ethnic backgrounds in our classes, people very much valued their opinions*” (Ph2Stu1). But even though different insights were valued, it was not always easy to encourage the international students to

contribute, as discussed by this domestic student, “*I know with one of our members, she’s from China, and we really valued [her] ... she had such great insight on so many things, but so many times you would ask her and we know she’d want to say something but she wouldn’t go into detail*” (Ph2Stu1).

Despite some students seeing the value to working in a multi-cultural classroom, staff, as well as domestic and international students, discussed a variety of concerns about the cultural differences they saw. A major concern was expressed by this staff member:

*I’d say our international students tend to receive a very unfair and high level of judgment in terms of their abilities ... our culture, our Western culture, it highly values verbal exchanges, quick thinking, extroverted processes, and generally speaking, our international learners tend to be more introverted and so they struggle to find a voice in those groups ... people from an Eastern culture and educational background really, really struggle because they’re simply unused to thinking in that way and it’s counter-intuitive to what they’ve been taught a student is supposed to be.* (Ph2Staff2)

One domestic student thought the problem lay with the unwillingness to embrace differences:

*It was an effort. Socially it wasn’t so bad, but as far as the class work and teamwork and stuff, there was some struggles there because some of [the domestic students] didn’t really know that they were going to have this aspect so they weren’t prepared for it ... some of the students here are real closed minded sometimes.* (Ph2Stu2)

Participants also commented on the cultural differences in the students’ approach to learning. For example, this staff member stated that, “*Sometimes the international students were quieter, and I understand because the culture issue, okay, and in fact I always said, look this is a safe place*” (Ph2Staff4). This observation was also shared by one of the domestic students who stated that, “*I think they also felt very uncomfortable ... it’s also not their culture to speak up in class, so it’s not like they’re contributing very much ... they’re not raised to be aggressive with speaking up*” (Ph2Stu3).

Another aspect of cultural behaviour was raised by the same student who believed that, *“it’s a different way of being trained to think. And you just really have to delegate and give them their section ’cause then they’ll get it done”* (Ph2Stu3).

This contrasts to the international students who provided a different perspective, commenting on the negative effect some of the domestic students’ behaviour had on confidence levels and the ability to engage comfortably in classroom discussion:

*When we bring our ideas, they are thrown away, looked at as though they are unimportant, or as though we’re not contributing ... that has made me lose confidence and if I know somebody throws my work out, I keep quiet because I don’t want that embarrassment on my face.* (Ph2FG)

Another contrast between the views of domestic and international students can be found in the following two comments. The international students noted that they were *“trying our best to adopt to the Canadian culture and I think [the domestic students] should be learning some of the knowledge of how to deal with us”* (Ph2FG).

Alternatively, a domestic student stated that:

*Having to, at the same time, carry your workload and everything that’s going on in your life and then having to pretty much teach these individuals what you’re trying to learn because ...their culture is so different and we’re supposed to learn about other cultures, but it’s just really tough because they’re not the same personalities as everyone else. So that was pretty hard.* (Ph2Stu3)

Some of these differences in perspective were compounded by language issues. For example, a domestic student discussed the challenge associated with working on a team when language was perceived as a barrier:

*They didn’t speak English as well and it was almost having to like re-explain the same thing over and over and over again ... And it just made your life harder, but I mean that happens in teams and that’s something good to learn.* (Ph2Stu3)

In addition to language issues, both domestic and international students talked about the lack of integration in the classroom, but the rationale for this was perceived differently. The following domestic student noted that, *“they stick together and*

*obviously they have common backgrounds and interests and stuff like that”*

(Ph2Stu3). Whereas the international student saw an alternative reason for this division:

*As an international student, I personally don't have much to do with domestic students because they have to make sure they deliver their assignments and stuff like that on time, right? They don't have a lot of time to sit down with an international learner and explain how things work in North America. (Ph2FG)*

One domestic student talked about visible divisions in the classroom, stating that, *“I think [the international students] were extremely separate and I don't think that they really created a lot of relationships, friendships ... I don't know if it was because of language barrier or maybe because they all lived on campus”* (Ph2Stu5). Even though the reason for the rift may not have been obvious to the student, it was evident that it did exist. This rift was exacerbated by the following type of behaviour, *“you see the odd person make a racial comment or something like that and just discriminate against them. And as unfortunate as it is, it happens”* (Ph2Stu5).

Finally, there was evidence that the students had developed an inclusive community as this student reported, *“and you could see them sit together. Especially at the beginning and first quarter. They would sit together. Now, it's not so obvious. ... a lot of people have opened up”* (Ph2Stu5). So, based on this comment, some of the initial discomfort dissipated as time passed, leaving both domestic and international students feeling more comfortable working together.

#### *Category 4 Trust*

Because many participants linked trust to the development of learning communities, trust featured prominently in the interviews and focus groups for Phase II. As discussed in chapter 2, trust is a complex construct to define, so when I asked the Phase II participants to describe what trust meant to them, I received a wide

variety of responses. One staff member provided a high level overview of trust, based partly on his work with students in the classroom:

*There is the cognitive side and there is the affective side. So on the affective side, the emotional side, I would say that trust is related to vulnerability and willingness to be vulnerable and a belief that the other person holds you as significant and important and therefore will protect that vulnerability.*  
(Ph2Staff2)

This comment fits well with Erdem and Ozen's (2003) description of affective trust as a "Mutual, emotional investment to their relationship ... demonstration of concern and benevolence are the trust attitudes expressing this dimension best" (2). The emotional investment Erdem and Ozen referred to is evident in the vulnerability noted by the participant. Next, the participant proceeded to discuss cognitive trust:

*On the cognitive side, the logical side, I think it has a lot to do simply with predictability. If you're going to do the things that you say you're going to do then I can trust that you'll do the things that you say you're going to do, and so that builds on itself and that aspect of predictability, that knowing what you're likely to do in a given situation, creates a degree of trust.* (Ph2Staff2)

Regarding cognitive trust, Erdem and Ozen's comment that, "individuals look for a rational reason to trust [the] other party...consistency between the other party's behaviour and his/her words might provide a basis for cognitive trust." (2). It is easy to align the participant's comment on predictability with Erdem and Ozen's use of consistency, as well as the following student's use of the term commitment, "*trust to me is being able to rely on a person getting something done or rely on an organization in following through with their commitment or their word or any promises that they made*" (Ph2Stu1).

Another aspect of trust was brought forward by Grabner-Krauter and Kaluscha (2003) who stated that, "trust, in general, is an important factor in many social interactions involving uncertainty and dependency" (784). Although uncertainty was not explicitly included in the following comment, the participant referred to

dependability when she noted the importance of supporting others without making judgements:

*Trust is having to depend on somebody or somebody depend on me ... when you find that the other person has a weakness, try to uplift them ... if they're failing, at risk, it's also important to put them up, to uplift them, to make sure that their effort is acceptable, without accusing. (Ph2FG)*

In the context of this study, we can align weakness with uncertainty. For example, in the classroom, a student who does not perform at a high academic level may leave other students unsure of his/her ability to complete a team assignment satisfactorily. The previous participant's comment, therefore, aligns well with scholarly premise.

Furthermore, with weakness comes a certain vulnerability, so if we explore the relationship between weakness and trust, it is logical to examine the role of vulnerability. As noted by Mishra (1996), "trust is one party's willingness to be vulnerable to another party based on the belief that the latter party is 1) competent, 2) open, 3) concerned, and 4) reliable" (5)

While safety does not play a prominent role in definitions of trust, it did play a key part in some participants' description of trust and is therefore worthy of note. One student stated that:

*"For me that was ... a total safety thing, and also a convenience thing ... I felt like it was going to be taken care of ... I guess it's being comfortable for me, so it's more like ... a comfortable environment ... you feel safe to do the things you want to do. (Ph2Stu2)*

Finally, the following staff member captured the unstable nature of trust, which aligns well with Mezgar (2006), who wrote, "Trust is a dynamic process and it alters based on experience" (6). The participant stated:

*Trust is also dependent by the culture we live in and also the importance of trust is different, and you know, dependent on the different cultures really ... now trust really takes a while to build and it takes a really few moments to destroy ... so it is not something that is static, that you say 'I trust you',*

*regardless if it's from the student or from the instructor, but you need to keep that trust alive every moment ... so trust, in a sense, is temporarily unstable and you need always to provide more elements to support that trust and, again, if you screw up, you know that can definitely impact your previous trust. (Ph2Staff2)*

From this overview of the meaning of trust, I will move into a discussion on the importance of trust from the view point of the research participants, noting parallels to literature.

*Theme i: Importance*

Jawadi (2006) stated that, "Trust is a key element to build successful interactions and to overcome selfish interests, it plays an important role in the construction and stability of interpersonal relationships" (4). Intent on exploring this statement in the context of the second phase of my study, I asked participants about their perceptions of trust, and how trust related to the learning community. While there were no truly dissenting opinions, and the majority of students believed that trust was an essential component to an effective learning environment, one student found that, "*whether I trust the person sitting in the next row or not, they might have a good idea or an idea that might spring another idea. So whether I trust them, I still think I can learn from them*" (PH2Stu5).

Nonetheless, the overriding feeling of participants is summed up in the following students comment, "*you cannot actually have a learning community without trusting people*" (Ph2Stu4). In fact, the majority of comments were closely aligned with this sentiment. One international student noted that:

*For me trust is very important, if I feel somebody trust me, it's back to my team members, then I want to contribute to my team, I want to move forward. But, if, I feel someone question my ability, like my heart [is] going to be closed, even though he didn't show my face, but in my heart, he's closed. (Ph2FG)*

The next student also believed that trust was important, *“you need to be able to trust that you’re all going in with the same aspirations and goals and people aren’t just here on daddy’s money ... trust is a must. It’s a requirement”* (Ph2Stu1). While Mezgar (2006) does not use the specific term aspirations and goals in his paper on trust building, he does refer to shared interests and tasks, which align closely to the students’ perceptions of essential ingredients for trust building.

In addition to discussing the elements necessary for building trust, one participant talked about the benefits of working in an environment with people you trust, *“for example, say you’re in a classroom setting and there’s people in that classroom that you trust and you feel comfortable in that setting, you’re more willing to share your opinion and contribute”* (Ph2Stu6). And a focus group participant talked about trust in very practical terms, *“we have to delegate tasks and you have to trust because you cannot do everything by your own”* (Ph2FG). So, from the thoughts and opinions of the participants on the role of trust in a successful educational experience, I will move on to examine what can happen if there is a lack of trust.

#### *Theme ii: Lack of Trust*

Mendoza discussed the problems that can arise when trust is lost, *“as trust ebbs, we become less open with each other, less interdependent, we look for strategies in dealing with each other”* (Mendoza, 2001, 39). Students and staff discussed how this lack of trust could negatively impact the educational experience at the university. Mendoza’s observations are clearly supported by two comments from different students who agreed that holding back information was one response to the lack of trust. One student said, *“you hold back, you hold back because you’re just always worried about what the other person is going to do”* (Ph2Stu4). The other student mirrored the comment of the first student when she stated, *“if you don’t trust*

*someone, then you may be holding back a little bit ... or maybe because you don't trust a person, you're not sharing a lot of your ideas with them"* (Ph2Stu5).

Another potential problem when working with an individual who does not trust easily was illustrated by this student's story:

*Definitely, trust, trust each other is very important. In my second quarter, [in] my team, there was a girl; she didn't trust anybody in the team. She so she wanted to control everything. She, how you say that, she just wanted to make sure everything goes well or she wanted to know everybody did the right thing, on the right track. It make us crazy, she want to know everything ... some times we were fighting with [her] because she want to control everything, she want everybody to listen to her, but we all have our own opinions. So, it wasted, we wasted a lot of time.* (Ph2FG)

In the comment above, the student talked about time wasted. Another student agreed, illustrating their observation with a different story. In the following case, the student talked about how the online environment could create a more time consuming way of communicating, one in which it was easier to misinterpret intentions:

*But in an email, when you write that page of complaints ... on how you feel and all that stuff, a lot of things can get misinterpreted. A person reads it and they're like 'okay, I'm going to get back at him, I want to get even'. So we have had a 10 email war and then finally we sat down and [said] 'okay guys, whoa' ...and then it was like not even a problem. It was like it got dealt with in 10 minutes in a face to face conversation. But it was a two day war over emails. [Whereas in face-to-face communication] 'cause of body language ... like the eye contact ..... just the tone and everything and then you can have open communication ... and it's real time and I think that's very key to trust and arguments and moving forward.* (Ph2Stu4)

Staff also discussed the negative impact a lack of trust could have. One staff member noted, "*Information might be dismissed because it's from somebody who is not deemed as trustworthy. Even if it is valid information"* (Ph2Staff3). While another talked about the importance of having rules and matching expectations:

*If you do not deliver according to your benchmark. If my expectations are that you are there, you have to reply within three business days and the quality of your replies are good, okay, as an instructor or as a student, so as long as your benchmark is in that range, I trust you. The moment you break the rules, then the trust goes away.* (Ph2 Staff4)

This last point is a clear illustration of Lewicki, et al.'s (1998) comment that, "we define trust in terms of confident positive expectations regarding another's conduct, and distrust in terms of confident negative expectations regarding another's conduct" (439).

Having examined some of the negative ramifications experienced when trust is not earned or extended, I will now move onto examining the development of trust.

*Theme iii: Development*

In this section, I will examine student and staff comments on their perceptions of trust building. They drew on experiences in the classroom, on their teams, and in a social context. Panteli (2005) stated that trust "is a dynamic and emergent social relationship that develops as participants interact with each other over time and depending on the situation." (1) Several students agreed with this assertion and emphasized the positive impact that socializing with classmates had on the development of trust. For example, this student noted that, "*I think you just trusted who you became friends with because I think the same/similar values ... similar morals ... view of things*" (Ph2Stu5). But a problem seen by the same student was that some international students "*often weren't interested in coming to do social things with us. So that was hard too and I think that ... that stood in the way of building the friendships. And just building the trust because you were not with them that much*" (Ph2Stu5).

However, the extent to which a lack of social interaction damaged the potential for the development of trust was not clear and there are alternatives to interacting in a social environment. For example, the following participant attempted to build an environment in the classroom that could, in some ways, compensate for the lack of social interaction outside the classroom. As he noted:

*My focus is on trying to create an environment where [trust building] can happen through creating dialogue, through identifying aspects that are likely to impact me through creating opportunities for those kinds of things, those experiences, those exchanges of information to happen, where people begin to build trusting relationships with one another. (Ph2Staff2)*

And, if an instructor was successful in creating those experiences for students, then the interaction that resulted could lead students to build trust. Explicit in the following student's message is that building trust is possible if a person is open and non-judgemental – qualities that can be seen in a variety of settings, not only in those external to the classroom:

*I don't care whether you're black, white, Muslim, whatever you are, that's fine. And I didn't really find that was an issue in building the trusting relationship. To me, it's about personality of the person and you just get that connection and [if] I feel that they're an open person and they're not judgmental and they don't have those qualities, then it doesn't matter. (Ph2Stu6)*

Other alternatives to the social aspects of trust building were cited by another staff member who talked about how dependability was a key component in the development of trust, “*trust is important. We develop trust, just asking them for feedback as we do, walking the talk, so again delivering, following up with people*” (Ph2Staff4). His comment illustrates the point made by Mendoza (2001) who stated that, “our trust in others is our tendency to view others as reliable and dependable in fulfilling the expectations we hold of them” (36).

In addition to interaction inside and outside the classroom, one student discussed a wider influence on the building of trust. In his comment, we can see how a common use and understanding of terminology could further the development of trust by creating an inclusive environment, “*understanding the terminology used at the university. I think that's maybe letting you into the university culture .... I think that works ... it's a way of letting you inside*” (Ph2Stu1). This aligns with a comment from a staff member, who talked about how the establishment of institutional

presence influenced students' ability to extend trust, "*well the structures and the previous history, the experience affects what they trust. They trust the course and that we are delivering it, and they trust the result*" (Ph2Staff4).

While the concept of sharing is prominent in literature on trust, it is usually in the context of shared experiences and shared norms (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999, Jawadi, 2006). The following student provided a different aspect of sharing as it related to trust development:

*Just the level of information that they're willing to share with you. Just I find that right away when you speak to someone, you can tell if they're kind of holding themselves back or holding a part of themselves back, and right away for me that says well, they don't trust me or they don't have ... they don't want to develop that level of trust.* (Ph2Stu1)

He also qualified this by saying that "*you must trust yourself a lot though*" (Ph2Stu1). So, if we are not in an environment that trains us to trust ourselves, we could conclude that sharing of personal information would not be conducive to the development of trust.

Finally, in addition to the importance of individuals sharing thoughts, opinions and experiences in order to build trust, another issues emerged as significant to a participant, who noted that it took time to establish trust, "*you can't trust anybody unless you know them very well. And you have to build that trust in the long run; it's going to take time*" (Ph2FG). This aligns with Jawadi's (2006) observation that trust can be constructed if certain conditions, including time, are met (4).

#### *Theme iv: Evidence*

After participants had discussed the development of trust, they were asked to reflect on how they saw trust exhibited in the classroom. Staff looked at actions they had seen as students interacted at the university. One participant noted that reduction in fear was one way trust could be seen, "*her level of comfortability that she's got on*

*the team now, and [she] is not afraid to ask for help* (Ph2Staff1). Another noted that students were fulfilling their commitments; they trusted that staff had their best interests in mind, *“they were delivering what I was asking. So for me, I had the proof that, you know, they were showing up, they were showing up on a Friday”* (Ph2Staff4).

Students tended to focus more on what it felt like both inside and outside the classroom, sitting together in class and socializing after class:

*So I think after the first quarter, that’s when you kind of break up and work more with your friends, study with your friends rather than the team base. And I think you just start to trust them more. You’re with them more. You sit beside them in class. You hang out with them outside of class, so that relationship is there.* (Ph2 Stu5)

Another student related the question to how he got along with teammates. For him, being able to relinquish control was important:

*I was able to get to know my team members enough that I could be able to trust one of them to take on something and to be the filter for that and for it actually to work out. And it gave me a whole new perspective on what if you finally get to the level of trust with somebody that you can actually relinquish some of that control.* (Ph2Stu2)

A connection can be made between this last observation and Javenpaa and Leidner’s (1999) discussion on trust as it relates to risky activities, which are beyond a person’s control (2). If students are willing to relinquish control, they assume some risk. When their grades are tied to the performance of another individual, as is the case in team work, it takes a trusting environment for the student to relinquish power. If they have not extended trust appropriately, their final course mark may suffer.

#### *Theme v: External factors*

There appeared to be different facets to the individuals’ perception of trust. Several participants talked about the influence external factors had on their ability to enter into a trusting relationship with someone. For example, the following staff

member discussed how administration should be consistent in the messages they send to the student, “*there was everything from just administratively being told one thing, and then actually another is true*” (Ph2Staff1). And, a student talked about how lack of trust on a team could negatively impact the entire class, “*there was not trust within that team and we tried to work through it, work through it, work through it... so that filters out to everyone else*” (Ph2Staff1). Another student noted how clear communication is needed about activities external to the classroom, if those activities have an impact on the school work:

*People will have things happening in their lives that they may not disclose, and they may act in ways that are important to them but other people don't understand, and so judge them ... if those external factors are not understood and there isn't communication around it, it can cause an erosion of trust ... external factors, what's happening in the external environment, will impact how people will act and that can affect the culture in the community.* (Ph2FG)

So, from these comments it is clear that it is not only what students do inside the classroom that affects trust, but also activities that may appear unrelated to the classroom. In addition, concerns about administrative consistency can affect trust, since they may influence the students' ability to trust administration, and that can affect trust in the classroom.

