Exploring Students' Experiences Learning Leisure Education through an Inter-University Virtual Learning Environment

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Abstract

A virtual learning environment was created for students taking upper level leisure education courses at Acadia University and the University of New Brunswick. The purpose of the study was to investigate students' experiences in this inter-university virtual learning environment. Data were gathered using a self-administered questionnaire on the last day of classes. The results indicated that the learning experience of students was enhanced primarily through contact with learners from another university with different academic background. Students from both institutions benefited from participation in online discussion groups and tool development feedback groups with their peers and students not from their home. Discussion focuses upon positive outcomes experienced by the students and considerations for the use of such an inter-university teaching innovation.

KEYWORDS: Virtual learning, on-line discussion

Introduction

During the 2007 Society of Recreation and Park Educators Conference, a session titled "Exploring Conversational Writing and Learning" was presented. The presenters described an initiative that involved students from two classes at Clemson University and students from one class at a university in Sweden who engaged in a discussion about a common poem that they were all studying This presentation initiated dialogue about the potential benefits of having students enrolled in similar courses at different universities interacting through a virtual learning environment (VLE) and making use of one another's resources between two attendees who both teach a course in leisure education.

A VLE is a *place*, divided into working spaces called "rooms" where students can connect electronically to share knowledge (Peat, 2000). The implementation of VLEs was, in part, a response from the education system to address a long standing problem of learners needing to physically be in the same locale (Barajas & Owen, 2000). This need not only disadvantages certain types of potential learners based upon factors such as income, residence, and access to transportation, but also can create rather homogeneous groups of learners limiting access to diversity of opinion expressed within the classroom setting.

The authors of this paper decided to establish an inter-university VLE with their respective leisure education classes during the Fall semester of 2007 to explore whether such an environment could enhance the learning experience for students. Our inter-university VLE initiative provided an electronic work space in which students living five hours apart from one another could regularly meet and work together on shared learning initiatives.

The decision was prompted, in part, because there were only eight students enrolled in the Acadia University course and the instructor was concerned the group size was rather small and potentially homogeneous. The students represented a similar demographic profile, and had already been in a number of core courses together as program majors. The University of New Brunswick (UNB) class involved twenty students who were more diverse in terms of their academic background and the nature of careers they were seeking (i.e., within the broader field of kinesiology as well as recreation and sport). In addition, the Acadia students had a solid foundation in leisure studies and recreation management while the UNB students had taken fewer foundational courses within the discipline. The UNB instructor believed her students' learning could be enhanced by connecting with students who had this solid foundation.

Social interaction among students plays an important role in the learning process and can have a significant impact on learning outcomes. Grabinger and Dunlap (2000) indicated that "learning occurs in a social context through collaboration, negotiation, debate, peer review and mentoring" (p. 37). Collaboration and cooperation can provide learners with the opportunity to discuss, argue, negotiate, and reflect upon existing beliefs and knowledge (Agostinho, Lefoe, & Hedberg, 1997). What is not clear is whether the outcomes of student interaction within a virtual learning environment would be similar to those reported through face-to-

face contact. With the increased development of technology that facilitates social interaction, either informally though sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace* or more formally though academic platforms such as *Blackboard*, this is an important question for educators to pursue.

According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), three core elements of a media rich environment that make teaching and learning possible are a cognitive presence (construct meaning through sustained communication), teaching presence (through course design, instruction, discourse facilitation) and a social presence (ability of learners to project their personal characteristics to the group). The premise of their model is that in an educational environment, learning occurs through interaction. It is important for educators to take the time to build a sense of community with learners who are connected through electronic means (Johnson, 2001; Rovai, 2003).

Computers and networking capability have been used to enhance learning in various ways over the past two decades. On-line discussion capability has been applied in various ways as a means of connecting learners outside of traditional face-to-face interaction. McComb (1993) identified certain advantages to asynchronous discussion amongst students including convenience, increased control by participants, opportunity for elaboration, and the ability to continue discussions following the end of class. Kuehn (1994) suggested that despite rather limited success with electronic discussion in higher education settings to date, that asynchronous student discussion, if facilitated with specific goals, could encourage dynamic thoughtful interaction. Certain authors have challenged educators to explore use of computer applications that foster constructive learning and engage students in critical thinking (Aylward and McKinnon, 1999; Jonassen, 1996). MacKinnon and Aylward (1999) identified the potential for electronic discussion groups in academic settings and provided a template that would foster substantive electronic discussion. Their research showed notable improvement in student discussion patterns when a template or framework was applied.

The value of community building within online discussion groups has been discussed as a means of creating a sense of connectedness between participants that would foster a greater depth in the exchange of ideas (Palloff & Pratt, 1999) and combating the sense of isolation (Lally & Barrett, 1999). Duemer et al. (2002) found the emergence of three distinct patterns relative to the establishment of online learning communities. The first was task-oriented with little desire for personal interaction with others beyond the discussion. The second pattern involved limited social interaction beyond the specific discussion task. In the third case, participants shared personal information with others through their dialogue and made reference to personal information shared by others as threads of conversation developed. As such, there existed a deeper exchange of ideas between those who felt a sense of connection to the community with whom they were willing to share personal information.

