

# **The Added Value of Participating in Learning Communities for Adult Learners**

**By**

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment for the requirements for the degree of  
Doctor of Education at the University of Lancashire

October 2025

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## ABSTRACT

This study is an exploration of learning communities in an adult campus of a Tertiary College in the North West of England. The study took place during COVID-19 and made use of an ethnographic style methodology to adapt to the changing situation during the pandemic. Previous studies on learning communities were mostly conducted in the United States, mainly using quantitative approaches in residential-based universities and community colleges. This study sets out to define what form learning communities take in a tertiary college, what the added value is of participating in a learning community and what different roles the members of these communities fulfil. Data was collected mainly through observations of recorded classes, as well as some on-campus activities, and triangulated with interviews and focus groups. The study finds that learning communities can develop without being formally set-up by the faculty, but benefit from the initial ice-breakers and rapport building activities at the beginning of the year. Rapport is highlighted as an essential component for the development of learning communities. Learning Communities are shown in the literature to improve retention, but also contribute to developing employability skills and improving social capital. This study also finds that participating in a learning community adds value through supportive, instructive and developmental interactions. Finally, learning communities are made up of individuals who fulfil a number of social roles within the community, eight of which have been identified in this study, shedding light on the inner life of a learning community.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank the students, the faculty members and support staff that participated within my research. I would also like to thank my wife, children, siblings and especially my parents for all their support. Finally, I would like to acknowledge my lecturers and supervisors, Dr Mahmood Chandia, Dr Jaqueline Dodding and Dr Claire Stocks, Dr. Richard Davies, but most especially Professor Candice Satchwell, whose sage advice, support and guidance through these turbulent years has kept me grounded and on task. Finally, I thank my EdD learning community for their encouragement, support and guidance.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of this study is to explore in what form learning communities exist within a Higher Education in Further Education College in the Northwest of England, what kind of interactions and roles occur within the learning communities and what value they impart to the participants. Previous studies of learning communities have focused on intentional interventions in residential universities and community colleges, mostly in North America. My study explores the concept of learning communities by considering how individuals in a particular educational setting form groups which relate in some way to learning. My focus therefore is not on communities as devised or envisioned by practitioners, but rather as naturally occurring entities.

I believe that student interactions with each other and with their lecturers are fundamental to a student's experiences of education, their development, and their motivation to complete their courses. Despite being in and out of Higher Education throughout my adult life, I only became aware that I was a participant in a learning community whilst studying for my PGCE, through group work activities, discussions during coffee breaks and supportive messages via WhatsApp. I was, characteristically, on the periphery of the main group of students, taking my breaks sitting by myself. A student from the main group saw me do this a few times before inviting me to sit with the others during break. The PGCE is an intense course of study and perhaps this contributed to a strong sense of a shared journey in achieving the qualification with the lovely people I studied alongside. We often shared our experiences of teaching with each other and discussed how we were embedding learning into practice. Being tech savvy, my role in the group was often to provide technical support for ICT issues. On several occasions we individually felt overwhelmed by the amount of work we had to do, but as a group we supported each other through those difficult times. Those of us who made it through the first few months developed a strong rapport with each other to the point that we are still regularly in contact with each other. Towards the end of the course, I began to question whether this sense of community was a common experience for other adult students. At this point, one of my earliest thoughts on participation in a community of learners was that it may not be the reason why people become students, but it may be one of the reasons why they stay the course and complete their studies.

### 1.1. Context

The College where the research was located was established in the 1970s, in the Northwest of England, and until recently was comprised of two campuses, the 16-19 campus and the adult campus. The National Institute for Adult Education (1970) defines adult education as any form

of education that is aimed at people who have completed their primary and secondary education and are old enough to work, vote and get married. The College was formed under the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and is an exempt charity, based on the Charities Act 2011. The College has expanded rapidly since its inception and has a reputation for excellence in achievement and progression to Russell Group universities and Oxbridge colleges. It was rated as an Outstanding institution by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) from 2008 to 2022.

The Dearing Report (1997) noted the existence of Higher Education (HE) in Further Education (FE) as mainly sub-degree programmes delivered part-time. Widdowson and King (2018) add that HE in FE, also known as College-based Higher Education (CBHE), plays a limited but important role in widening participation and offering technical courses. The College offers both full-time and part-time technical/vocational courses, as well as academic courses that provide a progression route to university, such as the Access to HE courses and previously Foundation degrees too. Typical HE in FE students have been described as mature, part-time, living locally to the college, with family and most likely employed (Rapley, 2012). Recent policy changes around Higher Education have led to an increase in how much institutions can charge for a course (Augar, 2019) and the removal of recruitment caps for universities (Hillman, 2014), that have led to the closure of HE courses at the College. Hillman (2014) notes that the government had not considered the impact that the removal of recruitment caps would have on HE in FE colleges and private sector providers. Augar (2019) suggests that originally it was thought that allowing universities to charge more for courses would herald a price competition, with the best universities being able to ask for over £9000, whilst others would charge less to stay in contention, but instead every HE institution moved to charge the maximum amount. Even the College eventually increased its fees for HE courses to £9000, putting it in direct competition with universities and pricing itself out of competing with other colleges in the region that were charging less. Augar (2019) notes that other consequences of market competition in universities include grade inflation, lower entry requirements and unconditional offers.

