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Social Work Education: Exploring a Virtual Sense of Place During a Pandemic

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Abstract

Sense of place (SOP) postulates that individuals develop bonds and connections with their physical environment. Higher education students develop an SOP with their peers, professors, classrooms, and campus. However, in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, in-person classes have been replaced with remote learning. Faculty and students have been forced to adapt to online instruction by implementing video conferences and email. Adapting to their changing environment and creating a new comfortable SOP can be a challenge given that remote learning requires the utilization of technology. Equally important with technology is the sense of community and humanism that faculty must create to make remote learning fruitful. The COVID-19 pandemic required faculty to create an SOP that can be developed and adjusted during times of crisis and virtual learning. While the faculty focused on maintaining connections in the virtual classroom, students used technology to create social networks. Online learning requires a place for community and socialization to ensure student attachments and values are supported to maintain motivation and feelings of self-efficacy. Creating a classroom SOP requires faculty to use symbolism to reflect the outside world and keep students immersed in the digital environment. The COVID-19 pandemic offers faculty time to better understand SOP in higher education and how it can enhance learning for students.

Keywords: Sense of place, place attachment, virtual classroom, higher education

Introduction

The severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), or simply COVID-19, has drastically changed what the scholar-educator role looks like. Academia transitioned from in-person learning toward a remote learning model in response to the pandemic; qualita-

tive research found itself coming to a halt because data collection became more difficult. Remote learning or online learning allows faculty and students to be physically distanced; class instruction and correspondence are conducted utilizing video conferencing, email, and other digital means. As a social work faculty-graduate student dyad, we were working on a research study on the sense of place (SOP) within permanent housing for formerly homeless individuals when the pandemic began. SOP is an important aspect of a person's identity. According to Williams and Roggenbuck (1989), SOP develops as an individual develop bonds and connections with their physical environment. These emotional connections to an individual's environment create a level of comfort, home, and community. SOP is not concrete but does evolve and change over time (Manzo, 2003).

With stay-at-home orders rapidly changing higher education, our SOP research now held new implications, not only for the formerly homeless but for college students who were coping with being separated from their classroom community. It was particularly fitting to shift the focus of the SOP research and use the framework to look into the effects COVID-19 had on the academic community; an introspective interpretation of the current body of knowledge of SOP allows for a better understanding of the impact of our current era of stay-at-home orders and social distancing on higher education. In the case of academia, students and faculty may have bonds with their classroom setting, school, and social groups. SOP can also be represented by symbols such as the school mascot and wearing the school colors on campus to build a sense of community. In this article, the creation of an SOP in a higher education classroom and its resiliency during a transition to remote learning is explored from the perspective of a social work faculty and a graduate student, and lessons learned are presented.

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Current Approach to Remote Learning

SOP is based on bonds with a physical place; however, there is a lot of focus in higher education and remote learning to create connections and a sense of community between the faculty and students. While the community is simplistically a unified body of individuals who share the same interests, the conditions that support and advance learning are more complex. SOP is defined as the meaning, connection with certain features, and values that a person assigns to a particular place (Grenni, Soini, & Horlings, 2019). The place in higher education is the classroom, whether in-person or virtual. Individuals reconstruct, within their minds, symbols and meanings of value that give cultural-historical and spatial context to their surroundings (Williams & Stewart, 1998). The establishment and continuation of SOP are cofacilitated by faculty with the collective participation of students.

While social workers acknowledge the importance of the human need to feel an attachment to others and not simply a part of something larger, the focus of creating a successful learning environment is on the development of a safe and open community. SOP is the emotional connection that individuals develop with a place (Lengen & Kistemann, 2012). An SOP strengthens the ability of students to learn; the emotional attachments within the classroom offer the resiliency needed for a stable and predictable environment. The importance of the classroom SOP became illuminated during the recent higher education crisis response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Below we present two different viewpoints on classroom SOP through the lens of a social work faculty member and the experience of a social work graduate student.

Sense of Place in the Classroom: A Social Work Faculty Perspective

As a faculty member in a social work masters program, each semester starts with bonding with students. The importance of the emotional connection to students is foundational to the development of rational and critical thinking (Damasio, 2000). Creating a welcoming environment to learn and allow free expression of viewpoints

supports the development of attachments among students and to the course material. An emotional connection to the course material is also accomplished through the use of a variety of teaching tools encouraging a high level of interaction. Positive emotions can enhance learning through improved motivation and satisfaction while reducing the perceived difficulty of the material (Um, Plass, Hayward, & Homer, 2012). When the pandemic worsened and university courses went online, the sudden shift created student anxiety, and the related concerns became apparent in the new virtual classroom. Being comfortable with the use of learning platforms and technology, my transition to the online course delivery was less destabilizing than what was reported by other faculty unfamiliar with the new virtual world. I was pleased the foundation of emotional connections formed early in the semester served everyone well during this stressful period. What I didn't realize at the time was my approach established an SOP that transcended physical location.

