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Barbara Yalof, American College of Education and Harcum College

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Marshaling Resources: A Classic Grounded Theory Study of Online Learners

Barbara Yalof, American College of Education and Harcum College

Abstract

Classic grounded theory (CGT) was used to identify a main concern of online students in higher education. One of the main impediments to studying online is a sense of isolation and lack of access to support systems as students navigate through complex requirements of their online programs. Hypothetical probability statements illustrate the imbalance between heightened needs of virtual learners and perceived inadequate support provided by educational institutions. The core variable, *marshaling resources*, explains how peer supports sustain motivation toward successful program completion. Understanding the critical contribution virtual interpersonal networks make towards maximizing resources by group problem solving is a significant aspect of this theory.

Keywords: Online learning, e-learning, personal learning networks, peer networks

Background

Online programs present a particularly appealing alternative to face-to-face programs in higher education as economic realities force more students to retain employment to pay for spiraling costs of education. The economic potential of the growing online market has not been lost on institutions of higher learning. Traditional programs have struggled to sustain a viable student base, but they can increase their numbers through the addition of national and international online students (Appana, 2008). In 2012, enrollment in online courses grew 9%, with the proportion of students enrolled in online courses at 32%, an all-time high (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

In light of the continual growth of online courses it is particularly alarming that attrition in online programs can exceed that of traditional programs by 10-20% (Allen & Seaman, 2010). Not only do students who leave an online program forfeit learning opportunities, but the institution also suffers lower enrollment, thereby imposing financial strain and reducing the vibrancy of the student body. Sustainability of programs in higher education relies heavily on recruitment of student populations who complete their programs and conclude that their academic experience has been a worthwhile investment (Gittings, 2010).

Empirical studies have not explained sufficiently how institutions can reduce online attrition (Kember & Leung, 2009; Tinto, 2012). Kember (1989) recognized the need to generate theories that explain attrition from online programs. He maintained that it is difficult to draw conclusions because the number of constructs in this substantive area is

“unwieldy if not unmanageable” (p. 279). The use of CGT provides the writer a greater understanding of the “motivational drivers” (Glaser, 1998, p. 32) of a particular group of participants. Discovering the main concern of online students through the systematic application of GT methodology draws into focus the dominant psychological coping mechanisms of online students.

The Theory of Marshaling Resources

The main concern for online learners distilled from this study is a feeling of disconnect or isolation, which may manifest itself as panic or anger, when confronted with a barrier to success. Because studying online is accomplished in a solitary virtual environment, students interact with the computer and must be able to navigate the learning management system and engage with the material in the absence of peer support. As learners progress through their programs, they find inconsistencies between their own expectations and needs and their online educational environment (Kiliç-Çakmak, Karatas, & Ocak, 2009). Glaser (1978) discusses how people position themselves (in this case, for success) by purposefully managing others. Students learn how to maximize resources and reduce frustration by building peer connections. As groups progress from mutual dependency to reciprocity, trust builds, and relationships deepen. Harnessing the power of this safe haven they have created online, students vent and reinvigorate. Marshaling resources illuminates how and why people find camaraderie when they need to feel a stronger sense of connection.

Given the promise of grounded theory to analyze patterns of human behavior in a systematic manner, I conducted a study around the grand tour question “Please talk about your experience as an online learner” to develop a theory that would provide a “theoretical foothold”(Glaser & Strauss, 1965, p. 268) into understanding problems that confront online students. What issues contribute to the high rate of attrition? Data were coded and compared and relationships between concepts analyzed to reveal several hypothetical probability statements to explain patterns of behavior problematic for participants (Glaser, 1978). The processes of constant comparison analysis (CCA) of data (Glaser, 1965), concurrent theoretical sampling, and the researcher’s theoretical sensitivity were the tools used to guide the emergent theory (Holton, 2010). Theoretical memos served as the basis for comparison and were written by the researcher “*as they strike the analyst while coding*” (author’s italics) (Glaser, 1978, p.83).