#### *Theme vi: Grades*

Grades played a role in the Phase I discussions, when it became evident that the reliance on team members' ability to aid in the achievement of high marks was a significant issue for both international and domestic students. In the Phase II data, it also emerged as a key issue. Several staff members commented on this phenomenon when referring to some students' attitudes, “*my behaviour doesn't matter. It just matters if I can do the grades*” (Ph2Staff1), and:

*Getting through, getting marks. Getting it done, getting the marks. Don't get in my way; I'll roll right over top of you. Cutthroat, definitely. We might see people who are compassionate in there but for the most part I'd say they're*

*fairly cutthroat ... and manipulative. They can be very manipulative.*  
(Ph2Staff3)

Feng et al. (2004) discussed the notion of swift trust that has been seen with groups working on a common task (7). However, while the formation of trust based on a common goal would appear to be achievable, having a common goal such as achieving good grades can, according to participants, run counter to supporting the development of trust if group members doubt that the successful realization of a goal is achievable.

Building on the topic of grades, we will examine a student's observation that, "[in] my first team, ... there was really a lack of trust and that really affected our grades" (Ph2Stu3). In this case, it would appear that if students do not trust others to perform, the impact ultimately is counterproductive and does negatively impact the outcome.

One student in the focus group did, however, offer a refreshing point of view on the issue of a grade:

*Because at the end of the day, a grade is just a number on a paper. Because you need that experience, what did you learn, it's not about, 'we want A or A+ or A- and I don't want to accept B.' What's the experience behind it'. (Ph2FG)*

In this case, the perception of goal achievement was no longer the grade itself, but the understanding and knowledge that supported it. So, while some students found there were problems associated with the desire to achieve high grades, others did appreciate the learning that they received and the experiences they had. The issue of grades could be linked to the ability of students to communicate effectively with team members, and in the final section in this category, I will explore the issue of communication from the viewpoint of both staff and students.

*Theme vii: Communication*

While several participants discussed communication as it related to trust building, their comments took a variety of forms. For some, the perceived inability of classmates to read, write and speak English had a negative impact on how the students worked together. As this staff member noted, *“if they’re ESL, really I think that’s the main issue”* (Ph2Staff3). For others, it was whether or not students were taking responsibility to clarify misunderstandings, *“it’s when that communication is not clarified and misunderstandings are allowed to exist and then perpetuate themselves that that can undermine and erode trust”* (Ph2Staff2). This last comment relates to Panteli and Duncan’s (2004) discussion of situational trust. They noted that the manner in which information was communicated influenced peoples’ understanding, which in turn influenced the development of trust (424).

If, as Panteli and Duncan observed, the way information is communicated influences trust, then ESL students may be at a significant disadvantage. The following international student illustrated this by talking about their struggles with communicating and the frustration that resulted:

*So we suffer silently ... because you don’t know how to communicate, whom to talk to, where to pour out your problem, so you are left alone and you feel frustrated. Sometimes it can even affect your work in school.* (Ph2FG)

Domestic students also discussed the negative impact the language barrier had on students working together and consequently on the development of trust within the classroom. For example, the following student stated that, *“a few other internationals were extremely difficult to work with ... because they could barely speak English ... I think that’s the huge breaking point there is whether they can speak or read it”* (Ph2Stu5). International students, who contributed to the class were sometimes met with the following response, *“when they hear that different accent, maybe it’s kind of*

*weird for them; they just kind of roll their eyes” (Ph2FG). As Feng et al. observed, “frequent communication between team members helps to promote trust” (Feng et al., 2004, 6). Following the logic of Feng et al.’s argument, if a student attempts to communicate, but is met with lack of interest, the result could be a reduction in the ability to create trusting relationships because of the interruption in communication.*

*Evaluate*

The intent of this phase of the research was to answer the first question discussed in chapter 1 as well as begin to answer the second and third questions:

1. *Can online activities support the development of a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students, and if so, how?*
2. *What steps should be taken when developing a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students?*
3. *What are the perceived disadvantages of studying in a learning community?*

By addressing these questions, I intended to determine how to proceed with the final phase of the study, Phase III. In the table below, I have provided a summary of the key insights, as well as how they informed the final phase.

Table 9: Key Insights Phase II

<b>Category/Theme</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Inform Phase III</b>
Transition into Learning		
Preparation	Lack of cultural preparedness; challenges for students who did not speak English as a first language; teaching pedagogies used did not align with all students’ cultural expectations.	Background information.
Pre-established groups	Some participants commented on the existence of cliques, but there were opposing opinions as to whether or not cliques aided or obstructed the development of a learning community.	Background information.

Category/Theme	Key Insights	Inform Phase III
<b>Bridge Course</b>		
Activities & Attributes	Problems with the website, confusion about what the purpose of the Bridge was and how to access it; bio, web intros, photos were all useful; suggestions for new Bridge: include more practical information, as well as discussions with alumni.	Aids in answering the first research question. Include opportunity to ask questions of BCom Alumni, program staff, student representative. Provide practical information such as housing, purchasing new textbooks, schedules.
Benefits	Students more prepared; familiarity with the university and the program; increased comfort level; develop relationships prior to attending on-campus studies.	Answers first research question. The course did appear to aid in the development of the community.
Challenges	Problems accessing the website; unclear that students had to do the Bridge course; instilled fear that they would be behind if they could not access the course and do the activities; international students felt ignored; was not for marks; hard to build trust online.	Aids in structuring second version of the Bridge, therefore, assists in answering question two.
<b>Learning Community</b>		
Defined	Mutual goal; support; positive atmosphere; building ideas; speak truth; multi-way dialogue; goodwill.	Aids in answering second research question.
Advantages	Feelings of connectedness, support, belonging, safety, sense of responsibility, identity.	Aids in answering second research question.
Disadvantages	Community may follow misguided direction; may be less inclined to challenge the social norm; self-interest can be destructive to community; not understanding pedagogy behind learning community.	Aids in answering third research question.
Development	Factors/activities that aid in developing a learning community: the Bridge; on-campus orientation; taking ownership; negative experiences build community,	Aids in answering questions one and two. The Bridge was mentioned as a way to develop the community. Also, provided insight about

<b>Category/Theme</b>	<b>Key Insights</b>	<b>Inform Phase III</b>
	socializing together; common goals; attitudes; encouraging people to interact together.	how to build a sense of community.
Cultural impact	Lack of respect for international students; unfair judgments; close-mindedness, quiet vs. noisy in class; high workload and language barrier negatively impacted patience with fellow students; over time interaction increased between domestic and international.	Background information.
<b>Trust</b>		
Importance	Most found strong link between trust and learning community.	Aids in answering second research question.
Lack of Trust	Hold back; negatively impacts grades.	Background information.
Development	Trusted people who had similar values/morals; socializing aided development; delivering on promises; previous experience; takes time.	Aids in development of Bridge activities. i.e. providing ability for people to interact socially.
Evidence	Comfort level; sitting together in class; socializing; relinquish control.	Background information.
External factor impact	Administration, team, outside activities impact ability to develop trust.	Aids in answering second research question.
Grades	Emphasis on high marks negatively impacts developing relationships; can be counterproductive.	Background information.
Communication	Language barrier; international students feel frustrated; misunderstandings not clarified breaks down trust.	Background information.

From this table, two areas of relevance can be identified. As is apparent, some of the data collected does not directly contribute to the building of the Bridge, or the development of a learning community. It did not help me identify the relevance of specific activities to the development of a learning community, or emphasize the

impact the learning community and trust had on the lived experiences of the participants. However, the themes that are noted for “background information” are still acutely relevant in that they emphasize the need for expanding the search for ways to reach our undergraduate students. Many of the comments provided by participants identified specific issues encountered by students and staff in higher education, with the result that my research was propelled forward into the final phase.

With regards to the elements that clearly addressed the research questions, the data collected helped the design team identify specific activities and approaches that could be used as we worked on the second version of the Bridge. For example, we looked at comments about activities to increase engagement, we also examined ways to make the website easier to find and help students understand its relevance.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I have discussed the planning and development of the online Bridge, and looked at how participants viewed it as a tool to aid in the development of trust and a learning community. I have highlighted some of the problems found by students and staff when working on-campus, as well as examined participants’ perceptions about the transition into learning, the Bridge, trust, and learning communities. As one participant stated:

*I think what you’re doing is great. I think you’re raising the profile of something that’s not very businessy, so business-types sometimes have a struggle dealing with it, but more and more businesses are recognizing that the culture that they create, the community that exists, is fundamental to the success of an organization, and people should be more attuned to it, so I think this is great stuff. (Ph2Staff2)*

While this comment was supportive of the steps taken so far, it is in no means an endorsement to keep the status quo. Rather it was an indication that we needed to continue the effort to raise awareness about problems that had surfaced, and continue to propel the project forward. In the next chapter, I will discuss how we used the

comments found in Phase II to build an improved version of the Bridge. A version that we hoped would address some of the concerns raised in Phase II, taking another step towards developing an inclusive, supportive learning community.

## Chapter 6: Phase III Results and Discussion

### *Introduction*

In chapter 5, the benefits and challenges experienced by the students when working on the first version of the Bridge course were examined. Building on their comments, as well as the observations of individuals at the university who worked with the students, a new version of the Bridge was developed. In chapter 6, I discuss this second version of the Bridge course, exploring participants' perceptions of the Bridge activities.

The main aim of Phase III of this study was to identify how the Bridge was useful in developing trust and learning communities. To contextualize the participants' comments, I also wanted to obtain an overview of the students' characteristics as seen by the staff and faculty who worked with them. As well, in order to understand the participants' perception of the learning community environment, their opinions regarding what it means to be involved in a learning community, as well as its development, advantages and disadvantages were explored.

The methods of data collection and analysis described in chapters 4 and 5 were also used in this final phase of the study, so they will not be described again here. However, my reflection of the research process for all three phases is included in the penultimate section of this chapter. Furthermore, the tools used for data collection in this phase are provided in Appendix E. The four-step action research process described in previous chapters was repeated, with categories and themes emerging from the data that was collected. I will now discuss the research for Phase III, starting with the Plan, followed in sequence by the Act, Observe, and Evaluate steps.

### *Plan*

In Phase III of this research study, the Bridge course, Version II, was developed. As with Phase II, I was a member of the design team, working alongside an instructional designer, the BCom Program Manager, and the Manager of University Life. In addition, we asked the Team Coach to join us. Building on some of the comments made by participants in the previous phase, the design team included additional individual activities and removed the team activity.

When planning the data collection for Phase III, I realized I would have challenges trying to get a focus group together with international students because they were no longer housed on campus. Instead, I opted to interview four international students, as well as 14 domestic students. In addition to these student interviews, I interviewed one faculty member, the BCom Program Manager, the Manager of University Life, and the Team Coach.

### *Act*

The Bridge course, Version II, was launched in September 2007. Although the design team was not able to act on all of the suggestions made by research participants, we had been successful in adding several features that addressed recommendations made by staff, students and faculty, as well as making the information about the Bridge activity more prominent in communication that was sent to students. In addition to the features included in the first version of the Bridge course, discussion groups called *Community Discussions* were created. In these discussion areas students could have asynchronous text-based discussions with alumni, staff and the Orientation Assistant. Also, audio recordings of key individuals from the Faculty of Management were provided. Additional information about extra

curricular activities was included so students could acquire an understanding of some of the roles they could play when they arrived on campus.

Furthermore, the final Bridge activity, *What is a Learning Community*, was followed up by an on-campus activity, *Building a Learning Community*. The idea was to integrate the Bridge activities with the on-campus orientation, so that the Bridge became the starting point for the ongoing discussion about studying in a learning community. A table containing the Schedule of Activities for the second Bridge, Version II, is provided below, followed by a more detailed discussion of each activity:

Table 10: Bridge Version II Schedule of Activities

Date	Activities
<b>UNIT 1: Getting to know [the university]</b>	
Sep 4 (ongoing)	 Activity 1 (3 parts - orientation, your profile, my[university]) <b><i>Orientation to [the university] resources for on-campus learners</i></b>
Sep 4 (ongoing)	 Activity 2 (online discussion) <b><i>Get Acquainted</i></b>
<b>UNIT 2: Learning at [the university]</b>	
Sep 14 (due)	 Activity 3 (individual deliverable) <b><i>What is a Learning Community?</i></b>
<b>FOUNDATIONS: Sep 24 – 28</b>	
Sep 24 - 28	Activity 4 (on-campus discussion) <b><i>Building a Learning Community</i></b>
Sep 24 - 28	Activity 5 (survey) <b><i>Share your feedback about the Bridge to BCom</i></b>

The first activity involved the students going through an orientation to the online technology used at the university, as well as looking through the resources about academics, services and the community. Included in the latter section, the students were encouraged to look through the *Learner Handbook* which outlined,

among other items, the students' rights and responsibilities. In addition, students were asked to complete their biography, using a maximum of 300 words.

For the second activity, *Get Acquainted*, students were asked to introduce themselves using 200 or less words. They were also asked to review and respond to other students' introductions, asking questions and making constructive comments where appropriate. Both of these first two activities were the same as activities in the first version of the Bridge.

The intent of the third activity was to allow students to start thinking about the learning community model and the impact they could personally have on the community. Students were asked to do the following:

Building on the resources we have provided, your work and life experience, and any other sources you wish to use, write a short, reflective piece (250 words max) on this question:

*What are your responsibilities as a member of the BCom Learning Community?*

Prepare your work in a Word document and submit it to the drop box by the date provided in the Bridge schedule.

Your submission will provide a basis for ongoing class-wide activities during Foundations.

As noted in the *Schedule of Activities*, when students came to campus, they were involved in a fourth activity, called *Building a Learning Community*. This session was facilitated by the BCom Program Manager, the Manager of University Life and a faculty member. Students had several sessions with the facilitation team, discussing their responses to Activity 3, as well as taking part in some community-building exercises. The main emphasis on this session was to create a mission statement for the entire community.

To achieve this purpose, students worked in several teams, discussing their values and goals. Each team created its own mission statement, and then an individual

from each team was chosen as a representative to go forward and work on a mission statement for the BCom student body. In order to achieve this goal, the representatives worked together using the teams' mission statements, refining them until they all agreed that the new mission statement effectively combined the intent of each team's statements. The new mission statement was then presented to all the BCom students on the final day of the on-campus orientation. In addition, posters of the mission statement were printed, laminated and displayed in each of the classrooms. The mission statement was as follows:

*As learners in the [university] Bachelor of Commerce Community we endeavour to share skills and experiences while offering encouragement and compassion in a safe, positive, learning environment.*

*This can only be achieved if we maintain balance while striving for excellence and having fun.*

*It is with integrity that we will embrace diversity which is essential to the development of a network reflecting our global community.*

After examining the *Act* step of the action research process in this section of chapter 6, I will move on to look at the *Observe* step. In the following section, the data that was gathered in Phase III is presented. In addition to examining the survey data, a rich array of participants' comments from the interviews is included; thereby illustrating the student, staff and faculty's lived experiences.

### *Observe*

In this section, I discuss both the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected in Phase III of the study. Starting with the quantitative data, I discuss the rationale for the approach taken with the student survey.

#### *Quantitative Analysis*

The activities in the Bridge were revised as noted in the *Act* section of this chapter. As a result, the survey for the second version of the Bridge was aimed at

examining different features from those in the first version of the Bridge. Also, a section on learning community building was added. Therefore, the Likert scale questions focused on four key features: the web introductions, the discussions, resources and the chat. In addition, to expand on the opportunity for qualitative comments, two boxes were added asking participants to comment on specific Bridge features, as well as any other online activities, that they thought were helpful to them in (a) building a learning community and (b) building trust. As with the Phase II survey, a question was included that asked for general comments on the Bridge.

The survey was opened immediately after students had completed the Bridge and kept open while they were on-campus in their Foundations week. Students were encouraged to fill it out at the same time as they filled out other feedback surveys. Also, they had dedicated time to work on the surveys, as well as being given access to the on-campus computer lab. As a result, the survey was completed by 63 of the 131 registered students entering the on-campus program in 2007. This meant that 48% of students filled out the survey, an increase of 10% over the proportion of students who participated in the Phase II survey. All but two of the student respondents noted that they had used the Bridge prior to entering the program. The following charts (Figures 11 and 12) provide details on the students' perspectives of the Bridge features:

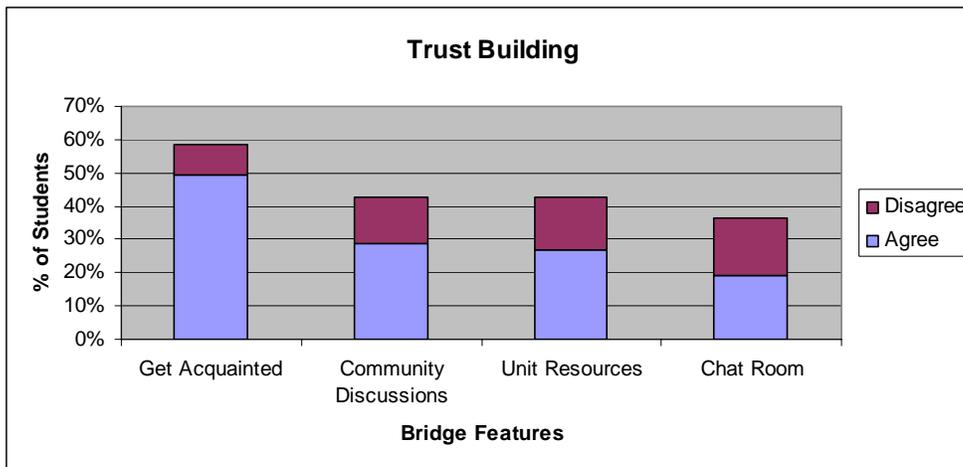


Figure 11: Trust Building Phase III

For clarification, the features surveyed are as follows:

*Get Acquainted*: students were asked to introduce themselves as well as review and respond to other students' introductions.

*Community Discussions*: students were given the option of having asynchronous text-based discussions with alumni, staff and the Orientation Assistant.

*Unit Resources*: the first unit contained information on the university and the learning platform; the second unit contained readings about working on teams, the benefits of collaborative learning, and some background reading on learning communities.

*Chat Room*: students were able to engage in synchronous chat with other students using the computer keyboard.