Following the 2019 Augar Review of Post-18 educational provision, which covered adult learners at all levels of education, the government made some announcements around the skills agenda and Further Education funding. For the most part, this has contributed to an increase to the base rate of funding in 16-18 education, acknowledging the increase in the number of 16-18-year-olds entering Further Education (AOC, 2019). Adult education has been cited as being important to the Build Britain Better campaign (HM Treasury, 2021). This campaign came with the promise of a new skills fund for adult education, although in real terms, spending on adult education has dropped by 53% since 2010 (Sibieta et al., 2021; Foster, 2019), with complicated eligibility rules

and single year funding having put off many providers from applying, as noted by Augar (2019, p.9), 'Funding levels are inadequate to cover essential maintenance or to provide modern facilities, and funding flows are complex to navigate.'

Whilst these policies impacted the number of adult students attending the College between 2020 and 2021, it is not immediately clear what effect this had on learning communities. My initial fear was that the reduction of student numbers would reduce the number, scale and the diversity of learning communities, as well as impact how much the College would want to invest in their adult provision. Whilst the environment may have become less favourable, I remained hopeful of discovering fledgling communities developing regardless of the challenges.

## 1.2. About the Study

The aim of my research was to identify learning communities and explore whether they add value for adult learners in a Higher Education in Further Education college, based in Northwest England. I wanted to find out whether there were learning communities in the college and if so, where did they take place, what did the interactions between members look like and what roles did they fulfil. I also wanted to know whether participation in a learning community provided some added value for its members. Traditionally, value-added refers to how much a school or college has aided a learner's development over the period of learning. In this study, I am interested in the added value gained by interacting with learning communities, measured through participant observations and the reflections of the participants. The research was a qualitative study using an ethnographic styled methodology, because it allows me to research a culture that I am also a part of. The participants were made up of two classes of students, BA Community and Social Care (CSC) Year 1 and Access to HE: Social Sciences, and their lecturers at the College. I chose these classes for ease of access as I also lectured them, however, I did not carry out any research during my own taught sessions, though it is difficult to separate my own experiences and reflections entirely from the research as an ethnographer. Within this thesis, the College (with a capital C) refers to the college in which I have carried out the study and the University refers to the institution that validates the BA CSC course.

To provide some structure to my study and better grasp what I wanted to know, I developed three research questions:

RQ1: What form do learning communities take in the adult campus of the College?

RQ2: What value do learning communities add to the learners?

RQ3: What roles do the different members of a learning community play in providing added value?

Like many other constructs within the social sciences, learning communities have been defined in various ways, which I will explore further in the literature review, however I will provide a brief description here to share my basic understanding of the concept. Previous definitions have focused on learning communities being formed intentionally by faculty (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), with the purpose of promoting deep learning (Kilpatrick et al. 2003), at various levels (Lenning and Ebbers, 1999). Most of these definitions come from studies based on the residential model of Higher Education, though there are later studies that have looked at learning communities in community colleges. The theoretical framework of these studies are either based on Social Learning theory or Social Constructivism.

For the purpose of this study, Learning communities operate at different levels. At the most basic level, it is two or more students working together to learn something. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory describes how learning can be improved when scaffolded by a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) to achieve a higher level of development. At the next level, it is a group of three or more learners offering each other mutual support, development or instruction through repeated interactions for the purpose of achieving a shared learning goal. This could include trying to understand complex ideas together, working on assignments or completing a course of study. These interactions can take place anywhere on and off campus, both physically and virtually. Students may drop in and out of a community as and when they need them. Learning communities are not cliques of students who socialise with each other but do not discuss learning content and goals. To participate in the wider class learning community requires the sharing of resources, ideas and the offer of support. In order for this to happen there needs to be a level of rapport and trust, which builds over time but can happen faster through the involvement of faculty members. Some learners may also choose not to participate in a learning community, and whilst they may still benefit from observing the strategies for problem solving or listening to their ideas, they are not part of the community. Learning communities can offer other benefits too. In my study, I refer to these benefits as added value. These communities could be said to formally end upon graduation, though the relationships formed in the communities often continue beyond the completion of their courses.

ZPD is a model that arose from Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theories of social constructivism, that humankind shapes its own reality through social interactions. Lincoln and Guba (2015) note that reality exists in the minds of individuals and, no matter how much you investigate it, it can never be fully known as there are as many realities as there are individuals to perceive them. There

are still tangible people, objects, and events out there, however, each person who interacts with them or experiences them adds their own constructed meaning, though there is enough similarity between how people interact with constructs for them to form agreements about them. The term social construct was coined by Berger (1963), describing how people in reference-groups forge their own version of an agreed reality.

