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Data for free: Using LMS activity logs to measure community in online courses

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ABSTRACT

In the study of online learning community, many investigators have turned attention to automatically logged web data. This study aims to further this work by seeking to determine whether logs of student activity within online graduate level courses related to student perceptions of course community. Researchers utilized the data logging features of the Moodle learning management system and the Classroom Sense of Community Index. Results reveal that cumulative course data logs are predictive of both a student's sense of connectedness and student community. This study adds to a foundation for a non-invasive assessment of affective variables in online learning environments, and suggests a simple method for providing e-learning instructors with real-time feedback for fostering online community.

1. Introduction

The United States has experienced unprecedented growth in both the availability of and participation in online education programs. At present, there are over 3.2 million online students at the college and university levels (Allen & Seaman, 2007) and over 96% of the very largest higher education institutions have online course offerings (Allen & Seaman, 2006). Over 700,000 students also participate in K-12 online education (Smith, Clark, & Blomeyer, 2005). Clearly, online learning is experiencing phenomenal growth. However, methods and tools for researching experiences within online communities have not kept pace; education lags behind industry and government in the use of comprehensively-gathered and carefully-analyzed data to support decision making (Black, Ferdig, & DiPietro, 2008). The growing use of learning management systems (LMS), many of which automatically keep logs of student activity, presents an exciting means of narrowing this gap. Lately, many researchers have worked to exploit this potential, both in academic research and the design of practical online learning applications. The present study continues this work, seeking to explore whether students' perceptions of community can be measured via logs of student activity within graduate level online courses. Since feelings of community are known to significantly affect online learning performance, such a simple and immediately accessible measurement of this affective variable would be useful for online learning instructors and researchers alike. Further, the measurement would provide a non-invasive alternative to currently-employed survey methodologies. This is a growing need as students increasingly develop "survey fatigue," apathy toward completing surveys. This paper will begin with a discussion of the importance of community in online learning.

2. Literature review

2.1. Community in online learning

Throughout the last 10–15 years, online learning researchers and instructional professionals have promoted the significance of community in online learning environments (Wallace, 2003).This importance is likely only to grow as online students increasingly come to see community as a fundamental part of online life (Weller, 2007). Collaboration between both students and online teachers is necessary to effectively cultivate a thriving online community (Berge & Collins, 1995; Palloff & Pratt, 1999). According to Wallace (2003), community in online environments arises at the intersection of three contemporary components in educational research: social learning theories, the affordances of computers as communication devices and increased utilization of theory in online course development.

Rovai (2002c) defines community in online learning environments as:

> …consisting of two components: feelings of connectedness among community members and commonality of learning expectations and goals….Classroom community is strong when learners (a) feel connected to each other and to the instructor, (b) manifest the immediate communication behaviors that reduce social and psychological distance between people, (c) share common interests and values, (d) trust and help each other, (e) actively engage in two-way communications, and (f) pursue common learning objectives. (p. 322)

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Hung and Chen's (2001, p.10) dimensions of principles of learning support Rovai's definition of online community:

1. Situatedness: fostered by contextualized activities, e.g. tasks and projects based on demand and needs.
2. Commonality: fostered by shared interests, e.g. in books; and shared problems.
3. Interdependency: fostered by varying expertise levels; varying perspectives or opinions; varying needs, mutual benefits; and complementary motives.

This further grounds the concept of online community within the work of Vygotsky and Spiro.

It is clear that community is an essential part of successful online education. Limited face-to-face communication can lead to feelings of isolation which, in turn, can lead to dissatisfaction, poor performance and course non-completion (Cereijo, Young, & Wilhelm, 2001; Curry, 2000; Rovai & Wighting, 2005). Research by Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) relates feelings of isolation to a low sense of community. Findings by Eastmond (1995) indicate that isolation can be alleviated when learners support one another. Additionally, Rovai (2002b) has demonstrated that encouraging a sense of community will effect student satisfaction, learning and retention.

Given this well-established importance of community in online learning, instructors and administrators are typically keen to foster a sense of community in online learning students (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). However, the nature of online learning often makes this troublesome. Specifically, the lack of face-to-face interactions in the online environment makes it very difficult to appraise online classroom community (Vrasidas, 2004; Mazza & Milani, 2005; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). Lacking access to the same breadth of social indicators as their classroom counterparts, online learning instructors must assess community through a diminished interaction "bandwidth" (Van Lehn, 1988). It is little surprise, then, that instructors are often mistaken in their assessments of online social situations such as class discussions (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007).