Dale and Lane (2004) were among the first of make use of on-line discussions within sport, leisure, and tourism programs. They discussed the merits of students

being able to contribute anytime and from anywhere, but identified the challenge of motivating students to engage in the discussion groups. They found a culture of downloading learning materials existed, but there was a hesitance on behalf of students to actively engage in online discussions. The authors reported that having students receive positive feedback for engagement appeared to transmit the message that what they had to offer was valued and served to sustain engagement.

More recently, Kayler and Weller (2007) conducted research on the establishment of communities of practise wherein professionals could come together and engage in meaningful on-line discussion. Participants were assigned to groups ensuring a diversity of opinions, and were required to be reflective about their own experiences and to critically analyze and constructively challenge the opinions expressed by others, in a timely and professional manner. The results indicated that students were able to place themselves at the centre of their learning. As the feeling of community developed, students became more comfortable expressing themselves as well as supporting and challenging others in order to maximize learning from one another. It appeared as though students were not simply consuming information given to them, but working to construct new meanings based upon the discussions. This resulted in the social construction of knowledge by the group. The authors concluded from their work that online communities of practise can facilitate cognitive and affective development for learners.

A review of literature related to the use of the VLE in higher education produced limited research directly related to linkages between classes of learners at separate universities. Since the completion of our study, a paper was presented to the Higher Education Academy of the UK (Kiernan, 2008) describing an inter-institutional dialogue initiative between political science students at Sheffield Hallam and the University of Western Scotland (UWS). Students at UWS were sent a set of questions generated by students during a discussion at Sheffield Hallam related to the Scottish politics. The questions were discussed in the UWS class and the discussion was videotaped and returned to the Sheffield Hallam class who then discussed the content of the video. Those discussions were audio taped and the sound files returned to UWS for feedback. Due to lack of technical capability, it was not possible to establish a self-directed interactive VLE. Results from participants provided an encouraging assessment of the initiative and support for further initiatives which would facilitate discussion on a common topic of interest between students in traditional classes at separate universities. Students reported value in a learning environment that combines traditional classroom-based modes of learning with an opportunity for discussion that extends beyond the classroom walls, engaging with learners who provide a different perspective on the material.

Much of the existing literature relating to VLEs and higher education focuses upon perceived advantages and disadvantages, often from a technological moreso than a pedagogical perspective (Dimitropoulos, Manitsaris, & Mavridis, 2007; Dutton, Cheong, & Park, 2004; Secker & Price, 2004). Existing research infrequently reflects student perspectives and therefore little knowledge exists from the student perspective relative to specific outcomes achieved when students pursue learning through the aid of computer-assisted virtual means.

One study collected data from VLE users in higher education (Haven & Botterill, 2002) involving 11 academic institutions in the UK that offer hospitality, leisure, tourism, and sport programs to determine the nature of use of VLEs in program delivery. The reported uses included delivering graduate level distance education, preparing for work placements, conferencing, posting of resources, providing course documentation, providing library access, conducting multiple choice assessments, providing postgraduate research support, delivering course modules, sharing research links, delivering student feedback, promoting problem-based learning, and posting digital videos. Specific objectives included enhancing the quality of learning, supporting on campus teaching, expanding flexible delivery for distance learning, and freeing up staff time. Faculty and students were both asked what benefits, if any, were realized through use of the VLE. For faculty, benefits included increased personal reflection by students, enhanced quality of discussions, ability to track coursework submissions, potential to interact with a greater number of students, opportunities for student-centred learning, and the capability to negotiate time and location barriers. Students reported higher grades, convenience, increased time for reflection, heightened feeling of support, and greater access to current material as benefits. Limitations reported by faculty using the VLE within the designated disciplines included the lack of technical support, resistance to change by students, amount of time required to set up and manage the VLE, technological glitches, loss of sense of community, learners expectations for immediate responses, faculty time devoted to such innovations not recognized, and the lack of opportunity to build faculty-student relationships.

Additional research has identified perceived potential benefits associated with VLE use. Thompson, Martin, Richards, and Branson (2003) discussed the importance of reflection time in permitting critical thinking and depth in discussions. Online discussions not held in real time provide the opportunity for participants to carefully consider points previously raised before engaging in the discussion. Given that everyone has a particular time of day or night when they do their best thinking, individuals may engage in the VLE at a time that best suits their needs. The asynchronous communication which occurs through a VLE, where teachers and students share learning but not necessarily in real time, can promote deeper levels of reflection enabling critical thinking among students at various performance levels (Dimitropoulos et al., 2007).