Berger and Luckmann (1966) outline some of the key intermediaries that shape how we construct reality, including consciousness that is intentionally focused on objects from different spheres of reality, for example inner thoughts, dreams and physical reality. This includes our everyday social interactions with our contemporaries, predecessors and successors, as well as with language and symbols. Vera (2016) says that social constructs are those intersubjective things that are referred to by people as being real and often taken for granted. He goes on to say that social constructs are reproduced and maintained by society and institutions as symbolic and social mechanisms that describe human activity (Vera, 2016). Berger and Luckman (1966) note that human activity is at the heart of the social construction of our environment and experiences, and any activity that is repeated often enough becomes habitual and more efficient, ritualising and limiting our choices of how to go about an activity. Our interactions with others through our early development, socialisation and education help inform us of the conventional ways to observe these patterns and rituals, connecting us to the predecessors that have constructed reality before us (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Social construction, therefore, focuses on the processes, whereas social constructivism focuses on the learning that occurs as a result of interactions. The social reality and experiences of learning within a community, I believe, are therefore best understood through the lens of social constructivism. Two key theories that have developed through constructivism are ZPD and scaffolding, which I will explore further in section 2.3, are crucial to understanding how learning happens in a learning community.

### 1.3. Reflexivity and Positionality

Before proceeding, it is important to acknowledge the context in which this study was carried out and some of the limiting factors. Attia and Edge (2017) note that research is a developmental process through which the researcher is constantly both being and becoming. I need to acknowledge here my own subjectivity and the situation of the world in which I carried out my study. Du Preez (2010) highlights the importance of one's own identity and privileges in discussing one's positioning. I am a British Muslim of Pakistani descent from a working-class family, raised in a North-western former mill town. I am the first in my family to gain a Higher Education and the first to enrol on to a Doctoral programme. The students I teach are

predominantly white and female, who mainly identify as either Christian or of no religion and tend to live in other former mill towns within commuting distance from the College. In this regard I am an outsider based on my faith and ethnicity. Savin-Baden and Major (2020) state that it is not enough to merely acknowledge these links, one must situate oneself in relation to the data and the questions one is trying to answer. I studied my PGCE at the College and have taught there since 2016. I have a good rapport with my adult learners and try to make myself available to them as best as I can in person and via email and Microsoft Teams. I try to offer them the benefit of my experiences as a student and demystify academia to make it less intimidating (Faltis, 2013). As a result, I think the students are at ease with me and often tell me about their lives and goals. This rapport was noted during one of the focus groups when I asked the participants if they were comfortable with me in my dual role as researcher and teacher, 'You've spent enough time helping us out ... so we are quite happy to do things to help you,' and 'A friend in need is a friend indeed'. This could imply that there was participant bias, in other words they may have responded in ways to please the researcher. However, it was made clear to them throughout the study that their participation or lack of participation would not impact their grades or change how I interact with them as a teacher. I also made sure to avoid leading questions and did not provide them with my views on learning communities, nor what kind of interactions I was interested in observing. Furthermore, the participants were also informed that their data would be anonymised before analysis. In the same way, I also have a good relationship with my colleagues, showing them positive regard and respect without being overly familiar. They too reciprocate the respect and collegiality, which was evidenced by their remarks during focus groups and interviews, such as, 'I like you, I'm happy to help out,' and 'Trust that you'll do a good job'. I will discuss my positionality further in section 2.3 of the methodology chapter. Another factor to consider is that the study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### 1.4. Impact of COVID-19 on the Study

The COVID-19 pandemic began during the second year of my Doctorate and resulted in three lockdowns and restrictions on social interactions and movement. The first countrywide lockdown was announced on 23 March 2020. People were told to remain in their homes and not visit each other, even close family members, for the duration of the lockdown. An order was issued to work from home and most educational courses were disrupted, with exams and assignments cancelled for the year. Online learning was mandated for all students, but with no assessments due, there was little incentive to attend classes. The lockdown was meant to last 12 weeks, instead it continued indefinitely with a phased reopening of the retail industry and localised lockdowns being announced for areas with higher rates of infection.

Originally, I had planned the study as an ethnography, to immerse myself fully in the physical world of the student participants, observing them in their natural environment on campus. However, I was conscious that another lockdown could be called at any time, therefore I had to adapt my study with this in mind. A literature review by Vindrola-Prados and Johnson (2020) provided an overview of how to do qualitative research during an outbreak. They listed methods such as interviews, observations, and community mapping, but did not cover practicalities around keeping participants and the researcher safe. I planned to maintain social distancing whilst observing students and make use of personal protective equipment (PPE). If further lockdowns were announced, I would continue to observe the students through online classes. Salmons (2016) provided some guidance on doing participatory observations online and eliciting responses and sharing insights with the participants. She also notes the use of focus groups and interviews online and the possibility of taking a back seat whilst observing online sessions.

The College campus reopened in September 2020 with social distancing measures in place, which included restricted class sizes, limited access to catering and the library and no access to social areas such as the Study Zone, the HE Study Room, nor the Enrichment Room. The college was festooned with warning posters and yellow tape. Sanitisation stations were dotted around the building and masks, gloves, wipes and bottles of sanitiser were placed in every room. Despite all these measures a further national lockdown was called in November 2020. The adult students did not return to campus for the remainder of the academic year as a third lockdown was enforced in January 2021, even though the 16-19 campus was eventually reopened in March 2021. For the study, this meant that I was unable to gain the anticipated level of immersion in the physical world of the participants. However, O'Reilly (2009) notes that increasingly the internet is being seen as a virtual place and participant observation has been adapted for online studies by adhering to specific criteria, which will be explored further in the methodology section (section 3.4.2).