My teaching philosophy has always aligned with a quote from Teddy Roosevelt, "they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care." Faculty evaluations are designed to provide feedback and facilitate the professional growth of the individual faculty members. During the pandemic, the importance of evaluation was minimized due to the crisis response of moving in-person classes online in a short amount of time. However, my students' qualitative feedback provided unexpected insights. Spring course evaluations showed a strong student theme that as a faculty member I cared about them and their learning. In fact, while there was an expectation in higher education that faculty evaluation scores would be compromised for this semester, my teaching scores were higher than ever. This theme across my taught classes was more prominent than in the past, which contrasted the disruption in the semester and the chaos surrounding the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The concept of SOP helped me frame these experiences. Education has long acknowledged the importance of building alliances, rapport, and trust between a teacher and individual students to improve learning (Lowman, 1995; Palmer, 1998). The experience of the pandemic highlighted not

only the value of the one-to-one faculty and student relationship, but how creating a sense of place multiplies these well-known lessons. Students' attachments to each other and their learning combine to humanize and personalize the online experience to establish an SOP that was not dependent on a physical classroom (Hinze et al., 2018). The anecdotal information from my course evaluations supports the students' need for a deeper connection than could be explained simply by an individual relationship between student and faculty. If students were bonded and attached to their learning environment and not only their physical classroom, students' SOP could remain intact even in a virtual classroom. As a faculty member, the pandemic offered an opportunity to see the role of SOP in the classroom.

Creating a sense of place in the classroom online is undoubtedly more challenging than an in-person course delivery. Northcote (2008) provided a framework with six recommendations for fostering a sense of place in the virtual classroom, which includes humanization, socialization processes, teacher presence, guiding structure, graphic tools, and student contributions. As a faculty member, I have always focused on reducing cognitive load through the use of structured courses and high use of technological resources involving students both inside and outside the class time. In addition, the high value of the relational aspect of teaching came with my experiences being a social worker and former nonprofit CEO. Relationships are the mechanism for leaders to impart alignment with organizational values and enhance productivity. Similar evidence of the positive influence of the relationship in the online learning environment is found in the literature (Hinze et al., 2018). The combination of a welcoming and caring interpersonal style that demonstrates a genuine concern for the students and their learning and a clear and structured online course delivery is what creates a sense of place in the virtual classroom.

Sense of Place in the Classroom: A Social Work Graduate Student Perspective

The transition to an age of video conferencing classes required by many students forced them to adapt and develop their support systems outside of the traditional classroom. As a graduate student

completing the final semester of a Master of Social Work program, it left me yearning for in-class instruction and support; this perceived dearth of support became glaringly apparent because COVID-19 gravely affected my final semester and graduate thesis project. Going online seemed like a pleasant idea, in theory; no more rushing off to class and no more sitting through dragged-out lectures. But in the end, students need that rapport and physical support from instructors. Students require faculty to be available for questions during office hours and to give hands-on guidance as opposed to impersonal emails. Rather than a collective experience of SOP organically forming in the classroom, each student had to find his or her niche and SOP during these trying times.

Balance was key during lockdowns and school closures. Without in-class instruction and with internship placements closed off to students, there was a need to adapt to staying indoors while still finding a connection to faculty. As a student, I had to reach deep to find compassion and empathy for my instructors who were seemingly bombarded with emails and questions about lessons and assignments. Patience was not only a virtue to espouse; I also had to practice patience, empathy, and tolerance for my peers as well. Not all students were entering the COVID-19 pandemic with the same academic standing, and those who were of lower academic standing relied heavily on their peers for additional support that they were not getting from faculty.

To fill the gap in attachment and a stable learning environment, students adapted by forming large texting groups and cliques, creating a new digital SOP. These texting chains allowed students to feed off each other for educational and moral support. I was a part of three different messaging groups that bounced around ideas and issues with each other, replacing the traditional classroom SOP. I also found myself being contacted regularly by students I did not normally converse with inside the classroom. From my perspective, my traditional circle of peers was becoming more immersed with the rest of the cohort as we faced the same issues of little contact and instruction from our academic professors. Questions via email could not be conveyed properly without showing professors, and faculty

responses were often vague and confusing. A major issue for some of the older students was learning how to utilize technology. Students developed an SOP in COVID-19 higher learning by creating these bonds and connections with each other. Meeting for synchronous video class and seeing each other on-screen was a breath of fresh air. The SOP students developed during COVID-19 was virtual: emails, text, phone calls, and meeting online. Through video conferencing, we were able to see into each other's private homes and lives. Thus, forming new attachments and sharing emotional experiences, we established a new SOP.