Information was gathered from 18 undergraduate and graduate students in 14 online colleges. These participants administer, counsel, and teach in online programs, and provide divergent perspectives on pertinent issues. Theoretical sampling guided the choice of participants. In order to saturate categories, I chose participants who are satisfied with their programs, who had been extremely frustrated at some point, and who had dropped out. Information from experts was solicited and discussion groups of online learners in professional learning networks were examined and coded for relevant information to provide a well-rounded view of the current state of online education (Glaser, 2007).

Marshaling resources highlights the power of social networking to fend off isolation and to create a network of like-minded peers who together solve problems that seem

unsolvable alone. The ability to trust others from afar transforms the learner's experience of aloneness into one of powerful bonding. Marshaling resources includes the interrelated indicators of *mattering*, *teaching ambience*, *navigating emotions*, *tipping point*, *breaking off*, and *replenishing*.

Mattering

A nurturing presence, be it human or spiritual, is crucial to success in online learning. Online students may never meet anyone from their college, yet they want to believe they matter and what they are doing has value. Learners realize they may need to create a system of support, as they find the educational institution is unable to provide for all of their needs. Many develop a group of people who at first care about the same thing and then learn to care about each other; sometimes very deeply. Properties of mattering are sustaining motivation, practicing expertise, virtual invisibility, and connecting virtually.

As a group coalesces, members form an emotional scaffold during stressful times. Peer networks eliminate isolation and associated feelings of anger and depression that occur if progress is thwarted.

Mattering applies also to the belief that the work accomplished in the online program will be beneficial for future employment and merits the significant hours of work involved. Coursework that complements practical skills is inherently motivating. One respondent notes "when assignments include freedom to use class assignments to enhance my employment skills, I feel that I am really learning and wanting to be there." When coursework does not offer immediate application to work, students turn to peers to sustain motivation and enrich learning through socialization.

Students enhance the creation or building of their own support systems through practicing expertise. Oftentimes, they provide information to peers in a quasi-teaching role, thereby enhancing their own feelings of self-worth by sharing their skills. In the online classroom, a more informed peer scaffolds a less knowledgeable peer by interpreting what is going on. This allows one person to lean safely on another without fear of being judged. These roles can reverse at any time, as tutoring relationships become the basis for personal relationships, which in turn become part of a support network. In this way, particularly in classrooms with low teacher presence, online students enlist others to make sense of assignments and achieve mastery over material. In turn, they reach out to help others as they internalize the power of reciprocity. Benevolent behavior helps people form friendships, which lead to co-building knowledge and teamwork (Knowles, 2008). Eventually, if mutually desired, repeated exchanges lead to a more intimate personal involvement. It is important to note that most of these group members never meet, yet are described as "family".

Without the benefit of face-to-face interaction, problem solving is more complex and can contribute to virtual invisibility, a feeling that, because you cannot be seen, your request can go unnoticed or ignored? One participant with a dual role as online teacher and student remarks how easy it is to ignore an online student in need. Those who study online

usually have time-sensitive issues, and stress compounds as time passes and nothing is resolved. A participant notes, "Once I get angry, I am wasting my time when I should be working."

It is relatively easy to mitigate these negative feelings. Data show that a simple act of a quick, personalized reply is effective in alleviating negative emotions, which begin to swell when people feel ignored. Relationships help redefine an isolating environment into a more nurturing one. Connecting virtually to others is a powerful motivator, as participants speak of not wanting to let down the people who believe in them.

Teaching Ambience

Encouragement from one who cares serves as a motivator for online students. The course instructor, though not visible in a corporeal sense, provides the teaching ambience, which directly affects course effectiveness and student satisfaction. A participant compares course experiences with a peer who had a different teacher in this same course. The peer teacher is warm and nurturing, while the other is non-responsive. The participant's desire to continue online studies is revitalized after a course with a teacher who appreciates and shares her sense of humor. Data show many times it is the course instructor who guides the student back into the class and makes the most important contribution to student success. Properties of teaching ambience are feeling lost, rubric reply, and positioning to share.