Researchers, administrators, and instructors have turned to survey data to answer questions relating to classroom community (Rovai & Wighting, 2005). However, there are significant limitations to this approach. First, today's online students are over-surveyed (Dillman, 2002), subjected to increasing numbers of surveys and assessments seeking to understand their motivations, concerns and mind-set. Students see little relevance in many of these surveys, increasing student apathy and non-response (Kalton, 2000; LaBruna & Rathod, 2005). Some universities, recognizing that "…student cooperation with surveys [is] a scarce and valuable resource that should be used wisely," have begun to institute policies guiding and limiting survey access to students (Porter, 2005). This one–two punch of decreasing reliability and availability of survey data will no doubt impact the usefulness of this methodology. Second, assessment tools, such as surveys, necessary for the measurement and evaluation of key factors that equate to online learning success have not kept pace with online education's explosive growth. A limited range of assessments are available for use within online education programs and few of these have proven valid and reliable (Black et al., 2008).

2.2. Non-invasive measures in online environments

In order to satisfy the need for valid and reliable assessment tools in today's environment of survey-saturated students, many have advocated adopting new approaches to data-gathering (Sinickas, 2007; Gofton, 1999). Until recently, educators seemed reticent to embrace data mining and statistical techniques to analyze data recorded by computing media themselves (Lopes & David, 2006; Lowes, Lin, & Wang, 2007; Klassen & Smith, 2004); however, such methods are now rapidly gaining popularity (Romero & Ventura, 2007). A common theme to these approaches is that they are less intrusive and subjective, though typically requiring more processing than survey methods (Pahl, 2004). Within this general paradigm of non-invasive assessment several different approaches have emerged, each with its own advantages and weaknesses. Researchers have made use of data from three main sources: (1) recorded text, (2) web server log files, and (3) learning software log files. Several such studies are listed in Table 1.

2.3. Recorded text

Several authors (Dringus & Ellis, 2005; Lowes et al., 2007; Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007) have employed data mining of text communications in learning management systems (LMS) and computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL). This is a particularly rich source of data which has yielded significant findings. Unfortunately, while automated text mining using artificial intelligence algorithms has shown considerable promise in educational applications (Mochizuki et al., 2005; Tane, Schmitz, & Stumme, 2004), mining for relatively subtle social indicators remains impractical (Dringus & Ellis, 2005). Consequently, this methodology is limited by the need to perform relatively labor-intensive hand-coding.

2.4. Web server log files

Another source of automatically-collected data is web server logs; these are vast collections of data relating the accessing of specific web pages (Hanna, 2004). Online learning researchers (Klassen & Smith, 2004; Lopes & David, 2006; Monk, 2005; Zaiane, 2001; Zorrilla, Menasalvas, Marin, Mora, & Segovia, 2005) have employed data mining techniques to gain useful insight from these data. Though, the

Table 1
Alternate sources of e-learning data

Data source	Method of analysis	Applied to community?
Text communication records: rich, high-level data; time intensive coding		
Lowes et al. (2007)	DM, SNA	Yes
Dringus and Ellis (2005)	DM	Yes
Mochizuki et al. (2005)	Real-time visualization, keyword recognition	Yes
Server log files: low-level data, high noise, difficult to organize		
Lopes and David (2006)	OLAP	No
Monk (2005)	Basic statistical	No
Zorrilla et al. (2005)	DM, OLAP	No
Klassen and Smith (2004)	Spreadsheet	No
Zaiane (2001)	DM	No
LMS log files: high-level data, more organized but still needs sorting		
Not real time		
Lowes et al. (2007, found of little use)	Basic statistical	Yes
Nurmela et al. (1999) (CSCL system log files)	SNA	Yes
Reffay and Chanier (2002)	SNA	Yes
Shen et al. (2007).	SNA	Yes
Silva and Vieira (2002) (platform-agnostic)	DM	Somewhat
Real time		
Moodie and Kunz (2003, proposed iLMS)	AI	Yes
Santos, Rodríguez, Gaudioso, and Boticario (2003, proposed CSCL system)	AI	Yes
Kosba, 'TADV' iLMS (2004)	AI	Somewhat
Mazza 'CourseVis' LMS tool (2004)	Visualization	Yes
Ueno 'Samurai' iLMS (2004)	DM, AI	Yes
Mazza and Milani, 'GISMO' Moodle module (2005)	Visualization	Yes

DM=data mining SNA=social network analysis AI=artificial intelligence.
OLAP=Online Analytical Processing (an analytic method similar to data mining).