Discussion: Sense of Place and Learning

Everyone responds uniquely to change. Value and meaning are key elements that help determine if an individual is willing to change as the environment changes (Horlings, 2015). Since SOP is based on shared values and attachments of a group of people, external shifts affect an individual's SOP. Disruptions in SOP often have negative social and psychological effects (Cheng & Chou, 2015; Devine-Wright, 2013). SOP is multifaceted and complex, but a core of social attachments allows students to process change and disruptions. Recognition of the individual learners must be acknowledged and not ignored to develop a deeper sense of community and online learning (Northcote, 2008). During COVID-19, as a student, I felt that faculty were not adequately prepared to transition from in-class instruction to remote learning. The human nature of students' needs to connect to others and share experiences is critical to the creation of an SOP that enhances learning.

A strong shared classroom SOP is critical to learning as faculty and student attachments support motivation and feelings of self-efficacy. Motivation can account for variance in learning to a greater degree than aptitude and merits (Clark et al., 2006). In particular, a virtual learning platform can pose a unique challenge to motivation to learn. Design elements that improve student motivation to learn include faculty modeling interest and involvement, using cooperative and collaborative groups, and encouraging social and personal responsibility (Pintrich, 2003). By utilizing

specific design elements, a high level of student and faculty interaction agreed-upon norms, and similar values and academic standards, a shared classroom SOP can optimize motivation and learning.

Establishing Sense of Place in the Classroom

COVID-19 has created a learning opportunity for higher education. Environments are important to online learning because they provide students with a place where they can interact socially and educationally (Arora & Khazanchi, 2014). Also, by facilitating the creation of relationships and connections in a learning environment, faculty can establish an SOP that is long-lasting. A study by Plunkett et al. (2018) found a strong SOP is associated with endurance, sustainability, and resiliency over time. The pandemic provides a mandate for higher education to look differently at how SOP shapes student learning. Consideration needs to be given to the person, psychological process, and the place in the development of place attachment (Scannell & Gifford, 2010). Examining the various ways to strengthen SOP in the remote classroom to advance teaching pedagogy is one takeaway from this pandemic.

An understanding of SOP can help faculty overcome the potential barriers to learning, whether online or in-person. To maximize a student's learning, quality instruction must be at the forefront and technology used only in support (Northcote, 2008). The importance of the human aspect of learning should be another lesson learned from the pandemic. Cognitive overload due to complex learning environments can be exacerbated by motivation challenges (Clark et al., 2006). The persistence strains mental effort and can result in strong negative emotions (Clark et al., 2006). Faculty facilitation of fellowship and shared values in the classroom form an SOP that can mediate the potential negative effects of cognitive overload and low motivation that virtual learning creates.

The emotional/symbolic bond, or place identity, is what creates an SOP (Williams & Roggenbuck, 1989). Faculty leadership is required to facilitate classroom SOP. Creating a learning environment that meets students where they are and also simulates realistic in-class in-

struction may be assisted by utilizing shared spaces and artifacts (Hoke et al., 2020). Artifacts or interactive tools like video clips and slides create a feeling of connection with the task at hand, thus further facilitating a student's SOP. Creating a communal virtual space where ideas can be shared freely fosters an SOP among students and instructors in higher education. This communal space virtual space can be compared to students who use text message groups to remain connected during the pandemic. Also, Manzo (2003) states that the development of SOP is constantly evolving, thus it leaves room for new attachments and changes in old attachments and bonds. The dynamic nature of SOP is an opportunity that faculty should take advantage of.

Ultimately, the creation of SOP cannot be a one-time thought as there needs to be continuity. An individual's willingness to adapt to change plays an important key in sustainability within an environment (Horlings, 2015). Engaging students to have an active role in the course will establish an SOP that provides the stability needed by all. Hoke et al. (2020) argues developing an online course SOP should mirror a video game by creating an arena that "disconnects" students from the outside world. At a time of crisis for so many, it is important for faculty to help students develop a strong and stable SOP centered on learning. The lessons learned from this pandemic will not only help improve higher education but will also support the development of values graduates need to be successful in the workforce.

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