Delivering material to today's computer-savvy students via a VLE is beneficial because it offers the interactivity that they have come to expect (Hodge, Tabrizi, Farwel, & Wuensch, 2007). The ability of students to collaborate in a VLE fosters a participatory culture that overcomes distance barriers and facilitates the development of a social space where learning can occur. It also provides an environment that increases self expression, interaction with peers located in other geographic areas, and the development of problem solving and analytical skills. Other researchers have raised concerns regarding the wholesale application of the establishment of VLEs simply because the technology exists to do so. Asynchronous discussions are void on non-verbal messages and social cues that are useful

components of communication. However, online discussion can facilitate engagement of shy learners who lack social confidence in face-to-face interactions (Driver, 2002; Vonderwell, 2003). Haven and Botterill (2003) urged educators to focus on pedagogy and not just technology when considering the use of VLEs. Technology should not displace face-to-face interaction unless necessary in cases such as distance education. When creating VLEs for use in higher education settings, care needs to be taken to ensure that doing so will enhance and add value to the course (Koskela, et al., 2005) and must be supported by research to examine their effectiveness (Dale & Lane, 2004).

One study examined the use of the VLE in leisure, sport, and tourism degree programs throughout the UK (Dale & Lane, 2007). They discovered that although the potential existed for students to engage in interactive learning activities through the use of existing a VLE, the majority were content to just download instructor notes. Most students appeared to lack the motivation to accept greater responsibility for their learning through online engagement. Students were concerned about embarrassment when expressing deeper level thoughts to peers and professors in online discussions and the perception that sharing their best thinking and ideas with fellow learners might somehow detract from their grade. The researchers concluded that within the disciplines being studied, traditional classroom-based delivery will probably not be replaced by VLEs in the foreseeable future, and that blended approaches where VLE initiatives supplement classroom-based learning experiences will likely increase. The researchers also posited that differences may exist between the humanities and professional practise programs.

The literature generally reflects the use of VLEs in delivery of online courses where the instructor and students do not meet face-to-face and all communication exists via the VLE. There are very few references to a *blended* approach where a VLE is established as a means of extending the walls of a traditional classroom enabling students to connect with a broader, possibly more diverse, set of learners than those in their classroom.

While electronic interactions are now possible due to recent technological advancements, it is important to explore whether, and in what ways, students' experiences may be enhanced or hampered as a result of technological innovations. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to investigate students' experiences with an inter-university virtual learning environment in an upper level Leisure Education course. The following research questions were developed to guide our inquiry:

1. What do students value about sharing learning through an electronic medium with peers from another university?

2. What are students' experiences (positive and negative) with the use of a VLE to complete specific course requirements that make use of the virtual learning environment?

3. What outcomes resulted from this inter-university initiative?

Learners in this study were all undergraduate students in small liberal education universities whose experience with higher education has been through traditional

classroom learning. As such, using a blended approach to learning seemed appropriate. This initiative involved two separate groups of learners, each with separate instructors, enrolled in different but similar courses at separate universities, all making use of the virtual learning environment as a component of a the overall learning experience.

Establishment of the Inter-University Initiative

During the 2007 Fall term, RECR 3096 – Leisure Education Principles and Processes was being taught at Acadia University while RSS 3213 – Leisure Education and Facilitation Techniques was taught at the University of New Brunswick. Leisure education has long been used in therapeutic settings as a means of enhancing the quality of life for those who, because of a particular characteristic or condition, have had their leisure functioning adversely affected. Most academic courses focusing on leisure education represent the therapeutic perspective and appear as offerings in Therapeutic Recreation programs. For the past 15 years, a small cohort of researchers have explored the need for leisure education for all segments of the population as a means of enhancing quality of life for all (e.g., Caldwell, Baldwin, Walls, & Smith, 2004; Leitner & Leitner, 2004; Mundy, 1998; Robertson, 2007; Shannon & Morrison, 2007). Neither Acadia nor UNB have therapeutic recreation streams within their recreation programs, therefore, both of the leisure education courses were designed to explore the value and processes of leisure education for all segments of the population. For the past three years, the authors have used a text entitled *The Leisure Education Manual* (Robertson, 2005).

The Acadia students were all seniors in the Bachelor of Recreation Management (BRM) degree program. The UNB students were in different years and from two degree programs: Bachelor of Science in Kinesiology (BScKin) and Bachelor of Recreation and Sport Studies (BRSS). The UNB students had taken fewer focused core leisure and recreation courses than the Acadia students (e.g., Psychology of Sport rather than Leisure Behaviour; Sociology of Sport rather than Leisure in Canadian Society). As such, the UNB students were generally less connected to the field of recreation and therefore had less exposure to leisure theory and recreation delivery practices.

It was determined that *Blackboard*, hosted by the UNB server, would be the most appropriate platform for the initiative. With the support of UNB's Centre for Enhancement for Teaching and Learning, the Acadia students were each issued a guest account that would enable them to access the course site. The site contained detailed course outlines for both courses so that students could better understand the nature of the total learning experience of the other group; short biographies and a picture posted by each student and both professors; a set of discussion groups (containing the names of students in the group and the date when each would be activated); and a set of leisure education tool/activity feedback groups. The coursework carried out using the virtual learning environment represented 25% of the grading schema for the students. The other 75% was graded work carried out within the context on their respective courses.

Personal Biographies

Students and professors each developed and posted a professional biography that included a basic demographic profile (name, hometown, program and year of study), previous work/volunteer experience, any previous experience with leisure education, motivation for taking the leisure education elective course, primary leisure interests, and future aspirations. They also posted a photograph of themselves engaging in a preferred leisure pursuit. In order to not violate personal privacy, students were given freedom to share only information with which they were comfortable, within the suggested parameters, and no issues or concerns arose for any student as a result.