Table 2
Students were recruited from the following courses

Course	Course name	*n*
A	Instructional Computing 1	9
B	Instructional Computing 2	9
C	Internet and K-12	23
D	Designing and Delivering Online Content	6
E	Digital Photography and Visual Literacy	5
F	Instructional Design	15

low-level information collected in server logs would seem to be ill-suited for observing high level, social phenomena; the above-mentioned studies make little or no mention of online learning community, presumably for this reason. In addition, server logs are plagued with a low signal-to-noise ratio; simply preparing the data for modeling can consume 80% to 95% of a project's resources (Edelstein, 2001), making this–like text mining–somewhat labor-intensive.

2.5. LMS log files

Perhaps the most promising source of automatically gathered online learning data is the learning software itself, particularly the LMS. Since students typically log in to such systems, keeping track of users and sessions–a major hurdle in examining server logs (Zorrilla et al., 2005)–is done automatically. In addition, many such systems gather a range of relatively high-level student data such as quiz grades and forum posts (Mazza & Milani, 2005). These data are both more focused than raw server logs, and more convenient than hand-categorizing text communication. Drawing in part on work analyzing community in online threaded discussions (such as Donath, Karahalios, & Viegas, 1999), several researchers have mined data from LMS to examine community in online learning. Many, including Shen, Nuankhieo, Huang, Amelung, and Laffey (2007) and Reffay and Chanier (2002), have employed social network analysis (SNA) to examine the nature of online learning communities. Although not examining LMS data as such, Nurmela, Lehtinen, and Palonen (1999) used a similar source in applying data gathered from CSCL log files to SNA techniques, as well. This study extends this research by exploring whether students' perceptions of community, an affective variable known to be important to online learning success, may be measured using data from LMS log files.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research question

Does a student's perception of community relate to the number of LMS data log events that student generates? Specifically, this method focuses on Rovai's CCS: Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002a) and its relationship to data logs. The CCS questionnaire is included as Appendix A.

3.2. Participants

Data for this study were collected from 67 individuals, 22 males and 45 females. The sample had an average age of 37.4 (SD = 11.6). All were enrolled in graduate level online educational technology courses at a large university in the Southeast United States. All participants had previous experience with online courses; on average, participants had taken 2.1 (SD = 1.6) online courses prior to participation in the study.

Given that all courses were graduate level and taught within the educational technology program, similarity was assumed. It should be noted that there was variation in the teaching experiences of the instructors for the courses; the course content and course materials were also a source of differentiation. Further, requirements for interaction with both the instructor and other members of the course varied based on the content within the course (Table 2).

Table 3
Regression results, dependent variable = community, independent variables = data logs, course

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β	Sig
Logs	.008	.003	.341	.006*
Course	.538	.631	.102	.398

* $p<05$.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Survey data were collected during the final week of each eight week course; students logged onto a website and completed the Classroom Community Scale (CCS) (Rovai, 2002a). The CCS is a 20 item questionnaire consisting of three constructs: learning, connectedness and classroom community. The CCS is a reliable measure of community (α = .93); both the connectedness and learning subscales are also considered reliable measures with α of .92 and .87 respectively. In addition, the CCS exhibits both validity (KMO: .94; Barlett's test of sphericity: $\chi^2 = 3883.95$, $p<.01$) and usability (Fleisch-Kincaid grade level score: 6.6) (Rovai, 2002a). Once the courses had been completed, the cumulative number of data logs for each student was downloaded utilizing the Moodle learning management system's data reporting feature. The reporting feature records and compiles student clicks within the course environment. Although our study was interested only in the cumulative number of data logs, Moodle sorts logs by type as well, including the number of pages within the LMS visited, messages read in discussions, posts in discussion and the utilization of intra-LMS communication (email, chat). A teacher or administrator can access the reporting feature and view or download (in Excel or text format) multiple reports based on their preferences. For example, reports can be generated for individual students, multiple students, and specific assignments or for a specified time period.

Once downloaded, the log data were sorted with Microsoft Excel, creating a single spreadsheet containing the complete set of data logs for the entire semester. This spreadsheet was then imported into SPSS v. 13. A frequency analysis was run on the data set, grouping by student names. Through this method a cumulative number of logs for each student was obtained; also, a summary of the students' activities in the LMS was obtained allowing for future analysis of specific types of events (e.g. content views, new postings, and replies to existing postings). Cumulative logs were combined with CCS scores for each participant; linear regression procedures were then performed on the data set to discern the relationships between the independent variables (sense of community, connectedness and learning) and the dependent variable (data log events). Pearson product moment correlations were conducted to understand the relationship between connectedness and learning.