As shown in the chart above, 49% of students agreed or strongly agreed that the *Get Acquainted* activity on the Bridge was helpful in trust building, and 29% thought that the *Community Discussions* were useful. The two activities the students associated least with trust building were the *Unit Resources* at 27%, and the *Chat Room* feature at 19%. Also, while 10% of students disagreed or strongly disagreed

that the *Get Acquainted* activity was helpful, 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the *Community Discussions* were helpful, 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed that the *Unit Resources* were helpful, and 17% of the students who participated disagreed or strongly disagreed that the *Chat Room* was helpful. Between 41% and 63% were neutral; which meant that they neither agreed nor disagreed that these Bridge features were helpful in building trust. Overall, though, it is apparent that more students found the activities useful than those who did not find the activities useful. While the results for trust building were positive, there was an even more positive response to the questions about learning community building as seen in the Figure 12 below:

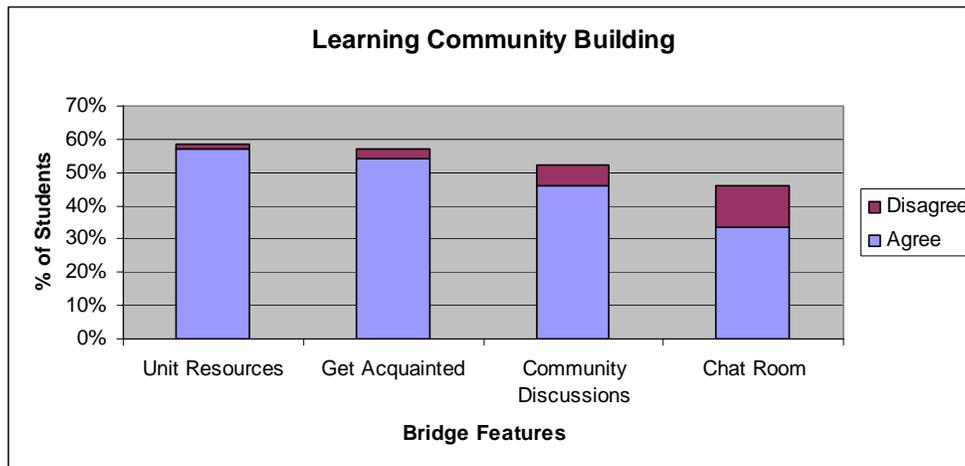


Figure 12: Learning Community Building Phase III

With regard to learning community building, the students felt that the *Unit Resources* were the most helpful, with 57% of students agreeing or strongly agreeing that the *Unit Resources* provided helped them as they started to build a community with their classmates. The feature perceived as the second most useful was the *Get Acquainted* activity at 54%, with the *Community Discussions* being ranked as third most useful at 46%. The least helpful to the students was the *Chat Room* feature, which 33% of the students agreeing or strongly agreeing that it was helpful in

building a learning community. While between 2% and 13% did not agree that these features were helpful in developing a learning community, 41% to 54% were neutral.

It was apparent from these results that the Bridge features were more useful to students in building learning communities than they were in developing trust. This was not surprising given the main focus of the Bridge, Version II was to aid the students in gaining an understanding of learning communities and to cause them to reflect on their own responsibilities to the community. It was surprising though that the *Chat Room* feature was not ranked higher. One reason for this could have been that the technology was not very well received by students, and that some students used MSN frequently, reporting that they would add new friends there, rather than use the Chat Room feature on the Bridge.

These quantitative results provided insights into the features students found useful, and the survey comment boxes allowed students to provide a greater number of open-ended answers to the questions posed. However, while their comments were insightful, they were not very deep. In the next section, in order to build on the findings from the survey, and to triangulate the findings with the observations of faculty and staff, I will proceed to discuss the qualitative data.

### *Qualitative Analysis*

This section contains a discussion on the qualitative data collected through interviews with faculty, students and staff. I have also chosen to incorporate the qualitative component of the Bridge survey with the interview results. For clarification, comments made in the survey have been tagged with (Ph3Survey) identifiers; comments taken from interviews have been tagged with (Ph3Stu\_) or (Ph3Staff\_).

In this section, I have included three categories; each category has two or more themes that emerged from the comments provided by participants. In order to frame the students' context, I have started this section with a discussion on the characteristics of the students who were engaged in this study. Following this is an overview of the learning community model as seen through the eyes of the participants. And, in the last category, I examined the second version of the Bridge course, exploring why students took part in it, whether or not they found it helpful in creating trust and building the learning community. I also examined how participants felt the Bridge could be improved. This section then concludes with a brief discussion on what staff felt they had learned from this three phase study.

#### *Category 1 The Students*

In this section, I will discuss some of the observations staff and faculty made about the students who participated in the third phase of this study. Their observations were made after the students had worked together on-campus for approximately seven months. In light of the observations made by some staff members about the student demographic, I have included some references to the millennial generation (it is usually agreed that this generation was born in 1982 or later). Approximately 76% of 2007/08 students in the BCom Program belonged to this demographic.

##### *Theme i: Student Characteristics*

The demographic of students entering 21<sup>st</sup> century post secondary education has changed (Oblinger, 2003). As Oblinger noted, if we compare students enrolled in higher education in 1970 with those enrolled three decades later, we can see many changes. The percentage of students over the age of twenty-five has increased from 28% to 39%, the enrolment of women has risen from 42% to 56%, and part time attendance has increased from 28% to 39% (38). These non-traditional students have

different life experiences from their predecessors. In the case of the students in my study, most have delayed enrolment in higher education and are therefore coming into the university setting with a wealth of work experience and pre-existing business skills. In addition to these characteristics, students born in the years 1982 and later, sometimes referred to as the Millennials, have worked and played on computers from an early age (Jonas-Dwyer and Pospisil, 2004, 194).

It is through this lens that I examined the comments of staff and faculty participants. For example, one staff member talked about the diverse personalities of the students and how this created some challenges in the classroom. *“Levels of contribution, personality styles not meshing, and the judgment that comes out of those personality styles”* (Ph3Staff2) were all problems staff saw in the classroom. But individual personality issues were not the only concern. It was interesting to hear how staff talked about a cohort of students taking on its own personality. Some staff members commented on the difficulties this could cause and one staff member noted how:

*Cohorts can really be influenced by one strong personality, be it for good or evil. 'Cause I mean one person for evil can take over a cohort and make it the most negative cohort ever. But if that cohort has one person in it that can stand up to ... that really loud ... annoying bully, it can actually be a really good group.* (Ph3Staff1)

Even though students entering into the post secondary classroom in 2007 were remarkably different from their 20<sup>th</sup> century predecessors, they still had room to grow and change. One observation staff members had in common was that the students changed as they progressed through the program. While the students' understanding of the academic subject matter increased, as this staff member noted, they were also *“bolder at the end and they're a lot ... less patient ... they don't show up for class... they kind of learned how to skirt the system”* (Ph3Staff3). Another participant echoed

this when she said, “*they learn how to come in, divide and conquer, and get through*” (Ph3Staff4).

A staff member also talked about issues that were specific to the domestic students, stating that students lacked sensitivity, and then went on to add that, “*we’re talking about the BCom students who are completely about what’s in it for me. It’s all about the money. Show me the money*” (Ph3Staff1). In addition, other staff members talked about issues that were specific to the international students. Specifically, a faculty member noted that, “*there are some extremely keen, bright internationals and they produce so much better on their own than in the team*” (Ph3Staff3). Given the collaborative, team environment, this created a potential problem for international and domestic students alike. Although, the previous faculty member’s comment appeared somewhat contradictory to another staff member’s observation that, “*[the international learners] are an incredibly tight knit group, really supportive of one another; [they] have created a really strong bond with people*” (Ph3Staff4). What she saw was evidence that the international students did work well together, but this did not always transfer effectively into the classroom when international and domestic students were assigned to the same team.

In this section, we have looked at the students who entered the classroom in 2007. However, in order to obtain a broader context, further examination of how they compared with previous intakes was needed. In the next section, I examine staff and faculty comments about the students who entered the program in the years 2005 and 2006 as they discuss how those students were different from the 2007 intake of students in Phase III of this study.

*Theme ii: Differences Between 2005, 2006 and 2007 Students*

The second theme in this category examines the three intakes of students who took part in this study. Faculty and staff commented on their perceptions of the students, providing insights ranging from the level of social interaction to the students' behavior in the classroom. I will start by looking at the social element of the student interaction because, as Nimon (2007, 38) discusses in her work on the Millennials, the social context can have implications on higher education (38). While Nimon was discussing the social context within which students are raised, I believe her observations also have relevance to the social context within which individuals study. There were a number of comments about the social focus of the students, such as this staff member who said that, "*the social aspects of this year's group were probably better than some in the past. There's a lot less drama*" (Ph3Staff2). Although he did add that one aspect of the students' social philosophy had a negative impact in that they had "*an attitude that somewhat marginalizes the learning and the people*" (Ph3Staff2).

He then went on to discuss the cohesiveness of the students in the classroom:

*It's been a much more cohesive group and they've been much more within the bounds of propriety, I'll say behaviourally, than we've had in previous years. Last year and the year before, we had some pretty big conflicts within the classroom and behaviourally, and that hasn't happened to that extent this year.* (Ph3Staff2)

Another staff member commented on how the students started out differently from the previous intakes of students, but as the year progressed, they seemed to align more closely with the predecessors:

*I'd say this last group seemed to have started out better but right now, maybe it's because they're in that mid period, they seem just as grouchy as the others. So I mean maybe in the end, like if it was this time next year I would assess this group that's here right now differently in hindsight, but right now they seem to be fairly on par with previous cohorts.* (Ph3Staff1)

The following staff member commented on the maturity level of the students, noting that the 2007 students had “*a lower level of emotional maturity*” (Ph3Staff2). He went on to say that some of the students were not interested in the learning as much as they were in getting through the program:

*There’s more of a prevalence of people that are just here to get through and do what they have to do and less people who are valuing the true learning and think they can do it, and that to me is an aspect of maturity. It’s a young group... that is, the cohort in ’05/’06 was an older, more mature cohort.*  
(Ph3Staff2)

The same staff member identified some consequences of the apparent lack of maturity shown in the 2007 intake of students. For example, “*I’ve heard similar comments from a lot of our instructors, I don’t think I’m alone in noticing that people are not taking their learning ... taking responsibility ... as much responsibility for their individual learning*” (Ph3Staff2). Furthermore, he noted that the students did not appear to have “*an inability to think critically. That is they tend to want to receive much more direction and tend to not be willing to just take things on themselves, as [students] have previous years*” (Ph3Staff2). This last comment mirrors the observations of Zemke (2001), who discussed the Millennials, noting that “they expect a more highly structured, ‘me-oriented’ environment” (45). So, perhaps maturity was not the key factor with the 2007 intake of students, rather it was the expectations of a generation.

One of the positive attributes of the 2007/08 students was a reduction in conflict. As this staff member commented, “*We haven’t had nearly the number of learner/instructor conflicts that we’ve had in previous years, where people were really challenging, upset and frustrated with what was happening in the classroom*” (Ph3Staff2). Which may have been linked to the community development process, as this staff member infers:

*They seemed like they were going to be a bit of a better group in terms of their... community building and stewardship and things like that ... maybe it was because we were doing things differently. (Ph3Staff1)*

In this section, I have provided some insights into the group of students that entered the university in September 2007. While staff perceived some negative attributes to this group as compared to the previous years, it also appeared that there were some significant positive shifts in how they managed conflict, built community and demonstrated social cohesion. In the next section, I explore the participants' perceptions of learning community: what it is, how it is developed, as well as the advantages and disadvantages perceived when using this model.

### *Category 2 Learning Communities*

The main focus of the interviews held with participants was on their perceptions and observations about how the Bridge was helpful in building learning communities. In order to contextualize this, I asked the participants to define what a learning community meant to them, how it was developed, and what the perceived advantages and disadvantages were. My rationale for using this line of questioning in Phase III was that this student intake had its own lived experiences which could have resulted in a different perception of the learning community. So, in order to ensure we were all using the same language, I felt it necessary to examine what the learning community meant to the 2007/08 BCom students. In this section, I provide an overview of their responses, discussing how their perceptions aligned with the literature in that area.

#### *Theme i: Learning Community Defined*

In order to see how the participants' perception of the learning community aligned with literature, I asked students to use their own words to define what it meant to them. In addition, staff and faculty were asked to go through the same exercise;

logically, if they had a clear grasp of what a learning community was, they would be able to discuss whether or not one was developed for the on-campus students.

The participants identified many features of a learning community, from support to personal growth, and from safety to responsibility. Their comments aligned well with literature in the area and all participants appeared to have a strong grasp of the learning community model used at the university. For example, the following individual spoke of the inclusive nature of the learning community, *“in general, it would be just a simple group of people you’re at school with. But in the broader sense, it would be the teachers, the faculty, everyone that has some involvement”* (Ph3Stu4). This mirrors Barth’s (1990) view when he discussed a community of students in terms of a place where students and adults are actively engaged as learners, encouraging each other (9). Although Barth was discussing a school environment, rather than a place of higher education, his words are nonetheless appropriate. A staff member also identified engagement and encouragement as integral components of a learning community when she stated that members had a *“commitment to learning and pushing forward and challenging one another”* (Ph3Staff4).

The element of inclusivity was also noted by an international student, who added a different perspective. She stated that, *“a learning community is we study together ... we all come from different countries. For example, in my team, we’re all from different countries, so we could learn different cultures and different opinions and different backgrounds about each other”* (Ph3Stu3f). However, as Mowbray (2007) noted, despite the positive outcomes of working in a culturally diverse educational environment “cultural differences can also compound the problem of unclear rules” (105). The following international student countered this argument by

noting the importance of not only working together, but also knowing and caring about each other. She compared the experience at the university with other universities she had attended that did not use the learning community model:

*[This university is] definitely it's a better place to be, because you think that you are part of a group, not a student number in a classroom and nobody knows you. And at [this university], everybody knows me and they care. The learning community – I think one of the effects is that you think that everybody cares about you, but in the other situation, in the universities and colleges, you are just the students that show up in the class, that nobody knows, nobody cares. (Ph3Stu16i)*

By incorporating a caring attitude and adopting respect, students appeared to overcome some of the problems of working in a diverse community. A domestic student concurred, describing her experiences at other institutions, saying that:

*[The other universities] want you to ask questions. But there is no sense of the student and the prof as a group. It's like you're the student, you're the master and it's this difference and there are stupid questions and you sit in rows and it kinda outlines their authority and you're to submit. Even the layout. And then you come to [this university] ... I think it's taken us as students a long time to get used to that because we're going 'oh yeah, you're right, there is no dumb questions', but it also means we have to be patient. Because when something sounds stupid ... it might be dumb but it's not stupid, we still have to be patient and encouraging. (Ph3Stu14)*

Another student agreed that the learning community model created a superior learning environment for him, noting:

*It's a positive atmosphere where everyone has the opportunity to say what they want to say and ... there's no right or wrong answer. I mean you're not going to get shunned or laughed at because you ... want to say your point of view and ... it's just a positive atmosphere for everyone to come together and gain knowledge and help people out. (Ph3Stu1)*

One of the more practical applications to the learning community model was identified as the support provided by other members:

*They support each other. Sometimes for me, I'm not good at computer stuff, the PowerPoints. Some of my team members, they say 'hey, we will trust you if you have any questions or if you need some help, just let me know'. So I feel supported. (Ph3Stu3f)*

A staff member also noted support as one of the key features of a learning community, but she added that *“it’s a learning environment that supports positive learning and that the learners support each other and are interacting and fully engaged with one another”* (Ph3Staff2). These comments mirror McConnell’s (2006) description of learning in communities, “where students share their understanding of what is to be learned, cooperate with each other, provide support and engage in relevant and meaningful processes” (7).

In addition to the support that is offered in a learning community, the following student noted that she saw the community as *“a safe haven almost. You have support. You have resources. You’re sort of all in it together and you work with everybody.... it’s a less isolated learning process”* (Ph3Stu6). Although the student was referring to an on-campus community, it aligns with Palloff and Pratt’s (2001) reflections that “students in the online learning environment should not feel alone and isolated but instead that they are part of a learning community that is working together to achieve learning outcomes and generate knowledge” (115). In the safe haven the student referred to, a staff member observed that *“[the students] weren’t afraid to give feedback to each other in front of us”* (Ph3Staff3). And in addition to giving feedback, students could feel at ease asking questions. As the following student commented:

*To me, it’s a place where you can ask questions. It’s a place where you can express your opinion, your experience, who you are, and not be judged for where you’re coming from, the questions you ask, or your experience. A place where other people who are around you are encouraging you even if you have the wrong answer. Because from my experience, if they tell you, ‘you have the wrong answer’, then you don’t want to answer the second time. So, yeah, but from the people around you, from the staff, from faculty professors, the learning community is where no question is a dumb question.* (Ph3Stu14)

In this community, where people can express their opinions without fear, trust can flourish, as the following student observed:

*We count on each other and we trust each other... and I see learning as just that, as learning. So when I hear learning community, I hear a group or organization of people that are actively learning something ... their goal is the same... they're trying to attain some knowledge. They're trying to develop themselves. They're learning not just from textbooks, from each other. A community is about respecting each other and so we're learning as much from what we read, as much from what we hear and talk and share. (Ph3Stu13)*

This illustrates Palloff and Pratt's (2001) argument that collaborative learning is one of the building blocks of a successful learning community (33). Looking at the learning community from a different perspective, the following staff member thought that accountability was an integral component of the learning community:

*Accountability... to that community to facilitate the learning within it ... I mean, we want the feedback but we also want to [provide] feedback to you, what you've said and tell you what we can do or not, that's part of that learning community. (Ph3Staff1)*

A student agreed accountability was a key component of an effective learning community, noting that “*accountability... requires you to work harder, to be prepared*” (Ph3Stu10).

Finally, the following participant discussed one of the highlights of being part of a learning community. While seemingly simple, she believed it was nonetheless important:

*Just being around a group of people that are laughing and enjoying one another's company ... in many cases, people that were willing to fight for one another and stand up for one and just protection of each other's rights and promotion of the whole as opposed to ... leaving people behind, so I certainly saw that. Anything from parking ticket arguments to ... something that maybe was going on with a team assignment or an exam. (Ph3Staff4)*

While laughter and enjoyment on their own do not necessarily mean a community exists, they are nonetheless desirable outcomes of the community. And, as Anderson (2004) noted, “community members have a greater sense of well-being and happiness” (184).

So, as verified by these comments, the participants felt that the learning community had much to offer. They defined it as somewhere a positive, supportive atmosphere could flourish, where people shared their learning, embraced differences, and took responsibility. It was a safe place, where trust developed and people knew and cared about each other. After explaining what the learning community meant to the participants, I will now examine how participants felt such a community could be developed.

*Theme ii: Learning Community Development*

When discussing the development of a learning community, the following staff member thought that *“it was a fairly organic process”* (Ph3Staff1). However, as another staff member pointed out, this organic process was not possible without staff *“laying out that framework and then making sure that there’s really strong buy-in from our instructional team”*. He strongly believed that, *“our job is to create the environment where [the students] can make meaning”* (Ph3Staff2). But, the emphasis was not only on staff and instructors, it was also important to have *“learners stepping up and taking responsibility for the environment that they ... work in”* and it was necessary to *“have learner advocates that also are working to that end”* (Ph3Staff2).

In addition to a classroom environment created with staff, faculty and students working together, one staff member observed that the interaction outside the classroom helped in the creation of a learning community, *“I think the social aspects are the important aspects that ... really bring them together”* (Ph3Staff3). This comment mirrors Pittinsky’s argument that, *“beyond the four hours of instruction each week per course, it is critical that the environment across the campus sparks interactions that foster a sense of reciprocity and trust”* (Pittinsky, 2003, 218). On the same topic, another staff member linked social networking to trust, *“the obvious*

*social network ... you know that there are... friendships established. There's friendships established, there's trust established"* (Ph3Staff4).