Instructor absence contributes to a sense of feeling lost in the online classroom. Data reveal this: as online teacher presence decreases, student struggle increases. Controlling class is a property of teaching ambience that attributes skill and willingness of the instructor to provide timely, constructive support and structure to student success. Without a visible and competent instructor presence, participants are susceptible to losing interest easily. One participant remarks that she sometimes feels as if she is her own teacher, and she has a grader who passes judgment, and she is not sure if she is learning.

A learning environment ideal for constructing knowledge provides parameters for mutual respect and makes students feel safe to express themselves. In the absence of a strong teacher presence to enforce rules and classroom structures, numerous concerns arise. Participants note problems interpreting assignments and intense "unmonitored arguments among students." Indolent peers might create annoyances, while other vocal students participate in arguments that derail learning through learner disengagement. This study corroborates research by Cull, Reed, and Kirk (2012) who note that chaos that can ensue without supportive presence of a knowledgeable instructor. This presence is essential to student intellectual growth and emotional stability; it stabilizes the group, and prevents flare-outs that derail learning.

Rubric reply is a response that comes from a teacher in the form of feedback that lacks personalization. Many times comments are made and grade deductions are taken without specifics of how to improve their work. Data show assignments are difficult to

interpret and seem vague, and students feel they must tiptoe softly rather than ask for clarification.

Online students can be nurtured by fellow students and in turn may nurture, but prefer to choose whom they nurture. Positioning to share is an aspect of the teaching environment as it informs classroom ambience relating to collaboration. The majority of online students do not want to collaborate, and view the forced collaboration of the online environment as impeding their learning. Certain conditions must be met in order for these students to build a mentoring relationship. They must possess a certain level of need for the relationship in order for them to engage. One participant says she understands that collaboration is "supposed to be a growth experience," but does "not want to end up doing the extra work involved when folks do not live up to my standards." High functioning online students are frustrated by the apathy of students who are supposed to be fellow collaborators. Eventually, foundering but motivated students gain confidence, and are welcomed as group members. The desire to build connections may begin in collaborative groups if potential members are identified by their positive response to nurturing.

Navigating Emotions

Navigating emotions involves the skill of the online learner to progress through complex learning management systems and degree requirements without letting negativity become overwhelming. Online students often encounter situations or emergencies, and students may think of dropping out if they encounter rigid authoritarian policies and attitudes. Remaining flexible is a property of navigating emotions. Online learners suffer less when institutions are flexible, and data revealed this to be contrary to the case in many situations. Navigating emotions is characterized by tiptoeing softly and relinquishing control.

Tiptoeing softly involves not wanting to stand out as a complainer. In instances that do require clarification and support, online students try to finesse communications with those who are in a position to judge their work. One student describes a situation where she had misunderstood an assignment and received a poor grade, "Although I felt that it was her responsibility to provide remediation for me, you don't want to alienate." Online students often feel they have been wrongly judged, yet do not believe the fight is important enough to risk losing the teacher's good graces.

Relinquishing control applies as online learners reflect on the emotional turmoil of feeling misunderstood. Relinquishing resistance by continuing on despite these feelings, they are able to let negative comments go. One participant was unable to do this and was affronted by every perceived slight to her intelligence. The student was infuriated by not being able to challenge the teacher face-to-face and point-by-point. She ultimately left her program, feeling she could not control the situation from afar. Participants speak of seeing online chats become filled with angry rants. Few noticed angry comments within the classroom discussions; most negative comments were posted on the chat boards not seen by those who had the power to assess their performance. Students who develop trusted peers with whom they share are not likely to flame out in this way.

Many comments on chat boards are posted to receive support, be understood, and be heard. One student on a chat group I coded declared that she was finished; she has had enough. She received so many supportive replies in response to her cry and saw how much her trajectory towards program completion mattered to peers that she was mollified. Today I received a Linked In request from her with the much-desired "Dr." in front of her name.