4. Results

Data logs were determined to be a predictor of sense of community (Adj $R^2 = .086$, $F(2, 64) = 4.090$, $p = .021$). Course was non-significant in

Table 4
Regression results, dependent variable = connectedness, independent variables = data logs, course

Variable	*B*	SE *B*	β	Sig
Logs	.005	.002	.288	.021*
Course	−.278	.513	−.066	.589

* $p<05$.

Table 5
Pearson product moment correlations: connectedness, learning and community

		Connectedness	Learning	Community
Connectedness	Pearson correlation	1	−.046	.774*
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.713	.000
Learning	Pearson correlation	−.046	1	.597*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.713		.000
Community	Pearson correlation	.774*	.597*	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	

* $p<05$.

this regression equation. Results from this regression procedure are summarized in Table 3.

Course and data logs have a relationship to the connectedness construct (Adj R^2=.066 $F(2, 64)$=3.341, p=.042). This result is significant, though a minimal amount of the variance within the dependent variable, connectedness, can be accounted for by data logs and course. Results from this regression procedure are summarized in Table 4.

Neither course nor log files were related to the learning construct (Adj R^2=.045, $F(2,64)$=2.54, p=.087). An analysis of Pearson product moment correlations (see Table 5) between the three constructs produced by the CCS instrument reveals a significant strong positive correlation between connectedness and community (r=.774, $p<.01$) and a significant strong positive correlation between learning and community (r=.597, $p<.01$).

5. Discussion

The current study examines a novel measurement of feelings of community: the total number of LMS log events. Results indicate that data logs generated during an online graduate level course have a relationship to both classroom community and feelings of connectedness. Specifically, log files were determined to be a predictor of sense of community (Adj R^2=.086, $F(2, 64)$=4.090, p=.021), and course and log files have a relationship to the connectedness construct (Adj R^2=.066 $F(2, 64)$=3.341, p=.042).

The total number of log entries, discussion posts, or similar events is bound to have a complicated relationship, to say the least, with students' feelings of community (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007). Logs can record many different actions, each of which can and does have a variety of different causes. Partly for this reason, Lowes et al. (2007) found inspection of LMS log data to be of little use in the study of online learning community. However, that study did not attempt to correlate log data with survey data; indeed, very few have (for an exception see Shen et al., 2007). The data indicate that such a correlation exists, atop a web of more complicated and (to date) less clear relationships between students' mental states and LMS data. This study suggests that the simple measure of log events reveals a forest from these trees.

Two applications for this measurement can be seen: first, to support real-time data analysis for constructing visualizations and modeling students, and second, to augment survey data for informing long and medium-term decision making. Unlike complicated data mining techniques, counting total log entries would be easy to automate for use in real time. This automated tool could be applied to a LMS as a module; this would be a relatively cheap and easy way to facilitate a move towards intelligent learning management systems. Such a system could be used until the adoption of more sophisticated modules, or could evolve more sophistication itself. In either case, it represents a very practical step toward a system to comprehensively broaden an online instructor's perception of her students. Additionally, the use of data logs to predict affective information about students in online courses can decrease the need for surveying and provide the opportunity to measure an affective variable without impacting the student. Given recent concerns over survey fatigue (Dillman, 2002), an alternative method of data collection that doesn't inconvenience students may be an important resource for decision-makers and researchers.

Data analysis is used in both the private and public sectors to collect information about individuals for a more comprehensive understanding of their behaviors, needs and concerns (Ayers, 2007; Davenport & Harris, 2007). Strategic decisions made at many of the largest, highly respected and most successful corporations in the United States, including Google, Wal-Mart and CapitalOne, are guided in a large part by real-time and post-hoc data-driven processes (Davenport & Harris, 2007). Unfortunately, the use and adoption of data-analytic practices has not been at the forefront of the education movement.

According to Guthrie (2007),

> …there are few 21st century operations as outmoded as educational data systems….Wal-Mart managers routinely know more regarding the location…of a toy bear manufactured in China, from the original point of purchase manufacturing specifications to the vendor's ocean shipping arrangement, to local store delivery and shelving and time of final placement into a customer's shopping basket than school district administrators know regarding the day-to-day status and school progress of their enrolled students. (p. 667).