Discussion Groups

Leisure education gives rise to many interesting topics for discussion, especially when applied outside of clinical settings as was the case in these courses. Therefore, the purpose of this assignment (valued at 10%) was to provide an opportunity for students to focus on a specific issue and to engage in an in-depth, small group discussion/debate with fellow students about it. Students from each institution were randomly assigned to one of six discussion groups in order to ensure that interuniversity discussion would occur. A series of weekly questions were posted to Blackboard, and the assigned group consisting of students from Acadia and UNB engaged in an "e-discussion" on the designated question for a period of one week. Each student was required to provide at least three entries which had to be 250 to 300 words in length, in the form of a letter to other members in their discussion group, and posted at least 24 hours apart. Once the first posting had been made, students were required to take into account and react to, challenge, or elaborate on the ideas and opinions expressed by fellow students as well as stating their own perspective. It was expected that students would make use of existing literature and expert opinion to help support their points and not rely solely on personal opinion. The instructors developed the discussion questions each weekend prior to the discussion beginning to capture the essence of key material being covered in both classes at a specific point in time and so as to not disadvantage students from either school. Both instructors monitored the discussion on a daily basis to ensure that requirements of the assignment were being adhered to by participants.

Tool/Activity Design and Implementation

Each student was responsible for designing a leisure education tool/activity that could be used with a group in a program setting, and for implementing it within his or her respective class. The tool or activity was to address a specific aspect of the leisure education process (e.g., leisure awareness, self-assessment, activity sampling, skill development, or personal planning) and target a specific group (e.g., children ages 3 to 5, single mothers, teens with ADHD). One week prior to presenting the tool to the class, students posted a detailed draft description of the tool/activity for feedback from peers within their designated groups (which were different from their discussion groups and included students from both universi-

ties). Fellow students within each group had five days to provide detailed, constructive feedback regarding the tools/activities for each of their group members once they were posted. The designer was required to take the feedback into consideration and incorporate it, as appropriate, into the final version of the tool which was then presented to the class.

Methodology

Data were gathered from four sources. Given the lack of knowledge about students' experiences with inter-university VLEs within a traditional classroom-based course format, an open-ended, self-administered questionnaire was completed by students in both courses on the last day of class (see Appendix A). Students had 30 minutes to complete the questionnaire. In order to promote honest responses, students were informed that the data would not be viewed until after their final grades had been submitted. The instructors were not present in the room while the questionnaires were being completed. Twenty-three out of a possible 28 students completed the questionnaire on the last day of class. The five students who were absent on the last day were contacted and invited to approach the department secretary (who was keeping the surveys until grades were submitted) to obtain the questionnaire which was then included in the envelope with the questionnaires completed on the last day of class. Two students took advantage of this opportunity. Therefore, we had feedback from 25 students. Of the students who completed the questionnaire, sixty-eight percent were female, all were Caucasian, and all but one were of Canadian origin.

Second, student discussion postings and feedback on tools/activities were also considered data. Such data included all of the posts made by students engaged in the online discussion assignment and comments provided to fellow students on their tools/exercises. Third, the Blackboard course management system provides data on student use of the system (e.g., how many times logged in; what components students logged in to; how long students were logged on for). These data were useful in understanding, for example, whether students examined the syllabus for the course at the other institution. Finally, throughout the term, the instructors kept a journal of students' informal unsolicited comments about the initiative (e.g., during instrument presentations, some students commented on the helpfulness of the feedback they received from their groups). Recording this information provided valuable situational data throughout the course (e.g., frustrations that occurred the first two weeks which were resolved and not reflected in students' comments at the end of the course 11 weeks later).

Data were coded using a grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The text of each questionnaire and of the postings was reviewed several times and descriptive codes were assigned. Next, the codes were reviewed, connections identified, and code categories developed that reflected multiple participant responses. A constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was also used whereby the responses of participants were compared to each other. Finally, selective coding was completed to develop and refine themes and to locate examples

within the data that supported the developed themes. Intercoder reliability was used to validate constructs that were developed from the data (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993). Both researchers reviewed the data independently and developed similar and compatible codes and categories. The findings were compared with the instructor's daily field notes to ascertain whether any observations had been recorded that were not present in the data. The only notable difference was that the initial frustration related to use of the technology reported by certain students appeared forgotten by the end of the course and did not seem to be a factor in the overall assessment of the experience. The themes were shared with students who had been in the class to ascertain whether or not the themes reflected their experiences. While not all students responded to the request for feedback on the themes, the six students who did felt the findings captured their experiences and thoughts about those experiences. The commonalities found in the student questionnaire and in their on-line postings, which compared favorably to the instructor field notes, as well as having the themes verified by participants gave the researchers confidence in the results.

Results

Analysis of the data produced four themes. The first was that despite participants representing the first generation raised with widespread computer access, students experienced considerable apprehension about accessing and working within the VLE. The second finding was that the VLE helped to facilitate self-directed learning by students, including when unexpected circumstances of a faculty strike shut down classroom-based learning. The third theme was related to the meaningful interactions that occurred between fellow learners. A final theme involved development of critical thinking.