Linked to the establishment of trust is the willingness to speak openly. As the following staff member commented:

*Success in a collaborative community requires people to be willing to speak the truth. It is to state their judgment ...because if people are locked up in their judgment and don't speak it, and it doesn't have an air, then it stays here and it becomes an interference in the ability to create that community.*  
(Ph3Staff2)

This same participant went on to say that:

*If I was to pick an area that I see most lacking in every team that I deal with and in cohorts it is people's inability to surface important issues and to work through them. And it's that surfacing, it's that bringing it forward so it can be addressed. People shy away from it because it may tip the social scales, it may prove unruly, they may be judged ... whatever their reasons. And so I think that if we want to create better communities, we have to help give people the skills that foster those communities.* (Ph3Staff2)

So, not only was it perceived important for students to have the desire to work in a community dedicated to advancing their learning, in a collaborative, supportive environment, but they also had to be given the tools to develop the community. And, while some students in the BCom Program came equipped to work in just such a community, not all the students did. As this staff member stated, "*it's a wonderful learning concept, but you've got people who come in and say, 'yeah, that's great, but I just ... want those initials at the end of my name'"* (Ph3Staff4).

However, reflecting on the processes the university had put into place to aid in the development of the learning community, the following staff member noted, "*I really liked their mission statement at the beginning of the year. That felt like there was something that we did right"* (Ph3Staff1). Continuing on from that feeling of doing something right, in the next section, I will explore why a learning community was thought to be an appropriate approach for the BCom students by examining some

of the advantages to the learning community model through the eyes of the participants.

*Theme iii: Learning Community Advantages*

As discussed in chapter 2, there are many documented advantages to the learning community model; amongst these advantages are deeper learning (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, Kilpatrick et al., 2003a), enhanced sense of happiness (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000), and greater retention rates (Kellogg, 1999). The participants in this study also contributed to this discussion, when commenting on the advantages of the learning community from their perspective. For example, *“it’s usually a good support network and... just the future networks that you are creating from meeting these people that are in the same program as you”* (Ph3Stu8). While not an attribute discussed at length in literature, the newly found network, from this student’s perspective, had the potential for far reaching implications, the following student agreed:

*I definitely think it’s the community that’s created here in this 12 months is priceless ... and that’s what this is about, it’s networking, and building trust. And so the connections that you make here, and the experience you get from that learner community, is what gives [the university] an absolute advantage over any university.* (Ph3Stu1)

An additional benefit noted by a staff member was that people *“feel comfortable sharing their experiences or just even sharing what they don’t know and asking questions. I also think ... there’s quite a bit of personal growth that can happen out of it”* (Ph3Staff3). This quote complements the comment by Roberts and Pruitt (2003) that, *“not only are individual and collective growth cherished in a learning community, but the processes for attaining that growth are also valued”*(7).

Although some students found the learning community model challenging compared to a less collaborative model, benefits were revealed when they looked to the future:

*Doing it on your own is the easier way, but I think the learning community definitely benefits you more and more ... you never know when these people are going to come back into your life ... again and affect you. (Ph3Stu8)*

Also, thinking of the potential future benefits realized by being involved in a learning community, the following participant saw some useful applications in the workplace and society, which supports Lenning and Ebbers (1999) observation that there are potential positive societal implications stemming from an effective learning community (120).

*It's actually ... an example of life. Even wherever you are, for example, if you are in a workplace or your organization you will be a part of the community and if you know the basics or fundamental rules of being in a community, for example, like accepting the policies ... or the procedures or valuing their mission statements you're ready to, ... no matter what type of organization it is, you're more basically receptive to working in the organization and in the community. (Ph3Stu12)*

Another student discussed the interactive attributes of the learning community, where students actively engage in discussions and are together in all their classes in each quarter:

*I like discussion. Yeah, I like the discussions in some classes ... well, I really like my fellow classmates and the fact that we're the same group of students in all four classes. Because it gives ... it gives us all a chance to get to know each other a little better. (Ph3Stu10)*

Similar to comments made by Kellogg (1999) about students experiencing a greater sense of involvement, the following student talked about enhanced learning and trust development:

*I think you learn. I think you learn a lot more. I think that your learning experience becomes personalized. Rather than a high school experience where you had a group of people that were just some friends, here I'll have people that I will have built relationships with. I will have developed trust with so that in five years, if I have some ventureship program, I could phone them and*

*they'd know exactly who I am and remember what experience we shared ... I love to learn about people and I love to talk to people and I find great value in that, and if I couldn't do that in the community, then what's the point? (Ph3Stu13)*

Another student discussed some of the issues around the diverse nature of the cohort. She observed that even though there were many positives to the community approach, it was important to be mindful of the potential for the diverse backgrounds to be destructive. Which again, mirrors Mowbray's (2007) position discussed in the *Learning community defined* section earlier in this chapter:

*I think that there are huge positive advantages to it because... if the community is all together and on board with the concept and actually practising it, then I think that it's a great advantage for people to become really comfortable with a lot of mentors. You can have people from all different backgrounds, experiences, educational history, and they all come together and ... all their opinions and evaluations are different because of... their background factors. And if the community is properly formed, then that's great. If it's not, then all those background factors tear you apart. (Ph3Stu14)*

Finally, to close this section, we will look at the perspective of a staff member who noticed a marked difference in one student from the beginning of the year to the end:

*It's interesting because in one case I saw a guy move from literally sitting there with his arms folded and being afraid to speak, by the end of the year being the first one to speak up. (Ph3Staff3)*

In conclusion, the participants identified some powerful, long-lasting positive implications to the learning community model. However, they also noted that there were a number of negative implications, which I will discuss in the following section.

#### *Theme iv: Learning Communities Disadvantages*

Given the main focus of literature is on positive attributes of learning communities, I found it interesting that participants found many examples of the disadvantages of being a learning community member. Some of the disadvantages were very personal to the individual; for example, getting along with other people and

balancing studies with life outside the community. Other disadvantages could be more aptly described as process issues, such as how discussions were facilitated in the classroom and feelings that the experience was too structured.

For example, the following student, when expressing the desire to spend less time working with others and more time working alone, noted that the learning community model “*is sort of a forced way to learn almost ... we’re all adults, we’re all here to get our degree, we’re at university, just let me do it. Let me work relatively alone*” (Ph3Stu6). This appears contrary to Rovai’s (2002) observations that students who do not feel they are involved in a classroom community may experience “feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, isolation, and low motivation to learn, which in turn can lead to low achievement and dropouts” (4-5). It would therefore appear important for students to strike a balance between cooperative learning and individual learning.

Related to the topic of cooperation is the concept of working with others. As Savin-Baden (2000) observed, working with others, is one of the “key skills [that] are being offered to undergraduates in order to both enhance their degrees and to produce graduates with well-developed personal and interpersonal skills” (15). It would appear that this skill is also critical to students if they wish to work successfully in a learning community, as the following participant noted:

*If you don’t get along with people then ... that could be a disadvantage ... possibly ’cause you’re in the cohort with everyone through the whole term and you have the same group. So if you don’t get along with people, you don’t like your group, it’s not going to work for you. (Ph3Stu7)*

However, the next participant found that even when students were working together, progress could move slowly if discussions were not handled appropriately in the classroom:

*Sometimes it just slows it down because...so many people are talking and trying to get their opinion out and then things get repeated and I think the instructor could moderate that better but they don't want to be rude ... it's hard 'cause you have to let people have an equal say. But it just gets too much opinionated ... and opinions are good when they're backed with logical reasoning for why we're talking about it... but then it just gets to be opinions...with no weight behind them. And sometimes I'm just like, 'this is too slow, I want to learn it and go, learn it and go'. (Ph3Stu5)*

On a similar topic, another student observed that even though some students do not have anything relevant to say, they still enter into classroom discussions:

*I guess there is some people, there is a quality in their speaking. Because they know this stuff, so it's appreciated if they talk a lot, I appreciate that. But some people they talk a lot, but they don't say anything, they just talk. (Ph3Stu16i)*

Related to the previous students' comments, the following participant found that conflicting individual perspectives left him feeling it was necessary to judge others:

*Everybody has their own different perceptions. Somebody might perceive that person to be this, or somebody might perceive this person to do this. That's why you have to look at facts ...another thing that makes it difficult is that it's hard to sit in judgement on another person, it's hard to be mad ... And yet it's hard to be sitting in judgement of other people and be like, 'OK, you're, you're terrible, you're a bad person and I don't want to learn with you'. That is something that for me, it doesn't make me feel good when I do that kind of stuff... if I'm like, 'man, you're, you're so much worse than everybody else, so I don't want to learn with you.' (Ph3Stu11)*

Palloff and Pratt (Palloff and Pratt, 2001) discuss conflict in positive terms, noting that “it is not a feature that should be feared but instead welcomed” (141). While this is a positive way of looking at conflict, for students in the classroom that may not have the tools to deal with conflict, it can be frustrating. As the student went on to talk about the classroom discussions, he concluded that in times of conflict, silence was sometimes the better option:

*So many people shouting out different opinions, one guy's, 'this is the way', another guy's, 'this is the way'. I'm like, 'one of you guys is wrong or both of you guys are right, but you guys aren't just seeing each other's opinion'. So we'll just like, don't say nothing, 'cause ... there are so many different things.*

*How's anybody supposed to learn ... If there's no talking done, great, there is learning to be done when nobody talks at a table. (Ph3Stu11)*

And, from a faculty perspective sometimes the discussions are one of the most difficult components of facilitating a class, “*the challenge ... is getting individuals to throw something out on the table*” (Ph3Staff3). If a key element of the learning community is a collaborative environment (Palloff and Pratt, 2005, McConnell, 2006, Roberts and Pruitt, 2003), it is important to engage students in a dialogue. If that becomes difficult, some key learning opportunities are lost.

Handling those difficult classroom discussions required an experienced, respectful facilitator. Unfortunately, there were times when the approach taken by the instructor makes a student feel uncomfortable, as with the following example:

*If it's not done well and the trust is lost, then the program is wasted. And when it's done in this style where everybody here is working in the community, if it's not managed well ... I had an instructor that I had to email because... I don't trust him with his joking. He's used me... as punch lines. To lose that trust has a negative impact on the student. I'm no longer interested in participating. I'm no longer interested in sharing. I've been exposed. I was vulnerable and he took advantage of that. So it can have [a] ...hugely detrimental impact on the success of the program and the success of the learner and the cohesion within the community. (Ph3Stu13)*

Learning communities are discussed in literature as having a powerful influence on social cohesion (Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, 2). When a student member of the community is threatened, as in the situation outlined above, one potential implication might be the students in the community uniting against the instructor or the institution, as described by the following student:

*Disadvantages would be the fickle part. And once you create that unity of people, if somebody or a number of people in that community are offended by something or are mistreated or a negative occurrence happens, the entire community is affected because just the expulsion of what's happening and ... the students are a lot tighter knit than student and instructor, right? So if something happens to affect the students, the students are going to band together. So it can flip on its head and ... conflict could come out and you get to see a group start to segregate. And in this community, it would be students against the university, more so than students versus students, because you can*

*understand and empathize with the students, being on the same level than you can with the university. [However], if you don't fit within the community ... if you're not comfortable or able to work and perform within the community that's been created ... through the culture and the values that have been set out ... the individual would not... benefit from that at all, because if they don't work that way or... can't learn to conform that way ... it can be detrimental, and they might just have to find a different university to go that way.*  
(Ph3Stu15)

The conclusion the student makes here is interesting – he notes that if a student can not fit in to the community, then a potential option would be to leave and attend a university with a different educational model. He also had this to say about the community “*it can be very fickle and you tread along a knife's edge. And at the same time, it can be very secure if you have a lot of the same values*” (Ph3Stu15). So, the key conclusion for this student was that if an individual fit into the community, it was secure and beneficial, but if they did not, perhaps the best option was to leave.

Interestingly, one of the attributes of communities discussed in literature (Wenger, 2003, 78-79), that of belonging, was found by the following international participant to be a negative factor:

*Probably one of the negative things about the learning community is the sense of belonging. For example, you came and some peoples are, it's kind of difficult for them to find friends and when you are in the learning community, people tend to have their little groups and smaller communities for themselves and when you think that you are alone between them in a learning community; it's kind of tougher for you. It's easier to handle when you are not in a learning community ... it's the way that it used to be when you go to a school, for example, an elementary school or whatever. Peoples tend to get together and create a bunch of different, smaller friendship groups and study groups and that sort of thing. So the learning community, if somebody comes to that community and feels they not belong to any of those groups, so, I don't know, loneliness shows more to those people. They are lonelier than in the other communities that are nothing ... but here, because it's a learning community, working and that kind of thing, then you think that you don't belong to that ... if people are older than you or the majority are younger than you, and you think that you don't belong to them because of their point of view, the way that they think, they see the world, I don't know. And the other thing, it's being an international student, people tends to be friendly that speaks the same language, they're from the same college, they have the same hobbies ... One of the [disadvantages of the learning community is] because of the cultural differences. Maybe if I was a Canadian, a person born in Canada, raised in*

*this culture, now I have different way of thinking ... I don't want to go to their social gathering. When you don't go to their social gathering, you tend to be left alone. (Ph3Stu16i)*

She also talked about language issues, and the impact they had on the individuals in the community:

*You know what, because the language issues brings, like the miscommunication because they can't fully express their selves. So because they can't or because people thinks they, there is the expression that, "if I speak with an accent, it doesn't mean that I think with an accent too". So, they think that because we can't speak well, we can't think well too. Or maybe because they can't fully express themselves, they can't just, I don't know, they can't express it. So the people can't really understand it, and they think they didn't really make a point. (Ph3Stu16i)*

Another international student talked about feeling disconnected because of her background. She also connected the social aspects of the learning community to that feeling of disconnection:

*This community is not really well connected. I just, I mean from my perspective as an international student. Different culture backgrounds, different languages and different educational backgrounds ... it's kind of a disconnect... There are other considerations, because, I mean as a person, I mean as a group of people, you cannot just communicate within the courses, within the teams, you have other social stuff ... it's not easy for me to be socialize with people, so when, while we are working as a team, sometimes my team members will talk about social stuffs that they have done, but I wasn't in it. So, I totally understand what they're talking about, but just I'm not in it. So that just disconnects me from the rest of the people. (Ph3Stu17i)*

She went on to say that in China, she had been exposed to a different learning model, which she enjoyed. Coming to Canada and the university had meant she had to change approach so she could be successful:

*To some extent the learning community doesn't really fit my personality. It doesn't really fit my life style, because when I was in China, I got so used to learning everything by myself. Now, and I just used to like to figure out things by myself, I enjoyed that. But here I can, it's, it's really hard for you just to make everything on own. So, I just have to change myself to fit into this learning community and there are lots of things like that I have to change. (Ph3Stu17i)*

A staff member also commented on this topic, stating that in the learning community she observed there were, "Cultural differences, language barriers ... and

*some communication issues*” (Ph3Staff4). Another staff member noted that “*More often than not, there’s a couple of individuals that act in ways that are aberrant from the norm and people don’t know quite how to handle them and so they become marginalized*” (Ph3Staff2). While McConnell (2000) noted that, “in a learning community, differences are seen as a cause for celebration, rather than a problem. The learning community allows individuals to address issues of minority interest... ensuring that minority interest and people are not marginalized” (118), in the community that was created with the BCom students, marginalization did appear to be a problem. I would argue that the community created was still a learning community, however not all the issues were recognized effectively and there was room for improvement in how students were prepared for working in a learning community. Also, the types of observations made by staff speak to the need for experienced faculty and/or providing training with regard to working effectively when using a learning community model.

The next student also talked about the challenges of working in a community with people from different backgrounds. Palloff and Pratt (2005) discussed the importance of planning when working in that type of situation, “group composition has to be undertaken with great care by attempting to match personal, professional, cultural and academic backgrounds” (39). However, in a classroom comprised of people from many different backgrounds, including a variety of ages, ethnic and geographic origins, people have to exercise tolerance, which may be a challenge for some. As this student commented, “*there are good things and bad things about having different backgrounds from different people. Sometimes your patience level does not actually cooperate with you*” (Ph3Stu12).

On a different topic, of major concern to the following student was the balancing of work, studies and personal life. She felt that the learning community demanded a high level of attention to the tasks at hand. Even though this was sometimes in conflict with other critical components of the individual's life:

*I think one of the disadvantages is when you come to class and you have more than just that class going on. In the rest of your life, you have four other classes, maybe a job, family, work, whatever. When you come to that class, it's like that's the only thing in the world that exists. And so if ... you've done all your homework for all of your classes, except for this one assignment for that one class, if anybody finds out, you're hooped and you feel so stupid even though you're trying to balance absolutely everything in life. Nothing else matters but that class and how badly that assignment wasn't done. It just doesn't ... seem realistic to the rest of the world. (Ph3Stu14)*

And finally, even though cohesiveness is cited as a factor supporting the development of a learning community (Swan, 2002, 15), as this staff member noted, *"I've seen people stepping up for the cohesiveness of the group and for creating positive relationships and ... getting along but that doesn't always mean people are learning"* (Ph3Staff2). So, cohesiveness, while important to a learning community, is not an indicator that learning is occurring.

In this section, then, I have explored some of the disadvantages of the learning community model as perceived by the Phase III participants. While this does provide some context to the experiences of the students, staff and faculty in the program, it does not link the learning community to the Bridge activity. In the following section I will proceed to discuss the final category by exploring different factors related to the Bridge course.

### *Category 3 The Bridge*

In this section, I examine who took part in the Bridge, whether or not the Bridge could be linked to the development of trust and the building of a learning community, and I explore participants' comments about Bridge features that could be

added. I will start this section with a comment from a student who made an observation about the Bridge participants:

*I didn't find anyone that actually was ... it was mainly ... just Caucasian people. I didn't see many people from different countries and stuff, but that would have been cool as well. Very cool. Yeah, there was a lot of people from Vancouver and a lot of people from the Island and there was some people from Ontario that were coming over here as well. (Ph3Stu1)*

As with the original Bridge, the second version of the Bridge was not mandatory. While students were sent a link to the Bridge and encouraged to explore it, they could choose to take part, or not to take part, depending on their preference. As the student above noted, not everyone took part, rather a certain demographic seemed to be present. When asked why they had chosen to explore the Bridge, or alternatively, why they had not gone to the online Bridge, students offered a variety of answers.