The pandemic created an opportunity for me to study learning communities during this unprecedented time of upheaval in people's lives. As noted earlier, previous studies on learning communities have approached the phenomena differently, which are explored in the literature review (section 2.3). The purpose of looking at these approaches is to help differentiate my own study but also to understand the perceived benefits of learning communities. Furthermore, the literature will also provide a basis for later comparison on the impact of online learning and how physical separation from peers may have an effect on a learning community.

## 1.5. Structure of the Thesis

Subsequent to the introduction, the structure of the thesis is as follows:

**Literature Review:** I begin by reviewing the literature on learning communities, exploring definitions of key concepts, the origins and variations of learning communities, the types of interactions, roles, and the composition of learning communities as well where they take place offline and online.

**Methodology:** I will discuss my methodology, including my sampling strategy and the methods that I used to collect my data.

**Data Collection and Analysis:** in which I will detail the data collection process and the framework for data analysis.

**Findings and Discussion:** Then I will present the findings, which will include samples of the data, followed by a discussion that will offer a synthesis of the literature and the findings.

**Conclusion:** Finally, I will conclude with a summary of the thesis and recommendations for developing and utilising learning communities to improve student experiences, engagement and retention.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

### 2.1. Introduction

The aim of my research was to identify learning communities and explore whether they add value for adult learners in a Higher Education in Further Education college, based in Northwest England, both on-campus and online during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The literature review will serve several functions in this study, including mapping the field on learning communities, establishing what previous studies have written about the topic, identifying gaps and situating my own study within the field (Kamler and Thomson, 2011). The literature review also serves to set the boundaries of the field rather than exploring everything written about the topic of learning communities as this is a discovery-oriented study (Rudestam and Newton, 2007).

The literature review will begin by defining what community is, as this is central to understanding what learning communities are. This will be followed by an exploration of how others have defined learning communities in comparison to my own definition, as provided in the introduction. Afterwards, I will look at the origins of learning communities by looking at the Experimental College studies done by Meiklejohn (1932) and his disciples, Tussman (1969) and Calderwalder (1981). Next, I will evaluate some recent studies on learning communities, including those by Weiss et al. (2015), Rima et al. (2019) and Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) to show how the concept of learning communities has developed and the forms learning communities take. This will be followed by the theoretical framework for the study, focusing particularly on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as the underlying theory that explains the mechanics of learning communities, and some examples of studies that have used this framework to provide a precedence for my own use of ZPD as the smallest unit of a learning community. Then, I will explore the added value of learning communities and what roles different members of the learning community play in providing the added value. Finally, I will look at what has been written about the barriers to participating in a learning community.

#### 2.1.1. Community

To understand what a learning community is, first we must consider what community is. Community could be understood as a group of people sharing geographic proximity, a co-constructed cultural identity, shared political consciousness and collective action, or even virtual connectivity (Delanty, 2010). Community is generally seen as a positive and desirable thing; somewhere to seek help, security, and a sense of belonging, but participants may have to give up some autonomy in decision making and be willing to be socialised into the community's way of doing things (Bauman, 2001). A focus on membership allows us to identify whether a

community exists or not, because we choose who can be a member based on the qualities, experiences, and common goals that we have come to share in a group, and exclude all others (Bauman, 2001). Bruhn (2011) believes that this sense of fellowship and belonging is important to understanding community beyond the mechanical solidarity that comes from being from the same place, as community comes from a sense of wanting to belong and the need to be understood. This is perhaps why learners may share a sense of camaraderie built on the idea that they are experiencing something together. Bruhn (2011) suggests that this develops a sense of trust and social capital, the value resource and network that aids in achieving shared goals. In learning, these ideas of community relate to shared experiences and a sense of belonging.

Habitus is a useful concept for understanding why community is an important element in learning. Bourdieu (2013) explains the concept as structures in any given environment that lead to the adoption of behaviours for success without conscious effort or provision of direction. Reay (2004) defines it as the way in which concepts and sensibilities we unconsciously develop over the course of our lives as we intersect with other cultures, histories, and different contexts, such as class, gender or ethnicity or indeed cultural groups, can shape a person's attitudes and behaviours (Reay et al., 2009). Reay et al. (2009) suggest that it may even influence a student's decision regarding which Higher Education institution they choose to study at, as they will be drawn to institutes where they feel comfortable and identify with the other students attending there. Mature learners tend to seek out familiar settings that are close to home (Burton et al. 2011), and are geared towards smaller groups of students, offering hands-on academic and pastoral support (James, 1995). Furthermore, their aspirations for progression tend to be limited to universities that are also relatively 'local'. Most of the students tend to be aged 25 and over, working-class and female (Reay, 1998). Inoue (2006) notes that it is difficult to verbalise how habitus is embodied, because it can be described as tacit knowledge, it is something that can only be understood through experiencing it. Rovai (2002) writes that for learners to become a community, they must share a community spirit and a sense of being connected and part of a group, a willingness to trust each other and care for each other's wellbeing, have meaningful interactions with each other beyond just for learning, and they must have common expectations and shared educational goals. When the above elements are combined, this arguably has the makings of a learning community.