Apprehension related to working within a VLE

Many students expressed apprehension, either in class or privately to the instructors, about engaging in an initiative using a virtual learning environment. Acadia students were initially concerned over their ability to effectively navigate the Blackboard platform as this was not the course management system used at their institution. Many students from both institutions were concerned about their ability to function with their current level of computer skills. "I am not the best with computers so hope that the on line discussions will not be too technical"(UNB student). Another concern was raised relating to the reliability of the computer "I am concerned that the computer might break and I will not be able to participate in discussions according to the schedule" (Acadia student).

Field notes from both institutions included numerous entries regarding concerns expressed by students to the instructor during the start-up phase related to use of the technology including; frustrations with glitches related to initial mobilization of the site, reservation about posting a personal biographical profile and picture on the site for strangers to view, and doubt as to whether or not there would be value to the individual student from engaging with learners outside of their course.

One area of apprehension expressed by a number of students related to the on-line discussion assignment. Three of the students specifically indicated concern over remembering when they were to participate and working within the timeframe. For others, concern was expressed over being able to sustain high quality discussion within the assigned framework. "I am concerned about the time commitment and dedication to the discussion, as well as remembering when I am expected to do it" (Acadia student).

The majority of participants expressed apprehension over the value of online discussions. Various concerns were raised including: keeping the discussion on topic, lack of depth in online discussions, bringing discussions to a normal conclusion, ensuring that individuals actually participate, sustaining quality discussion over a period of time, and feeling engaged in the discussion that is not face-to-face. "Every on line discussion that I have been involved with has not really worked well because people have not taken it seriously, have done it half-assed, have forgotten to do it or have done so at the last minute" (Acadia Student). Other students reported: "It is difficult to formulate a discussion when you can't see the others you are talking to" (Acadia student); "I hope I get in a good discussion group with people who have things to say that I can comment on" (UNB student).

Initial reactions from students were less than enthusiastic with most viewing the use of the virtual learning environment as simply a component of the course requirements that were to be fulfilled.

Facilitating Self-directed Learning

Initially, many students were hesitant to make use of the learning environment unless specifically required to do so in order to meet an assignment deadline. The instructor view of the program provided a tally of time logged online by each individual student. Although two of the Acadia students spent a number of hours on-line reviewing the biographic profiles posted by their peers, most logged only a few minutes; time enough to post the required material and exit the site.

It is important to note that six weeks into the 13-week term, Acadia faculty went on strike for a four-week period suspending classes at the institution and cutting off all communication between the instructor and her students. The possibility of such a job action appeared remote when the initiative was set up. Although Acadia students were not required to continue with their work during the strike, the option was there for them (through the VLE) to do so if they so chose. During the initial week of the strike, most Acadia students did not continue their work or adhere to assignment deadlines, but as the strike continued into the second week and beyond, all students took advantage of the opportunity to continue their interactive work with their UNB peers. One Acadia student indicated that she was not certain whether she should continue her learning through the VLE during the strike, but finally concluded that this was an opportunity to learn when so many others were put on hold. "Sorry for the late evaluation, but with this strike, I wasn't completely sure what was expected of me." She went on to provide detailed feedback to other students on tools that they had designed.

Another Acadia student continued with her work using the VLE. She used the platform as a way of incorporating her perspectives from the strike into the discussions about leisure education for individuals who are involved in a labour strike.

I hope everyone is doing well. I would just like to start by saying that I hope that by being the only one in this group from Acadia that some of my experiences thus far in the strike will help contribute to this discussion. I think you made some great points about the strike especially your views on the students. There actually have been some examples of the peer mentoring model that have already taken place. Students are accepting responsibility for themselves and coming together to put on activities as well as setting time aside for tutoring and other school related work (Acadia student).

Despite early concerns about using the VLE, 21 students reported that this initiative enhanced their overall learning experience. "I enjoyed hearing different perspectives from another school. It broadened my mind to new ideas that I never thought about before" (UNB student). "The feedback helped to improve the quality of my tool. I got to see what others might want and that I could continue working on it making it much better" (UNB student).

> This initiative enhanced my learning in that I was able to see that people were learning similar things to what we were however the discussion allowed me to hear different perspectives on the issues. I spent time reading the biographies so I could better understand the person I would be talking to before engaging in discussions (Acadia student).

Those who indicated that virtual learning initiative had little or no impact upon them were the ones who logged the least amount of time in the VLE and did not take advantage of learning resources available to them.

Meaningful Interactions

One of the key findings of this study was that students did engage in meaningful interactions with fellow learners which served to enhance their personal learning experience. For students from both schools, gaining access to a more diverse set of learners and opinions than were represented by those in their own class served to broaden the students' perspectives. Having the opportunity to interact with others who reflected different opinions and thinking was the most frequently reported positive outcome: "I was able to see that other people were learning similar things to what we were learning, but the discussion allowed me to hear a new perspective on certain issues" (Acadia student).