For example, one student stated that making connections were important to him as he was not from the local area:

*I was just really excited to come to school and ... I came here not knowing anyone and it was a new place. I didn't have any family here. So that was my reasoning why, 'cause... I was excited to come here and also to meet people and make new friends ... so I was I guess maybe it helped that I wasn't from [the city]. I was coming from Vancouver. And so I wanted to create connections with people. (Ph3Stu1)*

While the first student noted that he was excited and wanted to meet new people, the next student was looking for a feeling of security by obtaining some key pieces of information:

*I guess I wanted to feel some sense of security in going to school and knowing what I was going to be doing in the first week and where I was supposed to be and just to decrease stress in starting at a new school. Really just to figure out what was going to happen. (Ph3Stu4)*

Wegerif (1998) stated, “without a feeling of community people are on their own, likely to be anxious” (48). Even though the previous student did not expressly

state the goal of using the Bridge as one of seeing the feeling of community, the desire to feel a sense of security and decrease stress are positive effects of joining a learning community. The next student had a similar aim, she wanted to obtain as much information as she could, believing it would make her more comfortable:

*I think it was just because I was coming from so far away. I wanted to know everything I could about coming here, just so that I was comfortable coming in here and knowing where I was needing to go, what was needing to be done and the expectations and just familiarizing myself with the whole process. And I had a lot of questions at home because people don't know about this school and so I would say well I'm going to [the university] and they'd say 'where is that? What is it? It's only a year, why?' So ... I was able to explain a little bit more based on this 'cause it gave me a bit of an overview about what we were going to do there. (Ph3Stu2)*

While some students went to the Bridge in the hope that it would offer them some form of reassurance, the following student had a more practical reason. He wanted to become familiar with the technology used by the university:

*Learning how to use the website... I remember seeing the website. And having been to two institutions before, I know how valuable they are and how much information you get from teachers and stuff so I wanted to make sure I understood what was going on. And I definitely saw that ... doing the Bridge activity was ... valuable in the first week. (Ph3Stu4)*

Not all students were feeling stress or anxiety; some were excited and wanted to find out who they would be in class with:

*I was excited to do it... I didn't do it because I thought it was mandatory or whatever. I knew there was no grade to it ... I guess I'm just interested in people and ... I'm kind of nosy ... to see who's coming to class and ... it's just kind of fun. (Ph3Stu6)*

And the next student went to the Bridge with an understanding that if he was to be successful, he would need to contribute to the community. This student appeared to have a solid understanding of his responsibilities in that community, which aligned with McConnell's (2006) observation that, "A key feature of the idea is that responsibility for learning is shared among community members" (19).

*Accountability and responsibility. If I was going to take this program, this was part of the stuff that I had to understand. This was a tool that's used and implemented through the program. I don't think necessarily everyone took that sort of viewpoint. But I've been a manager before and I understand accountability and responsibility, and to ensure my personal success and my ability to contribute to the community, it was critical that I understand the tools that the community uses. (Ph3Stu13)*

However, not all the students did go onto the Bridge. The next student noted that the online environment was not something he enjoyed and, as he did not have a lot of spare time, he chose to wait until he came to campus to get to know people:

*At that time in my life, I didn't have the time to do it. I don't really like conversing with people online. I just don't see a purpose to it if I don't have a face or a personality to go with that. Words on a screen can't convey emotion or tone or anything. I mean you can read descriptions of people and such but ... it's not my cup of tea so I didn't use it at all. Plus it gave me an opportunity; I could work more, without the assignments. (Ph3Stu15)*

Another student who did not fully engage in the Bridge course did not understand the extent of the Bridge features:

*I didn't use [the Bridge], but I know it... I did look at the Bridge part, but I didn't know I could get connected to people on the Bridge. I thought it was just like the schedule for the foundation. So you used it for the practical pieces, like what am I going to be doing and that sort of thing. (Ph3Stu17i)*

It is interesting that, while the students who used the Bridge did not specifically mention the desire to create a community with fellow students, some of the reasons they chose to go onto the Bridge course, i.e. anxiety and responsibility, are linked to learning community benefits that are documented in literature. In the next section, I will explore the participants' views about the relationship between the Bridge and building trust.

#### *Theme i: Trust*

There were comments at two different ends of the spectrum about whether or not the Bridge contributed to trust building. For example, a staff member stated that, "I couldn't build a direct relationship between the Bridge and levels of trust"

(Ph3Staff2). Whereas, a students thought that some of the activities encouraged trust building, “[the Bridge] is a good way ... to meet people and build trust” (Ph3Stu1). First, I will discuss the comments from participants who believed the Bridge was helpful in building trust.

The following staff member commented that he thought “*there’s more trust in there because you’re behind a screen and you’re anonymous to some extent*” (Ph3Staff3). He also thought that interacting with people who were similar would help people build trust, “*they’re seeing people that are like themselves and they’re more trusting of each other*” (Ph3Staff3). Which aligns with an observation made by Jawadi (2006), who noted that one of the conditions necessary for the building of trust was cultural similarity (4). However, the student quoted below did not see the online environment working in a way that supported the transparency necessary to discover those similarities:

*The profiles were good because you could just look at other people’s and kinda gauge like where you’re at ... you think everyone’s like a hero then you kinda realize they’re just like you. But it’s still hard ’cause a lot of people just beef up their profiles and put in big job titles and stuff. But then you get here and you realize, ‘oh, they’re just like me’”. (Ph3Stu5)*

And, another student agreed, he believed that, “*about 80 percent face-to-face on building trust*” (Ph3Stu15).

The next student went further when he stated that, while the Bridge helped build trust in the institution, it did not support the building of trust on an individual level:

*I built trust in where I was going. I built trust towards [the university] because of the seriousness by which they took their program. I didn’t take trust in the rest of the people in the community or in the rest of the people partaking in the Bridge activities because the topics ... it was a little bit of biography about me, and somebody knew somebody from such and such school. Somebody wants to go out drinking. There was a little bit of party clubs forming. I’m a mature adult and have passed many of those stages. So I used the resources and tools beyond the connection to the people. (Ph3Stu13)*

This idea was aligned with the comments by a staff member who also differentiated between the trust in the institution, the group, and the individual, “*there’s the trust within the group and there’s the trust between the university and the group*” (Ph3Staff). This individual went on to say that, “*when people were there, they were there and they were committed and they were ready, they were at the table ... I mean you’re establishing trust right off the bat*” (Ph3Staff4). So from her perspective, if individuals were actively involved, they could start the process of building trust.

Although many of these participants’ spoke of the Bridge’s ability to aid in the development of trust, not all the comments were positive. The following student felt the Bridge did not contribute to trust building. In this case, the impression made by postings on the Bridge left the student thinking her classmates may not be very focused on academic goals:

*I thought they were going to be a little more stand-offish and a little not very interested in school and not very studious ... but they were far more serious and have a lot... more intelligent comments than I thought perhaps they would ... it ended up a lot of people wrote about their social things ... and where they were from and all the things that they’ve done.* (Ph3Stu2)

Another participant spoke of his lack of comfort with posting personal information in the Bridge:

*It was kind of awkward ... I’m not really big on chat room discussion forums and that. When you post something, it’s on there, you know. You put something, you can’t just erase it or... have any control over who you’re speaking to or what. I don’t know who I’m speaking to; I’d rather feel out the social setting in person with people at the school.* (Ph3Stu10)

The following student agreed, noting that he would prefer posting information on Facebook to posting his profile on the Bridge with people he had not yet met:

*Putting my profile in a website ... before I don’t even see them, every person has a different ... kind of a attitude towards putting their information on. I mean I wouldn’t mind putting on Facebook where I at least met those people face-to-face. Here I’ve never seen them. I can’t just really put my information and stuff.* (Ph3Stu12)

Also, the next student appeared to lack trust in the online environment, citing an unwillingness to be vulnerable as the reason that the Bridge did not help him create trust. Tocci (2003) reported that one of the key building blocks for trust is vulnerability (4), so logically an unwillingness to be vulnerable on the part of a student using the Bridge would impede the ability to build trust.

*I give trust to people but I think I'm very aware of that it is online ... you could be sitting and talking to an eight year old...unless you can see them, it's not proof that they are who they are ... and even at that, they could still be acting ... so I'm not really willing to be vulnerable with somebody that I can't even tell if they're male or female ... or five or ten or eight. (Ph3Stu14)*

One of the survey participants noted that it may have been a lack of understanding on the part of students.

*I'm not sure that the learners understand that while there is a natural progression of trust, here we are trying to create a safe environment to speed the process up so that we are prepared going into the program. The program is at a fast pace, I felt that some learners recognized the need to build trust, while others refrained and left it to the 'natural progression'. (Ph3Survey)*

So, a number of participants could see links between trust and the Bridge activities, but not all participants could see those links. The Bridge was effective for some, for others it did not create the necessary conditions for trust building.

Some scholars have discussed the link between trust and the success of learning communities (Gattiker, 2001, McConnell, 2006, Salmon, 2000). In order to see if participants perceived there to be such a connection, I asked if they thought that trusting classmates influenced their ability to contribute to the building of a learning community. While most believed there was a connection, one was more sceptical:

*You don't need trust. It certainly helps, but you can function without it ... it's definitely welcome ... and necessary for a high performance ...but just performing at an average level, I don't think it's 100% necessary. (Ph3Stu15)*

Other participants found numerous benefits to a learning community when trust existed. For example, one participant noted there was an associated reduction in

competitiveness if trust was evident, “*if there’s trust, which creates people working together and relying on people, then you’re less individualistic and instinctively you’re going to ... get to know people more and you’re going to be less competitive*” (Ph3Stu1). Further benefits included feelings of comfort and the ability to fully engage in the community:

*If you don’t trust the people that you are in the community with, you’re not going to feel comfortable expressing all of your ideas and feeling comfortable putting yourself out there. You’re going to close yourself off and maybe not gain the full experience.* (Ph3Stu2)

The following participant agreed, adding that:

*You just need to have that confidence to say something ... without the fear of being shot down, because you’re not going to be right every time, so you have to make mistakes. And then you’ll learn from those mistakes”* (Ph3Stu5).

And another student linked freedom to speak with the ability to be more creative:

*If everyone trusts each other then you’re ... free to say your opinions and ... you just are okay to be yourself ... and ... more creative ideas are made. Because even if you say a stupid idea, it might lead to something else, but you’re still trusting that people ... are there to support you instead of judging you.* (Ph3Stu8)

And this freedom to speak up was also perceived as important to a student who did not speak English as her first language:

*[If] I don’t trust that person ... I wouldn’t want to speak in front of this person because I might be thinking that person is laughing at me. He’s laughing at my accent, he’s laughing at my opinions. If I trust this person, I know he’s nice and that he’s going to be supportive and I’ll be no fear to speak what’s on my mind.* (Ph3Stu17i)

So, to conclude this section on trust, it appeared that many of the participants interviewed did believe there was a connection between the Bridge and the students’ ability to build trust with other students. However, others thought the online Bridge environment did not create the conditions necessary for building trust, in part because the students may not have understood the purpose of the Bridge. In addition, most

participants found that trust had a significant role to play in the learning community, citing reduced competitiveness, increased confidence, and the ability to voice their opinion in class as positive manifestations of the trusting environment. In the next section, I will build on these comments and explore the participants' views on the relevance of the Bridge to the building of a learning community.

*Theme ii: The Learning Community*

In the interviews, students were asked to talk about activities on the Bridge that may have helped or hindered their ability to build a learning community, while staff and faculty were asked if they thought the Bridge had an impact on the development of the community. In this section of chapter 6, I will discuss the participants' responses, opening with a comment from a staff member who talked about why he felt the Bridge was needed. In his view, we were "*preparing people to begin to think about the kind of things that we're going to ask them to engage in when they get face-to-face*" (Ph3Staff2). So, for this participant, the Bridge was a starting point, a place students could go that would prepare them for the on-campus experience.

There were a variety of responses given to the questions asked about the connection between the Bridge and the building of a learning community. I will first discuss some of the comments that were provided by participants who felt that the Bridge did support the building of a learning community. For example, the following student found the photographs that the Bridge participants posted of themselves helped him relate to his classmates:

*If I just looked at the pictures and everyone was 40 years old with a suit on, you know, I'd have been scared. But I saw a lot of people with a couple of pictures, just with their friends and stuff so it totally relaxed you. You could relate to them.* (Ph3Stu5)

A student who completed the survey commented that the Bridge made him “*feel a lot more excited about the people that I was about to meet. [It was] something new to me that you could talk to some people and be engaged before even starting*” (Ph3Survey). This link between engagement and the learning community has also been emphasized in recent literature (Palloff and Pratt, 1999, Kilpatrick et al., 2003b, Palloff and Pratt, 2001). Another student liked being able to establish a connection with the community prior to arriving on-campus, “*the Bridge to BCom was very helpful. It kind of established a connection between me and the learning community even before I'm there*” (Ph3Survey). The importance of social connection was discussed by Nipper (1989) in his work on distance learning. While the students in this study ultimately worked together in the on-campus classroom, Nipper’s comment that, “one learns best by and with others” (68) is particularly relevant in the context of the learning community model used by the university.

The following student agreed that the Bridge was useful, stating that certain activities helped start the process of community building, “*I looked at other people’s [Bios] and then the discussion board was also kinda interesting ... I guess it creates a community. It helps to create a community to start off with*” (Ph3Stu1). Another student talked about the written activity and how it helped her as she started thinking about the type of environment she would be studying in:

*I would say that the third activity got me thinking about what a learning community is, because I really hadn’t thought of that. In the institutions I’ve been to before [they] were more traditional and this one is completely not. So and I hadn’t really put a lot of thought into that prior to, so that started me to think about it but I wouldn’t say it had a huge impact until I got here.*  
(Ph3Stu2)

The next student also agreed that the Bridge did not have a great impact, but it did make things easier when he started on-campus:

*I think it was good, but it's still limited, it's just a small step, but I don't know. I thought the whole thing was helpful just like a big sort of overall comment there. But... yeah, it was helpful just to get ... like do things before you get here ... if I was to have shown up first day and it's like, 'here we go', not only would you be less comfortable, you're just a huge step behind. You can just hit the ground running here... and expectations, they need to be laid out ... and it just makes it that much easier. (Ph3Stu5)*

Similarly, the following student thought that they were small steps, but believed that working things out in the written activity provided him with some clarity:

*Just every time they refer to learning community, it's just another notch in your head, right? Like 'okay, that's what we're doing here, that's what we're doing here'. Then this made me work it out and put it out on paper. Which is putting your thoughts on paper and that just really clarifies things. So I thought it was good. (Ph3Stu5)*

The next student was surprised by the reality of the learning community, but found that the Bridge helped him prepare for things to come:

*Every other school's got the same pitch, like 'yeah, we're unique' ... but this place really is unique once you get here and you find that out. And I honestly didn't expect it. I started to figure it out during the Bridge and I was like, 'okay, things are a little different here; let's see how they're doing it.' (Ph3Stu5)*

One student commented that the Bridge made her feel important as she worked on building the foundations of a learning community with fellow students:

*I wouldn't have felt as important ... I guess it made it feel like it was more real. Before even getting here on the first day ... you've already started building that foundation of a community ... and of trust. I don't know, it just feels more like sorted out somehow. (Ph3Stu6)*

While the students quoted above found the Bridge useful to them as they started building a learning community, others did not find it helpful. In the following discussion, I will highlight some of the observations from students who found the Bridge either challenging, obstructive, or simply not helpful in building a learning community. To begin this discussion, I will start with a student who, while finding the Bridge contained an acceptable communication tool, thought the course was not a

reliable way to build relationships, “*although it is nice to communicate with classmates, people’s personalities through chat and posts are easily misunderstood and are somewhat unreliable when forming opinions or building relationships*” (Ph3Survey). Similarly, the next student thought it was limited, “*I figured I’d meet them anyways. I thought, you know, I’d see a picture, but how much can I get from a name? Like to decide what ethnicity they’re from, but other than that I had no depth to who they were*” (Ph3Stu4).

Another student found the Bridge stressful and appeared to be counterproductive as a method of building a learning community. She stated that it made her feel like an outsider:

*When something unexpected like the Bridge came up, it totally threw me for a loop and ... I was stressed about getting these things done and getting through all the different units ... and then another part where people would post discussion topics ... or if people saw that they knew someone and there was like conversation back and forth, that also made me feel like all these people already know each other and so I’m going to be the outsider ... I would look at other people’s and I’d see their response. There’s four posts to them and then, yeah, looking at mine and I’d think, ‘hmm’. It doesn’t make you feel good. But I mean in the grand scheme of things, it doesn’t really ... I think it just added to the whole anxiousness. (Ph3Stu8)*

She went on to say that she preferred to meet people face-to-face, as she felt that people were not genuine when making posts in a computer-based environment:

*’Cause it feels like you’re fighting for a job interview when you’re ... ‘well, I did this and I did this’. Makes you almost like, ‘oh, I’m not good enough for here’ ... because I was thinking when people are writing all this stuff about them, they’re only ever going to say the good things ... some people might just say what they think other people want to hear ... I would much rather meet them face-to-face and know the real them than just what they said on computer. (Ph3Stu8)*

The following student agreed. She thought that people want to appear intelligent, with the result that she felt intimidated:

*I think I looked at people’s posts and I went, ‘oh my gosh, what did I sign myself up for?’ A combination of things. Often times when people post things and they haven’t met people, they want to sound really good and intelligent,*

*and if you're me, coming from a work extreme background, I went, 'oh my gosh ... what kind of school ... am I going to? Are these people all brilliant and I'm like going to sound stupid?' It really intimidated me ... I went, 'I don't think I want to go to this school' because I just went, 'there's a lot of smart people in here and I don't think I can do that'. It was really intimidating and it made me want to withdraw and evaluate what was going on, instead of jump in and be involved. I just wanted to sit back and, you know the thing, when people talk too much you figure out how much crap's really in them? Yeah, that's what I was doing. It was that bad that I went, 'so what is this really? Who are these people that I'm working with?' (Ph3Stu14)*

So, while some students found the Bridge useful, others were intimidated, or found other challenges such as lack of depth in the discussion group postings.

However, some students did find that the Bridge had a positive impact on their first day on campus. One student discussed how she thought the first day was helpful because:

*I knew people. And I wouldn't have known them if I didn't go on the Bridge. Yeah. I would have been really scared to be honest, and I would have got to know people once I sat down, obviously. But just that first initial go to school, I would have been a little bit nervous. (Ph3Stu7)*

Another student had a conflicting view, she noted that:

*For me, it's almost the unknown is better because if I'm reading where people are from, where they worked and that kind of thing, I get intimidated ... if ... they've had a lot of work experience or they've done all this different schooling, I think, 'oh my gosh'. It overwhelmed me and I thought maybe I'm not... I shouldn't be in this program. So for me personally, the unknown is better... It would have been not as much stress beforehand. For me I think it would have been better without the Bridge. There was too much anxiety for me beforehand and I think ...for me, knowing that everyone's in the same boat, no one really knows each then it's like you're just thrown into it and you can go from there. (Ph3Stu8)*

The next student felt the same way; she noted the negative effects the Bridge had on her first day, also stating that it lasted into the first few days on-campus:

*I think that [the Bridge] probably negatively affected me... because I was so intimidated about the... people and I kind of was more reserved when I showed up on that first day. [The discussion group postings] made me hesitate if people were being real and sincere and if they weren't tempted to sound smarter than they actually were. So when I showed up, I just kinda kept my mouth shut and just listened to people. So I think the first day ...probably the first week or two actually, I was just kind of listening to people and seeing,*

*kind of, if they speak up a lot, if they always have opinion about everything. Just watching how I starting thinking about the Bridge because I always feel intimidated by them... I don't know if you could ever post anything online and have anybody else read it and have an always guaranteed positive experience 'cause it's not face-to-face. (Ph3Stu14)*

An international student commented on the first day, noting that the Bridge did not help her get to know other students. In fact by not engaging in the Bridge discussions, she felt that she had “*missed out on something. I found out that peoples get together and go for a coffee or something. And I thought, 'Oh, I missed a lot'. But in the foundations, I came and found out that, 'no'”* (Ph3Stu16i). Another international student also noted how, on the first day, she stayed with other Chinese students as they spoke the same language, “*when I first came here it was kind of, stick to those [Chinese students] as a group, because actually, we speak the same language, it was easy for us to just hang out together”* (Ph3Stu17i).