#### 2.1.2. Defining Learning Communities

In my introduction, I noted that learning communities operate at different levels, with two or more students working together to learn something as the smallest unit, or groups of three or more learners offering each other mutual support, development or instruction through repeated interactions for the purpose of achieving a shared learning goal. This could include

trying to understand complex ideas together, working on assignments or completing a course of study. This can happen at a small group level or as a whole class. These interactions can take place anywhere on and off campus, both physically and virtually. Students may drop in and out of a community as and when they need them. Learning Communities can develop by themselves but become effective more quickly through the involvement of faculty members. My definition seeks to clarify some elements that are missing from previous definitions, but also puts forward the argument that learning communities can develop spontaneously, without being designed and deployed by faculty members. A summary of previous definitions can be found in Table 1 (p.23)

Benjamin (2015) and Cross (1998) suggest that learning communities are an opportunity to practice academic and personal skills within an educational community or a group that is scaffolded and supported by others. Scaffolding was first defined in a published medium by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) as a process to aid learners to grasp something which would have previously been out of their reach. Scaffolding is about simplifying the process rather than the activity, within the task being distributed between the tutor, the learners and their peers (Daniels, 2001). I will revisit scaffolding later in the literature review (section 2.2.3) when discussing its link to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Neither Benjamin (2015), nor Cross (1998) clarify the minimum or maximum number of students in their definition. However, they do acknowledge that learning communities go beyond just learning new concepts, that they also provide support for each other. Fink and Inkelas (2015) also suggest that learning communities can vary in size and in the length of time they exist and in the level of involvement of faculty members in organising and instigating them.

Kilpatrick et al. (2003) suggest that within education, learning communities are a shared enterprise between learners, faculty members and administrators to develop deep learning of curriculum content by the individual students. The purpose of such communities is to share and create knowledge for the benefit of its individual members and the whole group. The impetus for collaboration and cooperation on achieving shared goals comes from acknowledging that one's own abilities and qualities aren't enough to achieve the task alone (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Kilpatrick et al. 2003). Collaboration goes beyond communication between individuals and is described as an act of creating new shared knowledge or understanding (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Zhao and Kuh (2004) suggest that this is because learning communities use a social constructivist approach to knowledge, with learners actively engaged in knowledge construction rather than just receiving it from an instructor. However, the focus on knowledge creation suggests that this is the only legitimate purpose of a learning community, ignoring other areas of personal development and support provided by learning communities.

Brown (1994) notes that learning communities are made up of learners who fulfil the roles of researchers and teachers and take responsibility for their own learning and develop a shared set of ideas and beliefs and a common knowledge base and voice. Voice relates to learners adapting to the vocabulary of the discipline as they become a community. The use of discursive practices suggests that learners who master the linguistic level landscape of a discipline are thus well placed to assist other learners to work towards mastery (Brown, 1994; Mercer, 2000, cited in Daniels, 2001). Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to this as guided participation. The Community of Learners Program (Brown, 1994) developed a series of principles for creating a system of learning communities which includes that students should develop self-efficacy and motivation; teachers should see classrooms as multiple zones of development; and they should legitimise and value individual differences; and create opportunities for dialogue and discussion between learners; and maintain a sense of research practice in the learner community.

This definition is important as it provides a description of what a learning community does at a classroom level and the role of a teacher in the community. However, Brown's concept also suggests that learning communities have to be formed by a teacher. Lenning and Ebbers (1999) imply that students are too distracted by other priorities outside of learning to spontaneously form communities. Much has changed in the world since Lenning and Ebbers made this suggestion. The proliferation of internet access and the rise of social media and smartphones have enabled learners to develop and maintain their own communities beyond the confines of the traditional university campus.

According to Creswell (2007, p.68), a learning community is a reality constructed by the actors within it, through reoccurring interactions that happen often enough to form 'shared patterns of behaviour, beliefs and language'. This definition provides a broad idea of what happens within a learning community, but again does not define the size of a learning community, nor specifics about what types of interactions the communities engage in. This is remedied by Lenning and Ebbers, (1999) who suggest that learning communities are organised groups of students that enhance learning through student-student, student-faculty and student-curriculum interaction. This definition is more specific about the types of interactions that occur within a learning community, though it does not provide a nuanced description of the behaviours and norms of a learning community.

In their report on learning communities, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) identify four basic types of learning communities: the curricular model, with students co-enrolled on two or more courses, including team-taught courses; the residential model, with students living together on campus; additional classroom-based communities, such as in the Community of Learners experiment

(Palincsar and Brown, 1984); and student-type learning communities that are aimed at learners with specific needs. However, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) acknowledge that learning community is a broad umbrella term to describe community level interaction for the purpose of promoting and advancing learning either at institutional, faculty or student level, and can feature physical, virtual and correspondence-based interactions. Furthermore, they also note that the basic categories of student learning communities listed earlier can be combined into various meaningful forms. Rima et al. (2019) and Fink and Inkela (2015) list five common models of learning communities in Higher Education that are like Lenning and Ebbers' (1999) list with the addition of paired or clustered groups and smaller cohorts within larger classes.

Arguably, the two courses in my study are structured in a comparable fashion to the co-enrolment model, as noted above. The BA CSC course is designed around a central theme (Community and Social Care) and combines various fields of study within its modular content. For example, one module focuses on the history of social welfare and policy, whilst another focuses on human development across the lifecycle. Both feature learning communities focused on classroom-based interactions and supplemented by student-led study groups. The Access to HE course combines Sociology, Psychology and Criminology, but is sequenced so that there is overlap in the three strands. For example, whilst learners are taught about the different explanations for criminality in Criminology, they will take a deeper look at sociological and psychological explanations in Sociology and Psychology respectively. However, there is little to no interaction between learners from different programmes of study, though prior to the COVID-19 pandemic educational visits abroad have been offered across programmes, and all learners across both of the College's campuses would be invited to attend the annual criminology conference. It is difficult to think of each cohort as a single learning community, especially when there are hundreds of students, however a small class or, as Lenning and Ebbers (1999) suggest, clusters of students within each class can be conceived as individual learning communities.