Online education providers, while using web-based technologies, are no further ahead of their traditional counterparts with regards to the data collection and analysis capabilities of their educational data systems (Pahl, 2004; Zaiane, 2001). However, this mistake is beginning to be rectified, as researchers find ways to apply automatically-collected web data to the study of online learning.

Large stores of automatically-collected personal data carry with them the risk of abuse, making the construction of data and policy structures to safeguard student privacy a priority for future researchers. Future research should also work to apply new methods of data analysis, such as geospatial data analysis, to web data. Additionally, researchers should examine path analysis procedures based on click stream data and increased application of regressive techniques to predict student behavior and learning in online environments. All of these represent immense opportunities for distance education providers given the diversity of online learning students.

6. Limitations

There are several limitations to this study worth noting. First, the narrow sample size greatly hinders the generalizability of the results. The content of the courses was not taken into consideration, and further, course instructors had varying degrees of experience in online instruction; it would be expected that these particulars would shape student perceptions and outcomes. Second, there were differences in the students who participated in the courses; while all students had prior experience as online learners, there were differing levels of comfort and technological sophistication amongst the learners. Third, it is possible that the CCS instrument, which was intended to analyze the outcomes of a single course, became a moratorium on the online learning program in general. Many students who participated in the study were enrolled in multiple online courses, allowing for the possibility that student responses bridged multiple course experiences. Finally, greater variation in the values assigned to different types of logged events may have a significant effect upon predictability. This study did not take into account the nature of the activity engaged by the student; for example, it would be logical to assume that the process of responding to a peer's discussion post would have greater influence on community than the process of reading the syllabus. Research by Lowes et al. (2007) finds that specific typologies of responses in discussion forums have the ability to facilitate a more robust discourse.

7. Conclusion

Use of computers in education has often been criticized for doing old things new ways—failing to take advantage of the revolutionary possibilities of new technology (Foshay & Bergeron, 2000; Jonassen, Davidson, Collins, Campbell, & Haag, 1995). Using a computer to disseminate and collect a survey, for example, is certainly more convenient—but not revolutionary (indeed, it may accelerate the affects of survey fatigue). Data from LMS, on the other hand, with its inherent capability to collect and report student actions, interactions and testing data, have potential to qualitatively change teaching and learning. Instead of relying on often-fallible intuitions based on an impoverished data stream, future online learning instructors may well take advantage of what computers are good at–gathering and sorting data–to build representations of online students that are in many ways richer and more accurate than they'd have had in the classroom. At higher levels, administrators and course designers will be able to embed features and dynamic content that encourage a deeper exploration of content. Current research, such as the study described in this article, attempting to identify indicators of student attitudes like sense of community brings us closer to such a reality.

Appendix A. Classroom Community Scale (Rovai, 2002b)

1. I feel that students in this course care about each other .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
2. I feel that I am encouraged to ask questions .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
3. I feel connected to others in this course .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
4. I feel that it is hard to get help when I have a question .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
5. I do not feel a spirit of community .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
6. I feel that I receive timely feedback .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
7. I feel that this course is like a family .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
8. I feel uneasy exposing gaps in my understanding .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
9. I feel isolated in this course. .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
10. I feel reluctant to speak openly .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
11. I trust others in this course..... (SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
12. I feel that this course results in only modest learning .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
13. I feel that I can rely on others in this course .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
14. I feel that other students do not help me learn .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
15. I feel that members of this course depend on me .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
16. I feel that I am given ample opportunities to learn .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
17. I feel uncertain about others in this course .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
18. I feel that my educational needs are not being met .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
19. I feel confident that others will support me .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)
20. I feel that this course does not promote a desire to learn .....(SA) (A) (N) (D) (SD)

Scoring key

Overall CCS raw score

CCS raw scores vary from a maximum of 80 to a minimum of zero. Interpret higher CCS scores as a stronger sense of classroom community.

Score the test instrument items as follows:

For items: 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 11, 13, 15, 16, 19

Weights: strongly agree = 4, agree = 3, neutral = 2, disagree = 1, strongly disagree = 0

For items: 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 12, 14, 17, 18, 20

Weights: strongly agree = 0, agree = 1, neutral = 2, disagree = 3, strongly disagree = 4

Add the weights of all 20 items to obtain the overall CCS score.

CCS subscale raw scores

CCS subscale raw scores vary from a maximum of 40 to a minimum of zero. Calculate CCS subscale scores as follows:

Connectedness: add the weights of odd items: 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15, 17, 19

Learning: add the weights of even items: 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, 16, 18, 20

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