In conclusion, the Bridge was useful for some students as they started to think about the upcoming educational experience. For those who went online and engaged in the activities, some felt it improved the experience and allowed them to begin the process of building a learning community. However, for other students, the Bridge was counterproductive, and left them more reserved when they came to campus. In order to address some of the students concerns, I asked them to comment on features that could have been added to the Bridge to enhance the positive experience; these will be discussed in the following section.

### *Theme iii: Improvements and Final Thoughts*

Students and staff were asked if they thought there was anything missing from the Bridge that could have helped them to build trust and and/or a learning community. In this section, I will discuss their responses, as well as participants' comments about making the Bridge a program requirement. There were several

suggestions about what could be added to the course. For example, the following student commented that *“I would like to see more discussion in future years”* (Ph3Survey). The existing discussions appeared to be a popular feature, allowing students to exchange information and find out more about each other. But it was apparent from the previous comment, as well as other students’ comments, that not everyone posted to the discussion areas, and more could have been done to increase the number of users. The following student suggested a tactic for increasing participation. She noted that the Bridge could have:

*Discussion areas on particular topics so that learners could start off if they wanted ... just start off on a topic on rock climbing or whatever ... so it wouldn't just be sort of just a general free for all ... it would be more sort of a topic based area or something ... you could have a dialogue that way.*  
(Ph3Stu2)

Another student commented on the synchronous feature, saying that the chat room *“is kinda useless because people have to be on ... go into it ... would be more effective if it was just a general sort of instant message ... if someone else was online, you could instant message[them]”* (Ph3Stu1). Participants also talked about Facebook and there were suggestions to have a *“connection with Facebook ...where you can search for people”* (Ph3Stu7). One student thought that the Bridge should be *“campus wide, so everybody, not just BCom but other majors. I know BCom is huge ... [but] it's better to set up a [university] camp, a school, university wide community. Not, department wide”* (Ph3Stu3m).

There were several suggestions about international activities. For example, one student thought that *“maybe we could have different clubs ...maybe people who have interest in learning Chinese culture, we could give them some information on Chinese culture* (Ph3Stu17i). Another student suggested *“a buddy system ... with some of the international learners who could be paired up maybe with a non-*

*international learner somehow in terms of maybe a few activities” (Ph3Stu6). And, one student thought that it would be a good idea to have:*

*cultural sensitivity ... and knowing and saying a component of your team might be introducing an international learner into it, and then saying these are the benefits of that, these are the backgrounds they could be from... just giving an overview... of that so I know what I’m getting into. (Ph3Stu4)*

While some participants focused on the social aspects of the Bridge, many students provided suggestions for information of a more practical nature. One student thought that information on “*financial aid and awards*” (Ph3Stu12) would be well received. Another student believed that “*information on the city in general ... the grocery stores ... the post office*” (Ph3Stu2) would be useful. Other suggestions included information on the “*dress code for the first day*” (Ph3Stu5). Other practical topics included the suggestion to “*talk about money, and let’s talk about housing ... let’s talk about roommates*” (Ph3Stu10) as well as, “*a guideline for time management*” (Ph3Stu15). Also, the following student noted that it was important “*to start alerting everybody. Also telling you what the benefits are going to be. It’s difficult ’cause I’m not used to doing internet stuff. I’m not a big fan of it*” (Ph3Stu15). Other suggestions included:

*More information on getting your books early ... used books, but your actual textbook list. And information on your classes, who your teachers are going to be, so you can look up ... rate my professor.com, you can check on how your teacher is or find out his bio or find out more information on who you’re going to get taught by, how many classes you’re going to have per quarter, how long ... maybe more information on the program. (Ph3Stu1)*

In addition to all the suggestions about activities and information to include, some students thought the website could be improved, as one student commented, “*the Bridge is not an efficient layout. I found it very difficult to find anything I was looking for as links are placed in seemingly random places. There isn’t one central area to gather information from*” (Ph3Survey). Another student had a similar observation,

finding the volume and organization of information inhibitive, *“the Bridge was a little hard to navigate. I know there are a lot to learn but it seemed almost too much information crammed into a small space. It made it harder to intake everything”* (Ph3Survey). So, from this point of view, even if the students had wanted to start the process of building a community, the organization of the content would have proved challenging. However, not all students found this to be the case, a different student liked the website, *“I really liked the website ’cause of all the websites I’ve seen for school, it was the most straightforward. And user friendly, it was good for me as a student”* (Ph3Stu4).

Staff also had suggestions for improvements, *“the Bridge [should include] a component of one of the courses, so it’s going to extend the course date which means that they’re actually participating in [it]”* (Ph3Staff1). Associated with the last comment, the suggestion was to have *“outcomes associated with it, that is to say, ‘okay, you have to do this reading and then you have to do something with it’”* (Ph3Staff2). One staff member observed that it would be a good idea to change the facilitator because *“the program manager facilitating the Bridge is [not] necessarily the best thing because [the program manager doesn’t] have as much of a direct connection to them going forward”* (Ph3Staff1). And, thinking about the students’ experiences once they came to campus, the following participant noted that there should be follow-up as well as information on how students could apply their new knowledge, *“here’s how we’re going to follow-up on this, and here’s how we’re going to use this as a tool”* (Ph3Staff4). Staff were united in thinking that the Bridge should be mandatory for all incoming BCom students. As this staff member commented, *“I would make certain things compulsory, not voluntary”* (Ph3Staff2).

Also, although not a direct comment on how the Bridge itself could be improved, a staff member noted that:

*It would be wonderful, at different points in the year, to have opportunities for students to come back together in an informal setting, or a formal setting with informal conversations, to talk about, 'hey, what are you getting out of this program? What have you got from this learning community? ... What's working for you? What's not working for you?' And presenting it in a way that groups are small enough that everyone has a chance to be heard. (Ph3Staff4)*

Some students talked about whether or not they felt the Bridge should be mandatory. In general, there were two different and opposing views. One position was that the Bridge should not be a requirement:

*I don't think it should be mandatory because I just think that sets a bad... sort of feeling, a bad vibe ...you should make them want to do it. That's what I think, so that's what I'm saying, some kind of reward... so that they do it themselves. If they're ... not motivated to do it, then they're just there and they might go through the motions and that's even worse than ... having them not there. (Ph3Stu5)*

The next comment is representative of the other view:

*"[If the Bridge was mandatory], then there is a stake for me ... I'm sure the basis of many BCom'er students is, 'what is in it for me?' ... if there will be something in stake, say your course starts two weeks before you have to get yourself familiar and there's two percent participation mark. Then that's a different case. That's an incentive. Yes, and then the psychology turns different and you say, 'okay, I think there is something that I should focus on'. And ... you know what? Every time I received emails, I was looking for that kind of stuff." (Ph3Stu12)*

As a final question, I asked the three staff members who had been with the study for more than one year if their understanding of trust and/or learning communities had improved over the time we had been researching the Bridge. The answers I received were varied. While one staff member said, "*I think it's about the same. I don't know*" (Ph3Staff1), another noted that it had:

*Helped deepen my understanding of aspects of trust ... and so I've appreciated that, and so it's certainly added some depth to it ... and it's caused me to look at it in ways that I perhaps hadn't. And that's always a good thing even if it's sometimes painful. (Ph3Staff2)*

The third staff member stated that:

*I think that idea to have trust ... comes into play and to me it is that first necessary ingredient. I think it really has been key in terms of my observations ...in the past couple of years, that's been an interesting learning piece. That it's one thing for us to put out what this wonderful guideline is and how it's going to benefit everybody, but if you don't have ... trust as sort of that core fundamental level... then you can't get beyond because you're not going to open up to the richness of what the exchanges could be because people just won't trust ... I didn't realize how important trust was. (Ph3Staff4)*

In this section, I have explored the suggestions made by staff and students for improving the Bridge course, discussed comments about whether or not the Bridge should be mandatory, and examined how staff perceived their own learning over the course of the study. In summary, some suggestions for improvement were based on the desire of students to socialize with their classmates. Other suggestions were of a practical nature. Staff comments on their learning revealed that even though not all of the staff participants felt their perceptions had changed, two did express personal learning about the relationship of trust to the development of a learning community.

### *Evaluate*

In chapter 1, I posed the following three research questions:

1. *Can online activities support the development of a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students, and if so, how?*
2. *What steps should be taken when developing a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students?*
3. *What are the perceived disadvantages of studying in a learning community?*

In this chapter, the main focus was on answering the second and third questions, since the first question had been addressed in chapter 5. I have provided a summary of the key insights in the following table:

Table 11: Key Insights Phase III

Category/Theme	Key Insights
<b>The Students</b>	
Student characteristics	76% belonged to the Millennial generation; students were bolder at the end of the program; tended to be focused on how learning benefitted them as individuals, as opposed to the community; they were keen and bright.
Differences between 2005, 2006 and 2007 intake students	Compared to 2005 and 2006, the 2007 intake students managed conflict well, built a strong community, and demonstrated social cohesion.
<b>Learning Communities</b>	
Learning community defined	A positive, supportive atmosphere; individuals share learning, embrace differences, take responsibility; a safe place, where trust is developed, where people know and care about each other.
Learning community development	An organic process, but with a clear framework laid out. Must have the opportunity for social interaction, allowing students to collaborate in safe, supportive environment.
Learning community advantages	It is a supportive, comfortable environment, where future networks can be built, and it is an example of real life.
Learning community disadvantages	Not getting along with others; balancing life outside the community with studies; ineffective classroom facilitation; too structured; length of time for learning to develop; conflict with others in community; friction between students and instructor; marginalization; lack of patience.
<b>The Bridge</b>	
Trust	Able to build trust behind the screen; more likely to trust people who are similar; build trust in the university; trust is not necessary, but if it exists, people will be more creative; trust provides more freedom
The learning community	Bridge helped some students prepare for the on-campus community; some were excited to meet new people, establish connection; it started some students thinking about the up-coming experience and how to build community, as well as reducing stress; for others it was counterproductive, creating anxiety and left them feeling intimidated.
Improvements and final thoughts	Suggestions for improvements were more discussions, link to Facebook, provide cultural information, add more practical content, and reduce technological challenges. Staff thought it should be mandatory, not all students agreed.

Participants were able to identify key attributes of a learning community and supplied a number of reasons why the model was beneficial to the students at the university. In addition, the participants identified some detrimental elements of the learning community model, but all clearly appreciated the educational environment created and the benefits outweighed the challenges.

Many participants did see the Bridge as a useful tool in creating both trust and a learning community, although most appeared to identify it as being a first step; a step which was most appropriately followed by additional discussions on-campus. Participants identified several improvements that could make the Bridge more effective, although there was some disagreement whether or not the Bridge should be mandatory.

While the Bridge was designed with the intent of providing students with a starting point for learning community development, practical information placed on the Bridge could make it a desirable destination for incoming students. Once there, other Bridge features could be used to engage the students in interactive community-building activities, thereby meeting the needs of students for information as well as fulfilling the Bridge mandate.

### *Reflection*

As noted in the methodology chapter, I believe reflection is an element vital to the entire action research process, rather than a distinct step. For this reason, the steps I used in my study were plan, act, observe, and evaluate, with reflection woven throughout. As noted in chapter 3, in the *Limitations and Delimitations* and *Challenges* sections, there were a number of general issues I faced when conducting this study. These issues ranged from the difficulty finding students who were willing

to take part in the project, to the limitations imposed by administrative processes that restricted early adoption of some of the participants' recommendations. In this section, rather than re-examine these topics, I will address each of the specific steps in the action research process. This reflective piece encompasses all three phases of the study

*Reflection: plan*

In the planning step of this project, several issues surfaced. In the first phase, time constraints made data collection challenging. However, by engaging the help of faculty and staff in recruitment of participants, the focus group and interviews were successfully conducted with students before they left campus. At the onset of the study, it had been my intent to conduct the research using data collected from students alone. However, as my work progressed, it became apparent that this would limit the study. I therefore concluded that the perceptions of staff and faculty would bring a valuable perspective to the study, creating a broader data set, thereby ultimately strengthening the outcomes. As a result, I arranged interviews with faculty and staff, which allowed me to examine student issues from a different viewpoint.

In the second phase of the study, the key challenge was to build a team quickly. This team needed to have the appropriate talent set for designing an online bridge course with limited resources in a short timeframe. This was accomplished by targeting several individuals with whom I had worked in the past. They were well established at the university, had the support of their departments, and were task-efficient. All understood the urgency and worked cooperatively together to design and implement the first version of the bridging course. The planning step in the final phase of the study was comparatively problem-free because the team members were familiar with their roles and the outcomes were clearly understood.

*Reflection: act*

In the first phase of the study, there were no interventions as participants were asked to reflect on the academic year that was coming to an end. The main challenge in this phase arose during the interviews when some participants wanted to focus only on the latter part of their year at the university. In order to obtain the data needed for the study, which included participants' perceptions of events that occurred earlier in the academic year, probes were used to explore the issues in greater depth. While I encouraged participants to bring forward some of their more recent experiences, as they provided interesting commentaries on the interactions of the students, I also re-directed the interviews and focus group to discover some of the initial experiences the students had with each other.

In the second and third phases of the study, because the Bridge course had been implemented I had the opportunity to engage in informative dialogue with the participants about the usefulness of Bridge activities. The main challenge in both phases was that the Bridge course was not mandatory, which meant that some students had not participated in the Bridge. Even though I was initially looking for students' observations on the usefulness of the Bridge, the observations of those who had not taken part were also rich with insights. When I interviewed students who had not taken part in the Bridge, I changed the focus of the interview to explore why they had not taken part and what could have been included in the course to make it engaging and useful. This allowed me to gather a wider variety of perspectives than would have been obtained by only interviewing those who had been actively involved in the Bridge. Consequently, this shift in perspective created some insightful observations, necessitating not only a change in the focus of the questions, but also in

the outcomes of the study. For example, I was able to examine the impact of the Bridge on students who were not interested in online bridging activities.

*Reflection: observe*

In the focus groups and interviews of all three phases, I booked a room at the university that allowed participants to be comfortably seated and uninterrupted throughout the interview. In the focus group, participants were seated in a circle with the digital recorder in the centre. I was a member of the circle. In the interviews, the participants and I faced each other. Attempts were made to put the participants at ease before turning on the audio recorder. For example, water was provided and a brief discussion was held allowing participants to discuss any concerns they might have had before the more formal process began.

When I moved to this next, more formal, phase of the interviews and focus groups, I asked questions of the participants that required them to reflect on issues in a general way. For example, they were asked to think about a situation where trusting someone had helped them in some way. Discussions that resulted from this line of questioning showed that the participants had begun to explore their own feelings on trust and how it had an impact on their lives. In doing so, they were contextualizing trust, placing it in their own realm of understanding.

Next, questions targeted specific observations the participants had about students in the BCom Program. Drilling down on their comments, I was able to expand my understanding of their lived experiences, thereby seeing a variety of perspectives which ultimately allowed me to weave a colourful tapestry of dialogue. With each interview, I found the discussions gained momentum. The experiences of earlier participants helped guide the conversations for those who followed. While I did not like to make copious notes during the interviews or focus groups, as I

preferred to focus on the dialogue with the participant, I would jot down key words and phrases I thought might be useful. After an interview or focus group ended, I would review these notes, looking for additional threads that I could include in the interviews that followed, threads that could contribute to the richness of the discussion.

Building on the participants' observations about the existing Bridge and BCom Program, I asked faculty, students, and staff to look to the future. At this point, the participants brought forward many ideas and suggestions, indicating that they were thoroughly engaged in the discussion. A challenge for me at this stage was to curb my own enthusiasm. Suggestions were made about how the university could use new technology to engage students on the Bridge. While some of the ideas were exciting and innovative, it would have been very difficult to incorporate them in the Bridge due to limited resources, so it was important for me to remain realistic and encourage participants to share more practical ideas.

Just prior to the conclusion of each interview, I would ask participants if I had missed anything they thought could contribute to my understanding. Often, in these final moments, new insights would emerge. This led me to understand that an open question, one that allows the participant to guide the process, can be truly enlightening. In my research going forward, I will always strive to include a question at the end that allows participants to openly raise any issues they feel appropriate. By taking this approach, participants can raise additional concerns, bring forward different ideas, and take greater ownership of the outcomes.

*Reflection: evaluate*

In the evaluation step for the first phase, I focussed on determining how the data collected could inform the development of the Bridge course, as well as guide the

following phase. In the latter two phases, I reflected on the research questions, looking carefully at the data collected, teasing out the key insights. My work in the evaluation phase was to examine the transcripts, looking for themes that emerged from the data. This data analysis was used as a basis for discussion with the design team.

In order to use my evaluation as a foundation for the planning step in the following phase, I had to reflect on each interview, focussing on unique directions and insights. As a result, I was also able to add new probes in subsequent interviews, allowing me to obtain richer, thicker data from the participants. This is not to imply that the earlier interviews were not insightful, but rather that interviews conducted later in the process benefitted from deeper probing as I built on comments that were made by those interviewed earlier in the study.

In addition, I found that through reflection on the interview process, my interviewing technique improved and, by the last phase, the time I spent interviewing participants decreased, with no apparent adverse effects on the data collected. I attribute this to developing an ability that allowed me to re-direct the participants back to the research topic if they went off track, while still allowing them to feel valued and heard.

In interviews during the first phase, I was cautious about redirecting the dialogue, thinking participants might be discouraged by my attempt to change the focus. I found in the later phases that this fear was unfounded because participants readily refocused on issues presented. It was sometimes difficult to determine the right balance between focus and freedom because it was hard to know what a participant's observations would reveal. In the end, I knew that I had to maintain a

clear direction if I was to obtain useful data and complete each phase of the project on schedule.

While conducting focus groups, one issue that I could not fully manage was the problem of several participants talking at the same time. The only way I found to address this issue was to remind participants that it was best if only one person spoke at a time. While this was met with some success, there were still occasions when taped sections could not be heard clearly.

To conclude, in each step of the action research process, I examined my strategy and rethought the process to seek different approaches that could allow me to obtain greater insights. On several occasions, I changed interview techniques if I found an alternative method that I believed would help me reach my goal more effectively. Over the three phases of this study, my ability to interview participants was refined and strengthened, but, like the action research spiral itself, I still have much to learn and expect my ability will continue to develop.

### *Summary*

In this chapter, I discussed the process followed when planning and developing the second version of the online Bridge. In order to fully appreciate the participants' context, I examined the characteristics of the cohorts of students who entered the university in 2005, 2006 and 2007. Mindful of current literature, I investigated how the participants defined learning communities, as well as their perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of using a learning community educational model. In addition, I explored participants' perceptions of the Bridge activities and how those activities supported, or did not support, the development of a learning community for on-campus students. Furthermore, I examined how the Bridge

could be improved, as well as how the process of taking part in the research had influenced the thinking of the participating staff.

After evaluating the observations that had been made by the participants, I included a reflective piece which summarized my thoughts and perceptions of the three phases of my study, looking through the lens of the four action research steps taken in each phase. My intent in conducting this study was to make a positive contribution to the existing scholarly dialogue, emphasizing the use of online technologies as a means of developing learning communities for on-campus students. In the final chapter of this thesis, I will conclude this discussion, providing key observations and insights taken from my research.