Daniels (2001) notes that Vygotsky was focused on the impact of interaction on supposedly independent functioning, which has implications for instruction and assessment being focused on the potential of the learner and on development through social interaction and collaboration, rather than on the ability to memorise a certain number of facts. One way of categorising learning communities is based on the level and frequency of interactions between members over the period of study. In Lave and Wenger's (2005) Communities of Practice model, those on the periphery of a community, such as new entrants or those who are soon exiting the community, interact less frequently and intensely than those who are working towards attaining mastery in their field. Lave and Wenger (2005) term this as legitimate peripheral participation.

In contrast, an individual can benefit from the community by listening to their discussions from the periphery, without ever becoming an active participant within it.

<b>Table 1: Definitions of Learning Communities and their Theoretical Framework</b>		
<b>Theorist</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Theoretical Framework</b>
Meiklejohn (1932), Tussman (1969) and Cadwallader (1981)	Learners enrolled onto a unified, one-year, liberal arts programme, living together with faculty members in residential halls.	Meiklejohn's Experimental College
Brown (1994)	A community of learners who fulfil the roles of researchers and teachers, taking responsibility for their own learning.	ZPD
Cross (1998), Benjamin (2015)	An educational community that is scaffolded and supported by others.	Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976) Scaffolding
Lenning and Ebbers (1999)	Intentionally developed community for the purpose of promoting and advancing learning at institutional, faculty or student level.	Dewey and Meiklejohn
Kilpatrick et al. (2003)	A shared enterprise between learners, faculty members and administrators to develop deep learning of curriculum content.	Social Constructivism, Vygotsky, Dewey
Zhao and Kuh (2004)	Intentionally structured, co-enrolled classes, engaging in common intellectual activities.	Social and Cognitive Constructivism
Cresswell (2007)	A reality constructed by participants through reoccurring interactions that forms a shared pattern of behaviour, beliefs and language.	Social Constructivism

### 2.1.3. Added Value

A Learning community must offer additional value beyond the social benefits of interacting with peers. Brown et al. (2016) note that in education, value-added normally refers to a teacher's or school's ability to impact a learner's outcomes, which includes their final grades and onward progression. This goes beyond the advantages or disadvantages of socioeconomic and the student's own attitude towards learning. They add that the interest in added-value is related to globalisation of education and the belief that what works in one place should work in another, therefore added-value becomes a determinant of quality. Such borrowing of ideas and approaches has led to changes in educational policy and practice and the ability to compare added value with schools that share similar demographics. However, in terms of learning communities, added value refers to the cultivation of academic, social and employability capital (Rima et al. 2019; Bruhn, 2011). In my study this relates to how learners support each other in grasping new concepts, improve academic skills such as referencing, or offer emotional support when a member of the community is suffering personal hardship or is struggling to manage the workload.

With the key terms now defined, I will explore the theoretical framework that underpins this study and provides the principal theories that form the basis for understanding learning communities.

## 2.2. Previous Studies on Learning Communities in Higher Education

Fink and Inkelas (2015) and Zhao and Kuh (2004) both credit Meiklejohn as being the progenitor of the first purposefully deployed learning community at his Experimental College at the University of Wisconsin, which ran from 1927 to 1932. Fink and Inkelas (2015) note that students were enrolled on to a two-year programme and were encouraged to collaborate and take an active role in their learning. Classes were team taught and courses were clustered together. The Experimental College was closed after five years due to 'drastically different expectations of students, compensation of faculty and curricular design' (Fink and Inkelas, 2015, p.7). Meiklejohn's experiment led to similar attempts by his advocates, Joseph Tussman (1969) in Berkeley and Mervyn Cadwallader (1981) in San Jose State. These experiments were radical attempts to reform the increasingly fragmented university experience into a programme that reflected classical and liberal arts education. These experiments were forerunners to the later learning communities that used co-enrolment, such as those of Rima et al. (2019) and Weiss et al. (2015), initially, Cadwallader's (1981) experiment experienced similar issues to Meiklejohn's

College. However, a breakthrough came when Cadwallader took his entire faculty and student body to the mountains to get everyone on the same page:

The retreat was part of the program, attendance was required, and so everyone was there. The first retreat was so worthwhile we opened every succeeding semester that way and even ended the program in the mountains. The retreats were important because they helped our faculty and students agree to be bound together by a common intellectual purpose for two years. Slowly little cliques broke down and a loose assortment of individuals became a band of brothers and sisters. (Cadwallader, 1981, p.16)

Here, Cadwallader (1981) pinpoints the exact moment that his disparate group of learners and teachers became a fully-fledged learning community, through bonding over a common purpose.