> It was good to get different perspectives, new ideas and new feedback from the people not in your class. For example, they might have spent more time discussing one area that we went over quickly so when they respond we get different information (UNB student).

Because of the size of BScKin and BRSS programs at UNB, the students had fewer relationships with peers in their leisure education class. At Acadia, the leisure education students were acquaintances, if not friends, who had previously shared learning experiences in a number of courses. A number of students felt that this type of on-line initiative was a useful means of sharing learning with not only

others within their own university and class, but also with those at another institution. "I place the value [of the initiative] as high not just for interacting with students from another university but also with students in our class" (UNB student).

Although four students reported that they did not use the biographies of their fellow learners, most read through all the profiles as a means of getting to know fellow learners. They expressed the desire to be able to put a name to a face while interacting with specific students, either in a discussion group or when giving or receiving feedback on the tool assignment. "I would use them [biographies] as a tool for understanding discussion points and feedback" (UNB student). "I used them [biographies] to draw examples from their experiences and relate it to their life to make a better point" (Acadia student).

Students participated fully in the on-line discussion groups, even though a few of the Acadia students posted late during the early stages of the strike. Interactions were polite and respectful. Feedback provided was constructive and supportive. During discussions, students referred to group members with familiarity as if they were individuals known to them. Students appeared to develop an understanding that educational background affects the perspective that individuals bring to an issue. "By attending a different university, the other students have many different experiences (just like students within UNB) but since their education is slightly different they are able to bring a different perspective" (UNB student). The results indicated that they acquired an appreciation for the conceptual differences that exist within a similar course with the same text as a result of the nature of the distinct learning environments. In their final discussion posts, many students from both schools commented on how much they had enjoyed their interactions over the course of the week, and how beneficial the interactions had been in terms of what they had learned.

Certain students reported that holding a discussion with those whom they did not have a relationship or face-to-face interaction caused them to feel less guarded about expressing their opinions without fear of how a certain individual might react. Despite this expression of perceived freedom, the tone and content of those learners within discussion sessions always remained respectful.

Suggestions provided by students also reflected the extent to which they had developed a sense of connection to fellow learners and a desire to interact further. The most common suggestion made by the majority of students was to create an opportunity for everyone to meet face-to-face once during the term. Such a meeting would be an opportunity to engage in focus group discussions of issues, administer their tools or activities to the entire group, and engage in other course-related project work. A further suggestion was made to engage in a day of shared activity sampling (an important component of any leisure education process) in one or both of the communities where the universities are housed or at an interesting community located between the two. "It [the learning experience] would have been better if we had a group session with the other school. It would be neat to meet them in person" (Acadia student). "Consider a field trip to meet one another for a leisure education day to share tool ideas" (UNB student).

Development of Critical Thinking Skills

Having to interact electronically with learners who were not known, as well as having to express personal opinions for others to critique, caused considerable anxiety for certain individuals. The anxiety served to facilitate the development of a more in-depth understanding of personal perspectives of the issue in order that students could feel confident in their posting. Needing to explain certain concepts to those from the other university who did not understand them from the same perspective lead to greater clarity of thought on the issue. "I felt that they (students from UNB) enhanced my learning because in certain discussions I had to explain concepts from our course to them which really made me think hard about the concept" (Acadia student).

Students reported needing to search for common ground with another learner as a means of initiating meaningful on-line discussion. Receiving feedback enabled students to challenge some of their own ideas and assumptions and either make changes or develop solid rationale for not doing so. Accepting feedback from those in the other class often led to greater change because the anticipated feedback from classmates, whose perspectives were already well known, had already been considered. "I enjoyed receiving new opinions and fresh ideas. It was good to get honest unbiased opinions without friends worrying about hurting my feelings"(UNB student).

All students from both classes reported that having to develop a leisure educa-tion tool or activity and present it to the learning community for feedback was a daunting yet useful endeavour. "It helped me focus more and have more confi-dence in my tool. I benefited from providing feedback, for it helped me to think about the course and their [group members'] special population" (UNB student). "It [getting feedback] was very valuable. Every student has a different perspective on how a tool might work and I was able to use their feedback in my final draft" (Acadia student). The feedback caused certain students to completely re-concep-tualize their tool design concept and develop a more solid one which they could better defend. Incorporating the ideas of others into the design gave a sense of confidence in the final product for some knowing that it represented the opinions of various individuals and was not based solely on one's own ideas. Focusing a tool or activity on one single dimension of leisure education rather than multiple aspects was challenging for certain students, but the feedback helped strip it down to a single purpose activity. Receiving feedback that indicated written detail and instructions were being misinterpreted enabled students to clarify on paper what they had actually intended. For example, one UNB student provided this advice in evaluating the leisure education tool of a group member:

> I think you may be trying to do too much with your tool. You have goals that deal with developing knowledge, problem-solving skills, and overcoming barriers. I am not sure you're going to meet this goal with the 20-minute activity. It may be a little more work, but maybe pick one thing to focus on and acknowledge that this tool would be one in a series of tools used to address a larger issue.