## Chapter 7: Conclusion and Summary

### *Introduction*

This chapter contains five sections. The purpose of the first of these sections is to provide an overview of the findings of this action research study. In the second section the recommendations are discussed, and then in the section that follows, the implications for practice, as well as the implications for educational institutions and society, are explored. Next, the potential for further research is presented, and finally some concluding remarks are offered.

### *Overview of Findings*

As discussed in chapter 2, the review of literature identified several attributes of learning communities, including collaboration, cooperation (Palloff and Pratt, 2005, Roberts and Pruitt, 2003, McConnell, 2006), engagement (McConnell, 2006), support (McConnell, 2006, Wilson and Ryder, 1996, Brook and Oliver, 2005), responsibility (McConnell, 2006), shared norms and values (Roberts and Pruitt, 2003), and common expectations and/or goals (Rovai, 2002). These attributes also emerged from the data analysis of the thirty-nine interviews and two focus groups in the study. In addition, analysis of the data revealed that there were several perceived disadvantages of the learning community model, including failing to work well with others, difficulty in balancing studies with life outside the community, ineffective classroom facilitation, imposed structure, high level of time commitment involved, negative conflict between students, friction between students and instructor, marginalization, community members following misguided direction, reduced inclination to challenge the social norm, destructive self-interest, and lack of understanding of the pedagogy.

In light of these findings, I suggest that an on-campus learning community needs to be grounded in the institution, rather than in the classroom as an isolated environment, because members of the learning community take sustenance from the wider context. The students' perceptions of the university's corporate website, as well as the relationships developed between the students and admissions staff during early encounters with the institution, form a foundation for students' interaction with the on-campus community.

Consequently, there is an institutional responsibility for the construction, as well as maintenance, of the learning community. The institution itself needs to be healthy, have a well-formed plan for the development of the learning community, and to provide routine check-ins with the community members. This does not imply that the classroom environment plays a superficial role in the building of a community, nor that the facilitator should let the community develop unaided, but rather that the institutional context should be examined and a collective meaning of the term "learning community" should be developed and understood by all its members. If this examination and understanding can be achieved, we could expect that mutual responsibility for the successful implementation of the learning community would be realized. In Figure 13 below, the connection between the individual, the cohort, and the institution is illustrated:

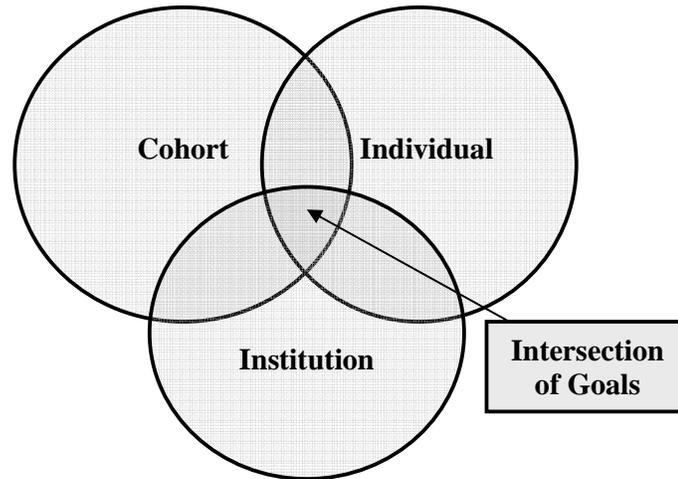


Figure 13: Individual, Cohort, Institution Goal Intersection

Although the individual, the cohort, and the institution will each have unique motivational factors and goals, ideally there are areas of intersection between the three. In light of the findings of this study, it could be expected that individuals studying in a learning community with others who have similar educational goals and expectations, where trust in the institution and the individual has been created and sustained, will be able to take part in the continued development of an effective learning community. Moreover, members of a rich learning community, in which there is an emphasis on collaboration and support, will have a higher chance of successfully realizing their educational goals. If the institution is committed to the success of the individual, and provides resources to maximize the potential for that success, the institutional goal intersects with that of the cohort and the individual. When the goals intersect, the ground for developing a learning community is fertile.

Furthermore, institutions can aid in the development of an effective learning community by ensuring that incoming students, as well as faculty and staff who work with the students, are prepared for the environment in which they will be working. As

found in this study, one way to prepare on-campus students is to provide a mandatory online course aimed at introducing students to the institution, the educational model, and each other. Due to the versatile nature of online education, a variety of activities can be offered, with on-campus follow up to ensure students have the opportunity to further the development of the community. In the following section, I discuss the features that could be included in an online course, and make recommendations for on-campus follow up activities to aid in the ongoing development of the learning community.

### *Recommendations*

Given the unique context of this study, as well as the number and the profile of participants involved in it, it is difficult to make recommendations that would be externally relevant in their entirety. However, it is clear that elements of this thesis may be identified as relevant in other educational contexts, thereby giving value to some of the recommendations in a wider or slightly different setting. Before going further with the *Recommendations* section, I will restate the research questions that framed this study:

- 1. Can online activities support the development of a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students, and if so, how?*
- 2. What steps should be taken when developing a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students?*
- 3. What are the perceived disadvantages of studying in a learning community?*

In this section, I aim to address these questions, in part by discussing the activities that can be included in an online course aimed at introducing students to the learning community model. Also, I will provide an overview of the actions that can be taken on campus to support the development of a learning community, as well as

explore some of the perceived disadvantages of the learning community model, and propose several mitigation strategies.

In answer to the “can” part of the first research question, as discussed in chapters 5 and 6, participants generally found the Bridge to be a useful first step in the development of an on-campus learning community. Although there were some perceived barriers, such as having too little time to take part in the Bridge and finding it hard to develop trust with fellow students online, overall, participants found the experience a positive one. It was generally perceived as laying a foundation for the community that students built when they arrived on campus. The “how” part of the first question, as well as the second question, is addressed in detail in the next section of this chapter, beginning with a framework for approaching the development of the learning community.

#### *DAGR Framework*

After analysing the data from this study, I developed the DAGR Framework (Driver, Action, Goal, and Result) in direct response to the second research question which asks: *What steps should be taken when developing a learning community for a diverse population of on-campus students?* In Figure 14 below, I have provided the DAGR Framework in its simplified form:

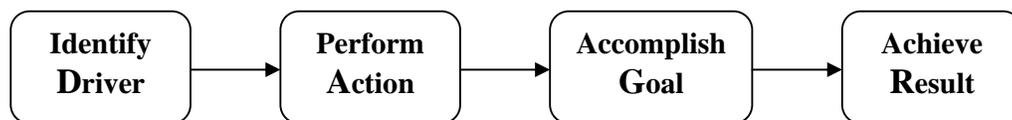


Figure 14: DAGR Framework

In the DAGR Framework, the Driver can be any of three parties: the individual, the cohort of students, or the institution. Separately or together, they perform actions aimed at reaching the Goal. The Goal is one or more of the attributes of the learning community identified by the research participants. When all of the attributes are fully developed, the Result has been achieved and a functioning learning community built. In Figure 15 below, I expand on the DAGR Framework, using it to illustrate how a learning community can be achieved:

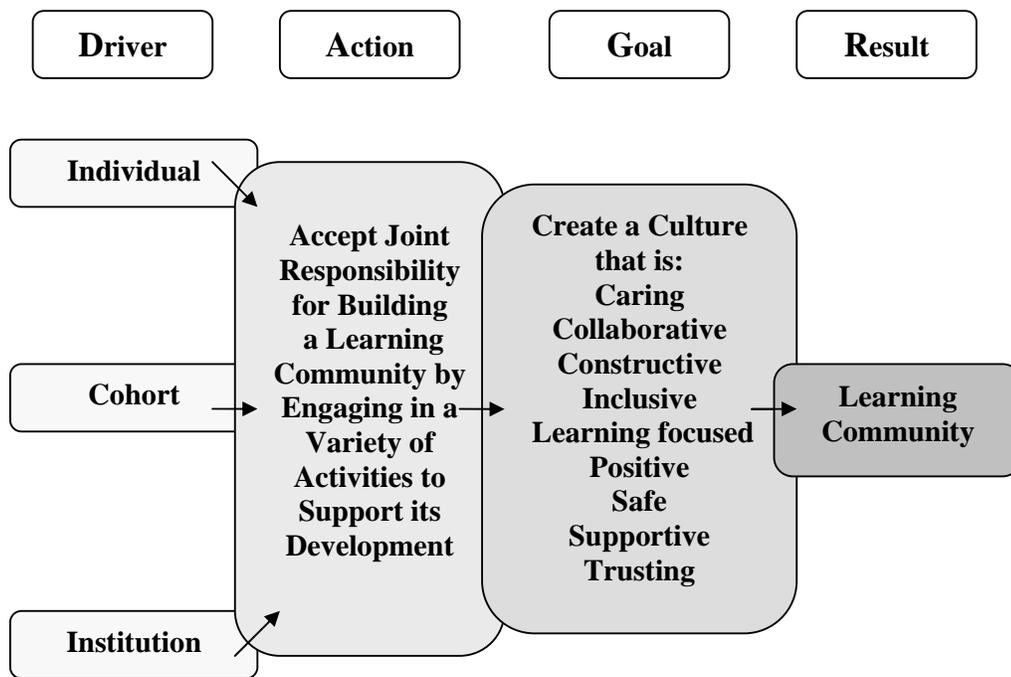


Figure 15: DAGR Framework (Expanded)

Next, in order to provide context for the DAGR Framework, I present an overview of how it was informed by this action research study. Each component of the framework is discussed and links between the Action and the Goal are explored.

### *Driver*

It was apparent from comments made by both students and staff in Phase I, that the institution played a key role in how students were able to build trust with each other. Building on this, in Phases II and III, participants noted that the learning community was not simply the students and instructor working together in the classroom, it extended beyond those boundaries into the institution itself. Therefore, there is an expressed need to consider not only the roles played by individual students, faculty, and staff in a learning community, but also the role of the cohort as a collective, as well as the role of the institution within which the community exists. These three coexist and, as discussed in the *Overview of Findings* section, when the goals of each intersect, the ground is fertile for the development of a healthy learning community. In the DAGR Framework, the individual, the cohort and the institution are called Drivers and are responsible for the Action that is to take place. While some Actions require only one Driver, other Actions require two or all three.

### *Action*

Even though the intersection of goals fuels the development of a learning community, there are also supporting actions that must be taken. Specifically, the responsibility for developing the learning community must be taken by all parties, and activities that aid in its development must be designed, conducted, and appropriate resources allocated.

### *Goal*

In order to determine the specific actions required, it is necessary to examine the explicit characteristics and requirements of the learning community. In doing so, the goal of each action is established. When working with the research participants, I drilled down on the attributes of a learning community identified in literature, as

discussed in the *Overview of Findings* section, and have summarized the participants' contributions as follows:

With a focus on *learning*, the culture should be *inclusive* and *trusting*, where individuals *collaborate* in a *constructive, caring* manner, thereby creating a *safe* and *positive* community where all members feel *supported*.

With each of these characteristics identified, actions can be undertaken that will support their development.

### *Result*

If the individual, the cohort and the institution are able to embark on an action path that leads to the successful development of each characteristic, an effective learning community can be established. With this end goal in mind, I have proposed some specific actions that can be taken by the individual, the cohort and the institution, focused on aiding the development of the learning community. My experience over the last ten years of teaching and studying in a learning community environment has allowed me to confirm many of the research participants' observations, and gain a solid understanding of the requirements of students and staff working in this environment. Therefore, the proposed actions build on the comments of the research participants and, while a given action may not have been specifically suggested by a participant, I have attempted to remain true to their intent, elaborating where necessary to create a meaningful plan for action. Table 12 below outlines the actions, with the goal italicized in brackets after each action item:

Table 12: Development of a Learning Community: Action, Goal

<b>Development of a Learning Community Actions Linked to Goal</b>	
<b>Individual Cohort Institution (acting together)</b>	<p>Discuss shared goals (<i>collaborative/inclusive</i>)</p> <p>Identify and discuss expectations (<i>collaborative/safe</i>)</p> <p>Contribute to a safe, caring environment (<i>caring/safe</i>)</p> <p>Accept responsibility (<i>positive</i>)</p> <p>Create an environment that is open and predictable (<i>trusting</i>)</p> <p>Develop opportunities for collaboration (<i>collaborative</i>)</p> <p>Act in a way that is dependable and reliable (<i>trusting</i>)</p>
<b>Individual</b>	<p>Help fellow students who are struggling with course work (<i>learning/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Be willing to extend trust (<i>trusting</i>)</p> <p>Engage with other students socially (<i>collaborative/inclusive/positive</i>)</p> <p>Embrace diversity (<i>inclusive/safe</i>)</p> <p>Frame conflict in positive terms (<i>constructive/positive/safe</i>)</p> <p>Exercise patience when working with others (<i>caring/positive/safe</i>)</p> <p>Give constructive feedback (<i>constructive/learning/ positive/safe/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Build on the contributions of others (<i>constructive/inclusive/learning</i>)</p> <p>Engage in thoughtful conflict resolution (<i>caring/constructive/positive/safe</i>)</p>
<b>Cohort</b>	<p>Arrange social activities that include all community members (<i>inclusive/positive</i>)</p> <p>Establish rules about confidentiality in the classroom (<i>safe</i>)</p> <p>Offer informal tutorials for cohort members outside regular class time (<i>caring/constructive/learning/positive/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Elect a student representative that can proactively communicate cohort concerns to administration and work with administration to resolve issues (<i>collaborative/constructive/positive</i>)</p>
<b>Institution</b>	<p>Engage with potential applicants to the program in a cooperative, friendly manner (<i>positive/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Secure appropriate resources (<i>supportive</i>)</p> <p>Provide new students and staff with an orientation to the institution and the learning community model (<i>learning/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Offer conflict resolution training and diversity awareness (<i>caring/learning /inclusive/safe</i>)</p> <p>Arrange follow-up community engagement sessions with staff and students (<i>caring/learning/supportive</i>)</p> <p>Provide students with opportunity to work with administrators to resolve issues as they arise (<i>collaborative/constructive/caring</i>)</p>

While this list is not exhaustive, it contains some key actions that may be taken by the individual, the cohort, and the institution seeking to establish a learning community. As is evident, some activities are conducted simultaneously, others consecutively. An alternative way of viewing this process is to identify the requirements for the learning community that are missing from the classroom and to work backwards to discover actions that would aid in their development, as well as determine which driver/s are responsible for the actions. In the table below, Table 13, the process is reordered to demonstrate how the driver and action is determined:

Table 13: Development of a Learning Community: Action, Driver, and Goal

<b>Development of a Learning Community Identifying Actions and Driver for each Goal</b>		
<b>Goal</b>	<b>Action</b>	<b>Driver</b>
Caring	Exercise patience when working with others	Individual
	Offer informal tutorials for cohort members outside regular class time	Cohort
	Provide conflict resolution training and diversity awareness	Institution
Collaborative	Engage with other students socially	Individual
	Elect a student representative that can proactively communicate the cohort's concerns to administration and work with administration to resolve issues	Cohort
	Identify and discuss expectations	Institution
Constructive	Engage in thoughtful conflict resolution	Individual
	Offer informal tutorials for cohort members outside regular class time	Cohort
	Provide students with opportunity to work with administrators to resolve issues as they arise	Institution
Inclusive	Embrace diversity	Individual
	Arrange social activities that include all community members	Cohort
	Provide conflict resolution training and diversity awareness	Institution
Learning Focused	Give constructive feedback	Individual
	Offer informal tutorials	Cohort
	Provide students and staff with an orientation to the institution and the learning community model	Institution
Positive	Exercise patience when working with others	Individual
	Arrange social activities that include all community members	Cohort
	Engage with potential applicants to the program in a cooperative, friendly manner	Institution
Safe	Give constructive feedback	Individual
	Establish rules about confidentiality in the classroom	Cohort
	Provide conflict resolution training	Institution
Supportive	Offer to help fellow students who are struggling with studies	Individual
	Offer informal tutorials	Cohort
	Provide follow-up community engagement sessions with staff and students	Institution
Trusting	Be willing to extend trust	Individual
	Create an environment that is open and predictable	Cohort
	Act in a way that is dependable and reliable	Institution

In Figure 16 below, the DAGR Framework is used to demonstrate how creating the conditions for a culture that is collaborative and safe can begin when an action requires all three drivers:

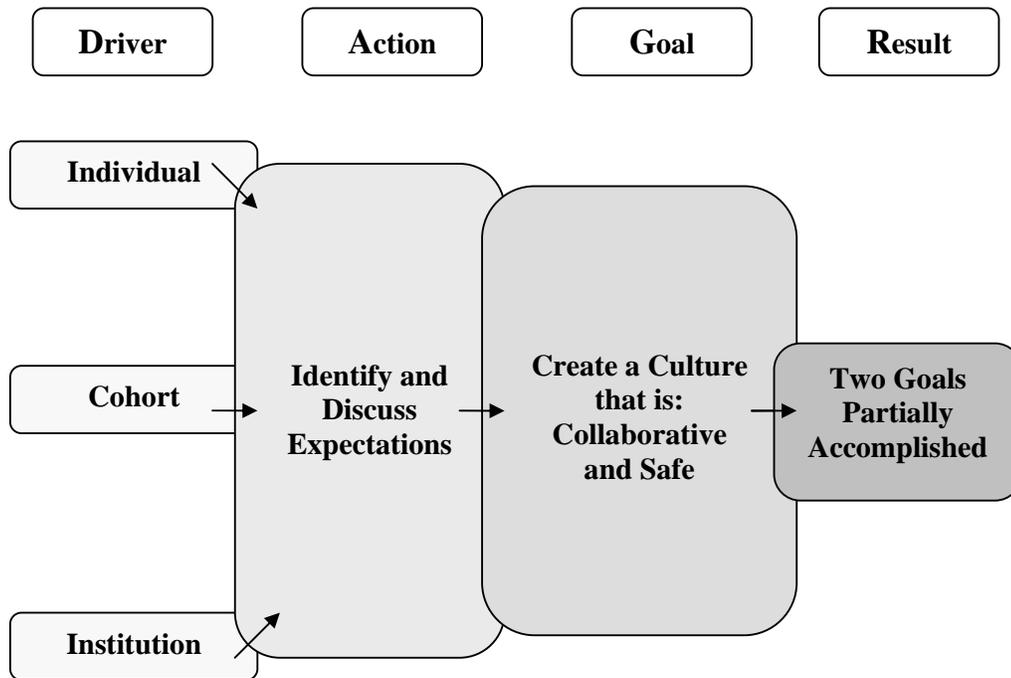


Figure 16: DAGR Framework: Common Action

At this point, while two goals are “partially accomplished”, the community is not fully effective. In the next example, Figure 17, each party has a different action to perform to achieve the same goal:

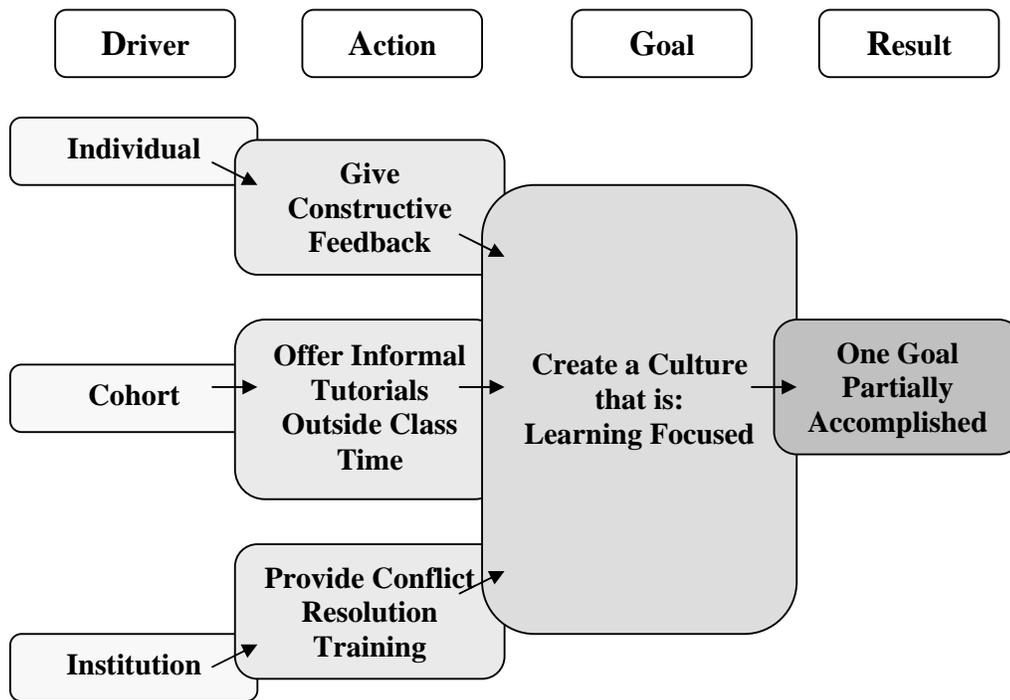


Figure 17: DAGR Framework: Different Action

It was apparent from participants' comments that no one driver or course of action can be responsible for achieving an effective learning community. Therefore, all drivers need to be involved in a number of actions if the culture is to develop into a learning community. In the following section, I have outlined how some of the actions discussed in Table 13 can be achieved using an online bridge course.