A number of studies carried out in North America suggest the purpose of learning communities is to deepen students' understanding of concepts and themes through linking courses together in both residential and non-residential universities (Rima et al., 2019; Fink and Inkelas, 2015; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). British academics, Gurbutt and Cragg (2019), also acknowledge this trend of a multidisciplinary approach to learning communities, to provide each discipline's unique approach to an identified issue. They believe that this approach aids in creating opportunities to expose learners to contrasting views and challenge stereotypes and perceptions, especially when a cohort of students lacks diversity. However, it should be noted that higher education courses are organised differently in the UK in comparison to the USA, often straddling multiple disciplines and taught in a modular form with students participating in shared lectures and seminars but as a single cohort (Chrysikos and Catterall, 2020). Fink and Inkelas (2015) note that residential models of learning communities are more prominent in the US, based on the British Oxbridge model of collocating learners on campus to socialise them together through living and working together.

I will now look at a number of recent studies on learning communities. Starting with Zhao and Kuh's (2004) study on the relationship between learning community participation and student engagement to provide a more traditional example of a learning community. Followed by Weiss et al. (2015) who studied learning communities in six community colleges using quantitative methods of data collection combined with observations and interviews. American community colleges have some similarity to adult further education and HE in FE in England. Students tend to be non-traditional, such as those who are unable to travel or move to university towns and cities because of either their economic or domestic situations and instead commute to campus. So, whilst the Weiss et al. (2015) study is on a much bigger scale, it looks at institutions similar

to the College in my study. Other studies include, Rima et al. (2019) research on co-enrolment of learners on a criminology and criminal justice programme, Chrysikos and Catterall's (2020) study on learning communities in UK universities, Dai and Elliot's (2022) study on a uniquely Chinese take on learning communities and Angouri et al. (2024) EUTOPIA project study of transnational learning communities.

#### 2.2.1. Zhao and Kuh (2004) Adding Value: Learning Communities and Student Engagement

Zhao and Kuh (2004) conducted a study that examined the relationship between learning community participation and student engagement across 365 higher education institutions (HEIs) that all run 4 year programmes. As noted earlier, they see learning communities as curricular communities that are co-enrolled onto a course of study and are intentionally structured by the faculty to aid learners in connecting with the ideas of their discipline and with each other. They made use of data from the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE), which according to the NSSE (2021) website, collects annual data from colleges and universities in America. It focuses on how students participate in programs and activities provided by their institutions, in order to estimate how undergraduate students spend their time and what they gain from attending HEIs. Their analysis found that participation in learning communities is positively linked to improved performance, increased engagement with educational activities, improved attendance and higher satisfaction levels with their overall college experience. They found the minority groups and those already part of fraternities and sororities were most likely to engage in learning communities. Women were also more likely to engage in learning communities than men. A major, self-identified, limitation of this study is its reliance on NSSE data and the ambiguity of the survey's questions on learning communities. As a result, they were unable to determine whether students had participated in a learning community or were intending to, nor could they distinguish between different types of learning communities. Zhao and Kuh (2004) also acknowledge that learning communities are complex and not so easily captured by survey data. The study corroborates what was already known about learning communities but its quantitative approach and use of secondary data means that it cannot provide a nuanced understanding of learning communities, the kinds of interactions that take place within them, nor comment on the different roles fulfilled by its members.

#### 2.2.2. Weiss et al. (2015) The Impact of Learning Communities for Students in Developmental Education

Weiss et al. (2015) note that less than 50% of community college learners complete or progress onto a university course. They suggest that this is mostly because the learners are academically unprepared for the level of study they are enrolling on to and are having to contend with family

obligations. They found that there was a small but sustained boost to academic performance through participation in learning communities on targeted subjects and no positive or negative effect on untargeted subjects. However, participation did induce learners to enrol on to additional courses and the cumulative impact on attainment was about 8%. Weiss et al. (2015) also suggested that there was evidence to support the idea that participation in a learning community improved persistence to a degree and helped carry the advantage they gained from participation in semester 1 into following semesters. They argue that feelings of integration with the academic and social life of a college, as also suggested by Tinto (1975), may not be enough by themselves to change a student's success rate, or that a single-semester community was insufficient to develop the level of integration required to markedly improve persistence. Tinto (1975) found that the more integrated a person is into the college system the more committed they are likely to be to the course and the college itself. However, Weiss et al. (2015) disagree with Tinto (1975) that a student needs to be completely detached from their original community to fully integrate, as most students at community college tend to commute from their original community. Therefore, they suggest that socialisation of commuting students may happen in a different way to that of traditional, residential students. Furthermore, I would suggest that the internet and social media have made it easier for non-residential students to maintain their communities beyond campus boundaries. This was the focus of a thesis by Alghamdi (2019) who found that online learning communities are established and maintained using social media and additionally, the importance of connectivism between people through the medium of Web 2.0 tools such as social media and blogs was also noted by Robinson et al. (2021).