Tipping Point

A tipping point is reached when a solution to a problem does not appear to be within easy reach. Pressure and turmoil increase as unmet needs begin to outweigh support provided by the institution. Feelings of isolation and anger ensue. The very issues that caused others to flounder do not particularly disturb many participants. A tipping point occurs when the status quo alters and expectations or protocol undergoes a transformation. Policies that are changed midstream may force people into tighter deadlines or situations they are unprepared to accept. Subsequent points of frustration occur where systems of support provided by more structured environment give way to more independent projects. Lack of a strong teaching presence or poor responsiveness of the teacher causes stress that may be unbearable. Judgments passed in harshness, if not accompanied by a remedy or remediation, push online students to feel unsupported and they may flounder.

Breaking Off

Too much stress and harsh judgment may cause a sufferer to think about abandoning his or her efforts towards a goal. A high level of stress is associated with online students' unmet needs. Students may feel ignored, invisible, and angry. These emotions precipitate a critical juncture (Glaser, 1998) characterized by thoughts of breaking off. Online learners assess the cost of failure (Scott, 2007) and may begin to look for help. Students who proactively search for resources (marshal) are in a better position to continue efforts to reach their goal.

Marshaling resources is a skill that can be developed to avoid getting emotionally "dragged under" by perceived lack of support. Online students who have positioned for success have taken responsibility for organizing their own system of support. They may have a clearer picture of how to move forward, and do not face the lethargy that isolation may engender. Students who study online must master both program material and their emotions to move smoothly through a curriculum. Support from their peer group empowers both of these areas.

Replenishing

When emotional scaffolding is in place, energy is replenished by sharing and venting. A safe place to release stress reduces the chance of anxiety becoming overwhelming and unremitting. Students can be re-energized and reinvigorated even by small gestures of

consolation. Teachers have power to instill a positive attitude in students through personalized feedback. A change to a different instructor can revive a student's interest in a class in which they struggle. Properties of replenishing are deepening faith and forging alliances. One participant discovers that she was in the same class as a new acquaintance, but with a different teacher. She shares this insight:

Teachers interpret the same parameters of each class differently. They each had the same rules from the school but I discovered over the course of the program that they used a lot of flexibility in how they interpreted the rules. From this I realized that not all teachers are the same, and she had a great teacher. Although the course itself was exactly the same as mine, she was having a great experience.

What was the difference? Kindness and caring are powerful motivators. Both participants in the study and students who contribute personal comments to the chat boards attest to the importance of locating caring instructors and advisors because these relationships provide the sustenance they need to continue.

A property of replenishing resources, deepening faith involves a way other than peer support that online students find emotional scaffolding to resolve problems. While some students have already assembled the rudiments of a virtual social network, others receive spiritual strength from belief in a higher power. They are able to deepen their faith in response to stress. As faith gives strength, so faith is strengthened. This cyclical process describes the power of faith to heal anger and help people find a path out of difficult situations. Those who have deep faith believe their struggles will resolve itself. The cyclical nature of deepening faith involves both trust in oneself and faith in a higher power. Faith empowers the individual and provides self-perpetuating relief from aloneness and stress. Connecting with spiritual feelings also creates powerful bridges from invisibility to visibility and from despair to hope. Forging alliance with peers provides strong support to those who require a two-way communication. Through faith and from peer support, students find a willingness to endure that persists despite the realization that concessions may be necessary. People decide that failure is not an option and push through barriers to achieve a goal.

Discussion

The theory of marshaling resources addresses the critical need for new theories to guide the emergent field of online learning (Kember & Leung, 2009, Saba, 2011). Saba (2011) noted the absence of theory in studies conducted using only the requirements of quasi-experimental research. The theory illuminates the various ways that online students of different temperaments respond to a common concern, which is the isolation and helplessness in the face of perceived lack of available institutional resources. It is not necessarily a linear process, as the level of neediness varies with each student, as does their ability to marshal support from capable sources. The more support students perceive is available, the fewer resources, both personal and psychological, are required to sustain the persistence effort. Imbalances between needs and supports provided by the educational institution can diminish student retention.