Discussion

An underlying assumption that exists within the literature is that the current generation of university students, the first raised with universal access to computers, are comfortable with online forms of learning due to the prominence of social networking sites such as *Facebook* and *MySpace*. In line with this thinking, Hodge et al. (2007) indicated that it is essential that the *Net Generation*, also known as *Generation Why* have access to interactive learning environments such as VLEs. However, findings from this study suggest that students experienced considerable apprehension about accessing and negotiating the VLE. In addition to basic computer literacy, a host of other characteristics are required in order to be successful using a VLE including discipline, self motivation, time management, ability to work independently, patience in dealing with technology malfunctions, and the ability to learn from print (Konrad, 2003). Therefore, not all learners achieve success with computer-based learning simply because they spend time using computers in other ways.

Concerns over the ability to successfully negotiate the technological challenges associated with a virtual learning environment dominated the early stages of the initiative. This was consistent with existing research that indicated lack of skill related to a particular technology can influence students' anxiety about VLEs (Ragoonaden & Bordeleau, 2000). The start-up phase did present a number of technology-related challenges, all of which were overcome and none of which served as more than a temporary frustration. Nowhere in the formal evaluation of the initiative was the initial challenge with the technology raised. It appears as though any initial concerns or frustrations were mitigated by the positive outcomes that participants experienced. It may also speak to the importance of course instructors being available to address questions and work with students to resolve any issues they have in the beginning when they are learning to use a particular technology.

This initiative was initially designed to address specific challenges relating to the delivery of leisure education courses at two universities. Acadia was faced with a small class which threatened to limit the discussion and feedback capacity to a small group of students, well known to one another. At UNB, there were concerns over the degree of background preparation that BScKin and BRSS students would have relative to the study of leisure. Each of these concerns was addressed by the creation of a shared virtual learning environment that facilitated interaction between the students and professors in both institutions. From the perspective of the Acadia students, they appreciated the opportunity to interact with a broader educational group than their seven peers. Most of the UNB students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to engage in discussion with the Acadia students. The extent to which they recognized the difference that existed in terms of theoretical foundations was not clear other than that they did acknowledge that the Acadia students represented a different perspective than their own.

Similar to findings reported by Agostinho et al. (1997), these data clearly illustrate that students valued the opportunity to access diverse opinions and perspectives. However, an interesting finding reported by students from both groups, but

more frequently the UNB students, was that this initiative also enabled them to learn more about, and from, others within their own class. This may be a benefit in classes where students do not necessarily know one another well or have opportunities to interact outside of the classroom setting. In this regard, this learning environment proved to be richer than the traditional one (Barajas & Owen, 2000).

Feedback from the students would indicate that most experienced meaningful interactions which could be interpreted as a sense of community relative to the VLE. Participants took an interest in each other, taking time to read one another's profiles, address others in a personal and familiar manner, and spend time logged in to the VLE. The opportunity to interact with fellow learners was the most frequently reported positive outcome of the initiative. Previous research has reported the development of a sense of community within a virtual learning environment to be one of the success factors (Duemer et al., 2002; Kayler & Weller, 2007; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Students become more engaged in, and committed to, the process when a feeling of community exists. The more comfortable students are with the process, the more likely they are to engage in critical thinking and analysis.

During summative assessment, students indicated an interest in engaging with other learners beyond the parameters of the project. A common expression of interest was that learners be afforded the opportunity to meet face-to-face in order to continue with the learning process relative to their shared interest in leisure education. Given the initial ambivalence that students expressed concerning this aspect of their respective courses, the establishment of a sense of community was not anticipated by either the students or instructors. Although others have reported that a sense of community develops within VLEs (Johnson, 2001; Ragoonaden & Bordeleau, 2000; Rovai , 2003), it was not necessarily expected to occur with this initiative given that these learners were all members of traditional classes that met face-to-face on a regular basis.

The concept of the blended approach where a VLE has been used alongside of traditional classroom-based education has received limited discussion in the literature. Blended approaches have typically represented conservative application of e-learning, having been used primarily for clerical functions such as downloading notes (Dutton, Cheong, & Park, 2004). VLEs have the potential to support learning communities in valuable ways that compliment rather than replace traditional approaches. That potential appears to have been realized in this initiative where the VLE enhanced classroom-based learning in ways not possible within the walls of a single classroom.

One advantage of the blended approach is that when students are engaged in discussion that is curtailed when class ends, the discussion can continue on-line with the entire group rather than just in small groups at the local coffee shop. Certain students, by their introverted nature, are less comfortable sharing opinions face-to-face in classroom discussions which can tend to be dominated by those extroverted students who are present. Online discussion capability better enables those students to express their opinions. When material is presented within the classroom, having the opportunity to discuss it with peers as well as other interested parties through on-line discussion enhances the students' learning.

In contrast to the findings of others who have studied VLE use in similar disciplines, (Dale & Lane, 2007; Haven & Botterill, 2002), this study found students' critical thinking skills were enhanced. As reported elsewhere (Dimitropoulos et al., 2007), the asynchronous nature of the interactions appeared to facilitate rather than limit learning. Providing parameters to guide the online interactions, as suggested at the Society of Recreation and Park Educators Conference session in 2007 that initiated this VLE initiative, were very useful in facilitating quality interactions. Parameters included establishing a number of posts per learner in discussions groups, and setting criteria for length and time frames for postings.