*Online Bridge Course*

In this section, I examine the online Bridge features and link them to the Goal component of the DAGR Framework. It is important to note that the institution in this study was willing to supply resources and extend trust to the design team, making the online Bridge a reality. By doing so, it provided evidence that the institution is an integral player in the development of a learning community for on-campus students,

thereby contributing to the *Supportive* goal of the DAGR Framework. In Table 14, below, I have described key elements of the Bridge features and identified how each feature aligns with the Goal:

Table 14: Development of a Learning Community: Activities, Goal

<b>Development of a Learning Community Bridge Activities Linked to Goal</b>		
<b>Bridge Feature</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Goal</b>
Resources	Information on the educational institution and the learning platform. Readings about working on teams, the benefits of collaborative learning, background reading on learning communities.	<i>Learning</i> Enables students to familiarize themselves with the institution, as well as gain understanding of the educational model used. Increases comfort level and establishes program expectations.
Get Acquainted/ Web Introduction	An activity where students can introduce themselves to their fellow classmates, as well as review and respond to other students' introductions.	<i>Caring/Collaborative/Constructive/Inclusive/Positive/Safe/Supportive/Trusting</i> Allows students to interact with their classmates to establish contact, make friendships prior to arriving on campus.
Community Discussion	Asynchronous text-based discussions with alumni, staff and the Orientation Assistant.	<i>Caring/Collaborative/Constructive/Inclusive/Learning/Positive/Safe/Supportive/Trusting</i> Permits students to discover information about the institution from alumni and/or from individuals currently working at the institution.
Biography	An area where students can post information on their professional and educational background, as well as include any other information about themselves they are comfortable sharing. The information in the biography can be read by other staff and students, but this feature is not interactive.	<i>Learning/Safe/Trusting</i> Provides students with the opportunity to present a formal introduction to faculty and classmates. Allows students to gather information about classmates in preparation for meeting them on-campus.
Practical Information	Information about schedules, activities that are available off campus, housing, and textbooks.	<i>Learning</i> Attracts students to website and encourages them to return repeatedly, thereby increasing the possibility that they will interact with other students.

While the connections between the Bridge features and the goals that are identified in the table above were supported by the research participants' comments, this action research study did not set out to verify such a connection. Rather, as an outcome of the study, the DAGR Framework requires further research. Also, as we saw in chapters 5 and 6, not all students found the online Bridge helpful to them in building a learning community. Reasons for this included barriers such as not having enough time to make use of the Bridge features, preferring to work in a face-to-face environment, and failure to engage with other students on the Bridge. In addition, some students found the Bridge activities counterproductive. For example, they were intimidated by the seemingly impressive biographies posted by classmates. As a result, there is a need to refine the process and to establish ways of engaging all students in a positive manner, allowing them to begin their on-campus experience with a solid understanding of the learning community model.

Furthermore, even though the online Bridge did provide students and staff with the opportunity to begin building a learning community, successful achievement of this objective cannot be guaranteed since each individual starts their journey with different attributes, biases and motivating factors. The process of developing a learning community is complex and multi-faceted, requiring commitment from all its members, otherwise problems can ensue. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss some of these problems, outlining not only the perceived disadvantage, but also some approaches that can be employed to reduce these potentially destructive concerns.

#### *Perceived Disadvantages*

In addition to the many documented advantages of the learning community model that have been discussed in earlier chapters of this thesis, the participants in

this study provided examples of perceived disadvantages to being a member of a learning community. In the following table, Table 15, I have identified those disadvantages, as well as provided recommendations for mitigation strategies and noted the party responsible for the action:

Table 15: Learning Communities: Perceived Disadvantages

<b>Learning Communities Perceived Disadvantages and Mitigation Strategies</b>		
<b>Perceived Disadvantage</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategy</b>	<b>Responsibility for Action</b>
Failing to work well with others	*Pre-course training to teach learning community members how to work with others; on-going check-ins with students to identify what is working and where the potential problems may be found; students and instructors pro-actively assess for potential problems	Institution, instructor and student
Difficulty in balancing studies with life outside the learning community	Educating applicants so they understand the implications of studying with the learning community model before they enroll in the program	Institution
Ineffective classroom facilitation	Instructor training, both prior to course start-up and ongoing, in the tools and techniques that can be used to aid in the creation of a learning community, as well as support a developed community	Institution
Model imposing too much structure	Pre-course training for students to provide awareness of the model and how to best manage the requirements	Institution and instructor
Time commitment involved	Pre-course training for students on time management skills	Institution and instructor
Negative conflict	Pre-course training for students to explore conflict resolution strategies; ongoing check-ins with students	Instructor and student
Friction between students and instructor	Regular check-ins between instructor, administration and students	Instructor and students
Marginalization	Pre-course training to explore cultural differences, discuss	Institution and instructor

<b>Learning Communities Perceived Disadvantages and Mitigation Strategies</b>		
<b>Perceived Disadvantage</b>	<b>Mitigation Strategy</b>	<b>Responsibility for Action</b>
	values and goals; ongoing check-ins with students	
Community may follow misguided direction	Regular check-ins between instructor, administration and students	Institution, instructor and students
Students may be less inclined to challenge the social norm	Pre-course training on how to manage peer pressure; on-going check-ins	Institution and instructor
Destructive self-interest	Pre-course training providing tools which allow students to engage in reflective practices and self-awareness	Institution, instructor, students
Lack of understanding of pedagogy on the part of the students	Pre-course training to expose students to the approaches taken in a learning community, as well as the rationale behind these approaches	Institution and instructor
*components of the pre-course training for students could be provided in the online Bridge, and/or in the Foundations week not-for-credit classes.		

As can be seen from the table above, using a learning community model is not without challenges. Some of these challenges, such as failing to work well with others and marginalization, can be the result of the diverse student body. Other challenges, such as friction between students and the instructor, as well as lacking knowledge of the pedagogy, can be due to a failure to understand the learning community model. If an effective learning community is to develop, thereby allowing students to benefit from a sense of trust, safety, and willingness to take risk, the institution must provide adequate pre-course and ongoing training for both the instructor and the students. In addition, routine check-ins with students should be held to determine emerging problems, and skilled facilitators should be ready to take action, working with students to reduce any potential negative individual and/or community impact.

### *Significance and Implications*

When shifting the focus away from lecture-based educational models towards models emphasizing collaboration and the social aspects of learning, there is a need to fully understand how to develop and support learning communities in both online and on-campus environments. This empirical study adds to the existing knowledge by submitting new findings about of online technology and how it can be used to aid in the development of on-campus learning communities. In addition, a focus on the perceived disadvantages of learning communities ensures a greater understanding of some key issues discussed in literature by researchers such as Palloff and Pratt (2005), Brook and Oliver (2005), McConnell (2006), and Swan and Shea (2005), who explore the development of online learning communities. A specific outcome of this study is the DAGR Framework which focuses on the roles played by the individual, the cohort, and the institution when a learning community model is used. Additional outcomes include the overview of online activities that can be completed by students preparing to form an on-campus learning community and the presentation of strategies for mitigating perceived disadvantages of the learning community model. In the following section, I explore the implications of this study on the development of learning communities, educational institutions, and larger society.

#### *Implications for Practice (learning community development)*

With a focus on using online technologies to successfully develop on-campus learning communities, this study has several implications for our current practice. Specifically, the DAGR Framework that resulted from this study not only focuses on the actions and goals necessary in the development of a learning community, but it also allows us to explore the interrelated roles of the individual, the cohort and the institution. By identifying a number of actions that can lead to the development of a

learning community, as well as the goals of those actions, the path to the learning community is clearly laid out.

Furthermore, using an online bridge course to support the building of a learning community for on-campus students provides several advantages. Practical issues such as the reduction in use of on-campus resources, and flexibility for students who wish to defer departure from their home town are addressed. Also to be considered is the ability to provide the learning materials in different formats to accommodate diverse learning preferences. As well, allowing students to meet in an online environment, which provides them with information about the university and the people with whom they will be studying, may contribute to a reduction of stress. According to some of the participants, the Bridge played a significant role in making the educational experience a positive one. Some students believed they were more relaxed when they arrived on campus because they had taken part in the online Bridge.

In addition to the presentation of the DAGR Framework and the discussion about online Bridge activities, potential disadvantages of the learning community model have been identified. This will enable institutions, students, and staff to be proactive and implement strategies that may reduce potential negative impacts found when actualizing a learning community. The work I have presented here could also result in a different way of approaching the development and support of learning communities for on-campus students. For example, how students and faculty are trained, as well as the level of support they receive, may be improved. And if issues such as marginalization are positively impacted by this study, it is likely that student retention will increase.

### *Implications for Educational Institutions and Society*

In order for our graduates to be fully equipped to work in a wide variety of organizations and to make positive contributions in a complex society, it is important to provide them with appropriate tools. By allowing students to become fully participating members of a learning community, they obtain insights into working effectively with others, thereby achieving new skills that can be applied to the work place. Upon graduation, these students are not only the possessors of theoretical subject-specific knowledge, but also have many practical skills, including the ability to reflect on their own role and perspectives, understand their own biases, and work in a variety of contexts – such as performing individual tasks, working with partners and on teams, as well as appreciating organizational challenges.

Educational institutions that propose to use the learning community model need to have a solid understanding of the model, as well as an understanding of the role the institution plays as a nurturer of students working and growing in such a community. In addition, institutions need to recognize the responsibility they have in providing students with a safe, trusting environment that enables the community to grow to its full potential. An environment where collaboration, support, and responsibility is the norm, and where students work together with faculty and administrators to ensure the needs of all community members are met. This study provides insights that can not only inform institutions of higher education about this responsibility, but also provide an understanding of the actions that support its successful realization.

Results of this study provide insights into the effective development of learning communities for on-campus students. By doing so, challenges are highlighted, and potential strategies for mitigating these challenges are provided. For

those institutions interested in using the learning community model for on-campus students, some of the strategies outlined in this thesis could be adopted. While the university examined in this study has some characteristics that may be different from those of other institutions, such as the student mix, it is likely that there are also similarities; therefore this research could make a valuable contribution to a wider field.

An additional implication for institutions is the identification of a need for experienced and well trained faculty to work in the learning community environment. Since the skill set required for lecture-based models is different from that required in a collaborative, social learning environment, appropriate orientation, as well as ongoing training and support, must be provided for faculty working in institutions that use the learning community model. While the implications of this study are numerous, there is also potential for further research, which will be addressed in the following section.

#### *Potential for Further Research*

When embarking on this study, I considered a number of options and approaches before committing to the project that is reported in the pages of this thesis. Wanting to take part in a meaningful study, one that could move our understanding of learning communities forward, I chose to examine the use of online technology for on-campus students working in a learning community environment. While the path I chose revealed some interesting and useful insights, I believe there are additional observations yet to be explored that could also contribute to our understanding of this field. In this section, I will outline some of these other research areas that could build on existing work.

In chapter 2, I discussed the shared norms and values that are agreed upon by members of a community (Roberts and Pruitt, 2003). In light of the experiences of the

participants in this study, further work could be undertaken that would explore pre-existing norms and values and their affect on the community as a whole. As this research revealed, some students appeared to have been drawn to people who had similar appearances, experiences, and skill sets. In a diverse community, rich with people from different backgrounds, who have travelled many paths in life, there is value to helping students embrace the differences and find comfort in an assortment of ideas and perspectives. If we are to accomplish this goal, we need to understand what motivates some individuals to challenge the norm, to push boundaries, and to embrace those who have different backgrounds and experiences.

In chapter 5, I discussed the positive impact of belonging to a student organization for students making the transition into higher education (Hurtado and Carter, 1997). I would suggest that additional work in this area could include exploring the impact of activities such as those contained in the online Bridge course. For example, would student attrition rates decline, increase, or stay the same if students engaged in an online course prior to arriving on campus? Also of relevance would be the impact of pre-existing groups on students entering higher education. Is the chance of success higher, lower or the same than students who arrive without an established network of friends?

Another item that came to my attention in the analysis completed in chapter 5 was the observation made by a student about the networking opportunities that were created in the classroom. If networking is a common goal for some students, does this mean there is a reason for the learning community to endure long after the students have graduated? Does the learning community continue, or is it superseded by something more closely related to a Community of Practice, or does it merely become a social network? Perhaps this depends on our definition of learning community and

whether or not it is closely linked to the educational institution and program of study. But perhaps also, we could turn our attention to the long reaching implications of the learning community model. Even though current literature explores the many benefits of this model, the long-term benefits appear to take a secondary position. If we look to the earlier models of the learning community, such as that pioneered by Alexander Meikelejohn (Smith, 2003), there appears to be a more acute awareness of wider reaching implications of the model. Perhaps then, we should explore not only the benefits to students as they are studying in the learning community, but also examine the duration of the learning community beyond those studies and the resulting long-term benefits.

In chapters 5 and 6, I reported that the Bridge was not perceived as helpful to some research participants. Furthermore, some found the Bridge was counterproductive as it led them to withdraw from contact with other students when they arrived on campus, rather than engaging with them. As a result, I would recommend that further research could be undertaken to explore these negative reactions; research aimed at understanding not only what caused the students to have such a response to the Bridge, but also how an online course could be adapted to meet the needs of all the students.

In both chapter 5 and chapter 6, I raised the issue of whether the learning community model was appropriate for everyone; to be more specific, whether or not students could successfully learn to adapt to the model after a lifetime of lecture-based education. And, if the majority of students are willing and able to adapt to a more collaborative model, how can we, as educators, provide them with tools that will ease the transition? Conversely, if this method of learning is not a good fit for everyone, how then can we assess personal suitability?

In this chapter, I introduced the DAGR Framework. As an outcome of my study, it requires further exploration; exploration which could reveal additional insights, thereby enhancing the framework further. Specifically, I would suggest examining how it fits with a broader range of institutions. Institutional size and orientation to learning, cohort demographic, and individual preference may all contribute in the applicability of the DAGR Framework.

In general terms, as I worked on this research, I found myself reflecting on the role of technology; not only how can we use it to our best advantage when creating learning communities, but how also how technology works against us. Finding that some students expressed distrust of how others portrayed themselves online was cause for concern. As a result, I believe further research to examine ways we can minimize feelings of distrust by using technology more effectively would be beneficial.

Finally, as I looked back to the starting point of this three phase study, I believe there is room for further work on student marginalization in learning communities. For example, why do some students feel marginalized? Who are they and what do they have in common with each other? It was also apparent from this study that students who felt included were not always aware of the marginalization of others. So, are there ways of increasing their awareness of student marginalization and finding ways to increase the atmosphere of inclusivity?

While there is great potential for further research related to this study, it is now time to move on to the last section of this chapter. In it, I will present some concluding comments, bringing the work full circle.

#### *Concluding Remarks*

During the course of this research project, which explored the use of an online course to begin the development of an on-campus learning community, I interviewed

39 individuals, held two focus groups with a total of 14 students, and surveyed 117 students. The data collected was rich and revealing, providing many significant insights into the lives of students and staff at a Canadian university. From expressions of frustration to those of relief, from anger to happiness, the individuals who contributed to this study did not disappoint. From providing a community development model that included no online foundation, to one that provided some basic online building blocks, the support provided to students evolved over time. Even though some participants found the progress insufficient, or even inappropriate, the majority acknowledged the effort to propel the community development process forward and found value in what was offered. I had many insights along the way, some of which came as swiftly as lightning; others were much slower to develop. In the next section, I will provide a personal perspective of some of these insights.

#### *A Personal Perspective*

When taking a look back over the three years I spent working on this study, I found I had many moments of realization. For example, trying to build a learning community without first preparing the students for this undertaking could be compared to trying to build a village without creating a solid foundation for each of the houses. While the structures could be erected, they may not withstand substantial battering by the elements. Similarly, a learning community built without a strong foundation is fickle, and lacks resilience. I also came to understand the influence the institution had on the development of the community. Even though a community consists primarily of students and faculty members, it is not independent of the institution that is responsible for its creation. When situations occur that cause students to question the institution's reliability, such as high staff turnover, the impact

on the community is significant and can range from marginalization to lack of trust in the efforts of fellow students.

Furthermore, while there are many documented benefits to the learning community model, there are also some significant challenges. Challenges, which if not resolved, could mean the community loses some of its most valuable members – those who offer different perspectives and demand we scrutinize the collective thought. If communities are to exist that stretch our imagination and enable members to take risks, then it is important to continually search for ways to encourage all community members to embrace diversity and seek out the value in a different perspective.

At the beginning of this study, the goal of examining the perceptions of three intakes of students seemed somewhat intimidating. However, I became immersed in the issues and the three iterations of the action research spiral allowed me to fully interact with the project, seeking to resolve some of the key concerns, and understand the problems of those involved, striving always to re-assess and improve. I have thrived in the rich environment of action research and am a solid believer in the power of this approach.

While this study started as an exploration into the building of trusting relationships in an online educational environment, it morphed into an examination of how the online environment could benefit on-campus students. I have learned that there is benefit to being patient and allowing the process to unfold, all the while staying in touch with the core purpose – striving to create a place where individuals can work in harmony, embracing their differences. In the classroom, both online and on-campus, we still have far to go in creating safe, inclusive learning environments, but by persisting and continuing to explore areas of discomfort, I believe we can be

successful. If we do not persist, the price is high. In closing, I have included a comment from a Phase III international student, Ph3Stu16i, who volunteered the following:

*Definitely [this university] is a better place to be, because you think that you are part of a group, not a student number in a classroom and nobody knows you. At [this university], everybody knows me and they care.*

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## Appendices