The theory indicates development of strong systems of support is a mostly student driven phenomenon, despite the fact that human connection is an essential component of learning online. Certainly, not all online courses contain the same requirement for social

interaction. Not all students share the same propensity for learners to want to interact online. Scott (2007) makes the point that inopportune circumstances such as differing schedules or time zones increase complications for online students. People with a highly developed personal commitment styles may thus be thwarted in their attempts to fulfill all requirements of collaborative projects in a timely manner. They may also experience extreme frustration feeling the pull of wanting to have the work completed on time but not having all of the pieces in on time.

On the other side of the collaboration discussion, data from this study show strong desire to build and lean on relationships with other students. The process of marshaling resources can also increase passion for learning through the process of co-creating knowledge. The concept of collaborative creativity, as Scott (2007) mentioned, aligns with marshaling resources because it illuminates how a shared learning experience can positively transform a student's perception of online learning. Participants who were active members of an online support group credited the group with not only intellectual stimulation but also emotional support to continue to completion despite obstacles.

The same positive emotional response holds true for students who develop virtual relationships with faculty or staff members. Rather than cutting off potentially rewarding relationships with teachers who could assume mentorship roles, participants want colleges to help them develop these relationships. Unfortunately, many institutions do not appear to value the student-to-staff connection and frequently change staff assignments. One participant relates this after months waiting for a helpful response from her unresponsive designated chairperson:

I put in a request for a new chairperson. Then I was blessed with getting the chair I had asked for in the first place. This chair was excited to have me, not like the first chair. We were equally excited to work together. I had had her as a teacher and we had clicked. We just seemed to click through e-mails, and discovered a similar sense of humor.

Replacing the student's unresponsive chair allows her to reevaluate her belief about the responsiveness of her college to her needs and re-energizes her dissertation journey. The action of the college transforms a disgruntled student into a successful graduate.

Implications for Practice

Marshaling resources conceptualizes how unmet student needs might cause one student to consider dropping out and another to be empowered by the experience in order to move ahead. Probability of success is related directly to availability of institutional resources and ability to expend psychological resources to receive help. Online learners believe that the outcome of their situation depends on how flexible and supportive the institutional staff is willing to be. The fundamental message provided by online learners in this study is a deep concern that many of their needs, and the needs of their fellow students, are not met.

Successful online students recognize they must act to build their own supports if they become disengaged or encounter trouble that virtual invisibility might engender. Through building relationships, they generate new resolve and this determines whether their path is

one of attrition or completion. Peer networks provide more emotional support than a teacher who does not create a strong presence. Importantly, online peer groups are able to transition from social discourse to cognitive support, and back again.

It is important to understand better the role of collaboration in online classes. Increasingly, accreditation agencies require colleges to utilize these types of so-called knowledge-building activities in their online courses. Students who cannot choose their teachers or mentors bristle at enforced peer collaboration. Participants clearly want to choose with whom they are going to be working and have a good idea about with whom they do not want to collaborate. High achievers do not wish to learn from or with those who are not driven to learn. In order for collaboration to work, motivation to learn and share must come from all parties, and clear parameters for group work requirements should be enforced.

Developing Ability to Marshal Resources

Marshaling resources by building community can involve a transformation from being a taker of information to being a giver, and can deeply enriched the experience of those who participate in the exchange (Holton, 2007). While it is true that individuals possess finite resources, each person has the capacity to marshal resources thereby enabling him or her to maximize resources by employing a learning-support group to solve problems. Some individuals know instinctively who is a nurturing presence and whom they wish to befriend. Many individuals go out of their way to assist others and are happy to do so.