A key finding of this study was that some students felt challenged to think more deeply about the issues under consideration in order that they could post something of value for consideration and scrutiny by both peers whom they knew and strangers whom they did not. The requirement to respond appropriately knowing that one was being evaluated on the quality of such responses further helped to foster deeper level thinking. A related finding previously reported within the discipline (Dale & Lane, 2004), indicated that students responded positively within a VLE when they felt that their opinions were valued and they received constructive feedback from others. This outcome was engineered in part by establishment of a framework that guided interaction between participants similar to that suggested by MacKinnon and Aylward (1999).

The VLE holds promise for collaborative learning where groups bring varying perspectives to similar content. For example, with the two groups of students in this study, one had taken a *Leisure in Society* course and the other a *Sport Sociology* course. Although the topics covered in both courses would be similar, the application would differ somewhat. Shared learning opportunities between two such groups on those particular topics could potentially prove beneficial for both. This initiative sought to pair two courses that were similar in content, delivery, and philosophical foundation; however, there may be merit in exploring the matching of courses that may be more complimentary than consistent.

The evidence suggests that those students who embraced the idea by becoming active participants in the process benefited greatly and in ways not anticipated by the researchers. Despite the fact that four individuals did little themselves to take full advantage of the learning opportunity afforded them, they nonetheless benefited from it and highly valued aspects of the experience.

Inter-university encounters, such as varsity sports, are generally intended to foster competition and rivalry between institutions. However, this initiative was designed to foster inter-university cooperation which ultimately facilitated students supporting one another in the learning process. Various benefits related to the inter-university experience were noted by participants from both schools. It is interesting to note that although many of the reported benefits came from not personally knowing the other students, there was a strong desire expressed to connect with those individuals through electronic social networking and a face-to-face meeting.

Students in the larger and more diverse UNB class valued the electronic medium as a way to better connect with others in their own class suggesting that

there may be merit in establishing intra-university virtual learning environments. VLEs may be an important strategy for enhancing the sense of community among students within the same class. Additionally, numerous students indicated that sharing learning with those from more diverse countries and cultures could potentially heighten the learning experience. Although establishing such inter-university virtual learning environments is possible with existing technology, careful consideration would need to be given to cultural differences in terms of both the content and standard educational practices of the cultures involved.

Certain aspects of the field are less developed than others and therefore less literature representing a wide variety of perspectives exists to support student learning. Such was the case in this study and therefore the ability to test their ideas, get feedback, and further develop opinions in which they had a degree of confidence and comfort was a valuable aspect of the initiative for many students. Fostering an interest in students in the lesser explored frontiers of the field could lead to them taking on the development of important work in such areas. VLEs may also be an opportunity for universities offering unique courses to widen access to their courses to students at other institutions (Barajas & Owen, 2000)

Summary and Conclusions

Building upon the notion of the electronic cottage predicted by Toffler (1980), the global classroom has become a reality. Whether one seeks to enhance the learning experience of his or her students by networking with other learners who have something specific of value to bring to the table or as a means of addressing a challenge such as a small or homogenous class, establishment of a virtual learning environment that connects two or more groups of learners can help to build capacity.

This research gives rise to future work in leisure studies as well as other areas. One important extension would be to explore the outcomes of connecting two or more groups of learners who represent greater diversity than has been the case with this research. Students participating in this initiative reported that they felt the value to them would have been greater if those with whom they were connected on-line had reflected greater diversity of thought. This type of initiative could be used to link students from other parts of the world and so research on the effectiveness of a VLE-based learning experience when more profound cultural differences exist is merited. Another potential application of this approach that arises from this work to be explored and assessed is the use of a VLE to connect students from different disciplines studying a similar concept or population. For example, students studying leisure and aging could share elements of their learning on-line with a sociology of aging class either at their same institution or elsewhere. Similarly, students in a leisure and gender course could engage with a women's studies class. In an age when trans-disciplinary connections in higher education are deemed to be desirable, the VLE holds great potential to be further explored through application and research.

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APPENDIX A

RSS 3213: Leisure Education and Facilitation Techniques (UNB)
RECR 3163: Leisure Education (Acadia)

EXIT SURVEY

1. Did the interactions you had with students from another university enhance your learning experience? ☐ Yes, ☐ No. If yes, describe the ways in which this occurred?

   _____

   _____

2. In what ways did you make use of the biographies of your fellow students? (e.g., to put a face to a name; to find someone with a similar career goal as you.)

   _____

   _____

3. What value, if any, was there is having students from another university engage in your on-line discussion groups?

   _____

   _____

4. Describe what value, if any, there was to you and your learning to have other students evaluate your leisure education instrument and provide feedback?

   _____

   _____

5. From your experience, what value, if any, was there to interacting with students from another university?

   _____

   _____

6. Would you recommend this type of inter-university interaction in the future? Why or why not?

   _____

   _____

7. Provide any suggestions you have for improvement to this inter-university initiative.

   _____

   _____