Fit for other Substantive Areas

To heighten appreciation of the issues underlying high attrition in online programs, the present study was conducted using a classic grounded theory design (Glaser, 1965; 1978). This grounded theory study provides more than an explanation of the experience of online students. Online students may have more at stake than other groups of people; yet, the theory applies to those who struggle to maintain forward momentum as they navigate complex systems in today's society. The theory generated can be applied to people who find themselves in untenable situations or who face unsolvable problems alone. It explains how resiliency is found within from marshaling and accepting strength from others. Understanding the critical importance of personal networks to problem solving is a central component of this theory. Successful online students are able to discover and cultivate sources of support not readily apparent to all students.

Marshaling resources can be applied (Glaser, 2002, p. 8) to help institutions in order to understand how to retain a greater number of students by ensuring their emotional needs are met. Because grounded theories are abstracted from time, place, and from specific groups of people (Glaser, 2001), the theory should have fit and grab (relevance) to other substantive areas (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The need to secure alternative sources of support relates to people who struggle in all circumstances. Without the stability provided

by a source that is readily available to provide support, people cannot or are not able to progress forward.

Ideally, people should cultivate resources and have them in place before a tipping point occurs. Marshaling resources may help individuals and institutions realize the importance of developing networks of support early in the process of obtaining a degree online or any other goal that involves extreme effort. In this networked world, connections made during the time in college or graduate school can foster the formation of learning networks that serve one well during employment (Siemens, 2008). Participants who are able to make meaningful connections while studying online find added value to their educational experience exceeding merely classroom learning.

Categories such as forging alliances and deepening the faith describe the unrelenting efforts of participants who are driven to succeed. These concepts have fit and grab (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) for those who struggle and refuse to give up despite the effort and sacrifice involved. The theory marshaling resources is generalizable to the greater community (Glaser, 2001).

Contribution to the Body of Knowledge

Marshaling resources theory supports and extends the research conducted by Holton (2007) by providing additional insight into how a cohesive trusting group enables students to sustain interest in online learning. Holton's (2007) grounded theory, *rehumanizing knowledge work through fluctuating support networks*, highlights how people motivate each other. "Individual passion for learning is stimulated and reinforced in a network. There is a strong sense of collective wisdom . . ." (p. 37). Holton describes reciprocal learning as ". . . getting past disengagement . . ." (p. 37). When online learners interact with caring members of an online cohort, the way in which they acquire knowledge and their willingness to support fellow members grows exponentially.

Marshaling resources also affirms the studies of Gatin (2013) and Shea and Bidjerano (2009) whose studies both enrich understanding of the online student. Gatin (2013)'s theory *keeping your distance* sheds light on why some online students struggle with enforced collaboration, yet may find their own group a safe and motivating environment. As people begin to feel that their knowledge helps others, so their own cognitive progress is stimulated (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Vygotsky, 1978).

A combination of tenacity and emotional intelligence (Goleman, 1997) work together to facilitate people's ability to engage others' help when supports provided by the institution do not satisfy their needs. Through marshaling resources, people seek and create support systems. It is outside the realm of this study to investigate the role of emotional intelligence in marshaling resources, but is an area that other researchers may wish to pursue.

The contribution of this study should be tempered by its limitations. Although the theory seems to fit for other substantive areas, data resides within the online learning

arena. Empirical validation of concepts illustrated in this theory could be investigated in other areas where individuals experience difficulty having their needs met and may be prevented from attaining goals or receiving help they need.

As Simmons (2011) aptly noted, "You are unlikely to attain your 'what ought to be' unless you have a clear, accurate understanding of 'what is'" (p. 3). Marshaling resources can be applied to explain not only how to prevent student problems, but also to address what institutions of higher learning can do to prevent student dropout or transfer. More research is needed to test substantive theories based on current empirical situations in online learning and thus shape the teaching practices and policies in the evolving field of online learning. Additionally, more research into the value of personal learning networks as emotional scaffolding would test the theory's relevance and fit to other substantive areas.

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