### 2.2.3. Rima et al. (2019) Supplementing the 'College Experience' with Program-Based Learning Communities

The third study is by Rima et al. (2019) who instigated learning communities for a cohort of 72 first year students enrolled on an underperforming criminal justice degree programme. They designed their learning communities based on what previous studies have suggested are the core elements of a learning community: faculty collaboration, the involvement of support staff, integrated curriculum and strong relationships amongst peers and faculty. Other steps included block class scheduling, smaller class sizes with average of 25 to 30 students per class and opportunities to participate in extracurricular activities. This is very similar to how adult classes are organised at the college, with adult students coming in two days a week, with small class sizes and the occasional offer of extra-curricular activities. One important point in the design used by Rima et al.'s (2019) for learning communities was that the communities were linked over three courses, noted as Criminal Justice (CRJ), First Year Seminar (FYS) and Psychology (PSY). Additionally, faculty members were given lighter teaching loads to give them time to

develop and create opportunities for integration within the learning communities. The study used an anonymous questionnaire and college records to collect their data and was done over one semester, which Rima et al. (2019) recommend as the minimum length of time for a learning community. After the first semester, students re-enrolled at the college and joined other learning communities.

Rima et al. (2019) found that learners believed learning communities to be groups of people studying the same classes with the same teachers and helping each other. These communities provide additional support in college and opportunities for interaction. Some of the students felt that collaboration between faculty members was important in a learning community and for them to succeed. Rima et al. (2019) also found that most learners were interested in taking part in further organised learning communities. The data on progress and progression also demonstrated that the learners that participated in learning communities outperformed other learners on the CRJ course, but not on the FYS and PSY courses. Their explanation for this discrepancy is that most of the additional support in the learning community was aimed at the CRJ course, and the data on the other two courses show that there was a relatively small difference between learners participating in the learning community and those who were not.

#### 2.2.4. Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) identifying student retention factors of a UK university using the concept of a learning community

Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) carried out their study in the UK, with first year undergraduate computing students. They used a qualitative methodology, using focus groups and the unfolding matrix approach with 80 full-time students. Padilla (1991) developed the unfolding matrix as part of his study on assessing the acquisition of heuristic knowledge. Padilla et al. (1996) proposed that rather than waiting for the analysis stage to organise data into a matrix, you start data collection with an empty matrix and record data directly into it. The matrix is dialogic in nature, and limits the data collected to the specified fields in the matrix.

Chrysikos and Catterall's (2020) study was representative of a diverse body of university students, including commuters and mature students, however it did not include part-time learners. The study set out to examine student retention by looking at the experiences of first year students and whether participating in a learning community aided in better social and academic integration. They suggest that in a UK university, learning communities are cohort-based due to degree programmes being mostly single subject-based, as opposed to US university degree programmes that take a major and minors route and therefore require co-registration for learning communities to work, as suggested by Tinto (1975). Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) make a few assertions that differ from the previous studies. First of all, they note that membership in a learning community is not automatic but is the result of induction and

orientation practices that are common in UK universities. Interestingly they differentiate between classroom-based learning communities, such as lectures and workshops, and social-based learning communities, such as study groups and student societies. In this scenario, learners can interact with students from their own cohort or course or from any other. They reported four types of interaction, student-faculty, which includes academic tutors and advisors, student-student, including non-learning community members, student-personal tutor, though mainly in advice and guidance context, and student-professional, which includes university administrators, employers and co-workers. The writers acknowledge the lack of generalisability of their study but note that it may still be relevant to other universities and subject areas. This study is interesting to me because it is one of a very few UK-based studies on learning communities and utilises a qualitative approach to data collection.

#### 2.2.5. Dai and Elliot (2022), *Shi men* as key doctoral practice

Dai and Elliot (2022) explore the concept of '*shi men*' in Chinese learning communities based on ideas of connection, relationship and organisation between supervisor and students, that started from traditional kung fu schools, and have since become an informal part of the postgraduate culture in China. *Shi men* is not officially instigated by universities or departments, but is deeply ingrained in the culture of student and supervisor. As such, experiences of *shi men* are contingent on the experience and expertise of the study supervisor to manage and direct the community, which can potentially leave international students feeling marginalised and only nominally part of the community (Dai and Elliot, 2022). Dai and Elliot have applied a Communities of Practice theoretical lens to their study because it aligns well with Chinese collectivist culture. They have used semi-structured interviews with six international doctoral students and their supervisors to collect their data. Their study provides an insight into the inner-life of this uniquely Chinese style of learning communities, its strengths and its limitations in terms of consistency in student experience. Arguably, *shi men*, whilst not instigated at faculty level, is being instigated by the doctoral supervisor, but it is still an informal mode of learning community, very different from the residential and co-enrolment model of Lenning and Ebbers (1998) and Zhao and Kuh (2004).

#### 2.2.6. Angouri et al. (2024), Connected Learning Communities

The Connected Learning Communities study aims to connect learning communities through EUTOPIA, a transnational university alliance in Europe. The Connected Learning model has developed in three waves, through connecting the formal and informal curricula, online networks and finally, placing emphasis on learner agency and their communities of practice (Angouri et al, 2024). Their understanding of learning communities is built on a constructionist approach and social learning theory, particularly highlighting Wenger's (1998) Communities of

Practice model and Lenning et al's (2013) definition of learning communities as intentionally developed communities that promote individual and shared learning. Angouri et al (2024) describe their connected learning community model as learners from different institutions connecting to co-create learning experiences by building on existing curricula, whilst prioritising individual and group progression. The study made use of a mixed methods approach, including direct observation, document analysis and reflective practice. This study, like my own, took place during COVID-19 and was also affected by the shift to online delivery, though they were already looking at a blended learning approach. Angouri et al (2024, p.20) note that they found that learning communities are 'dynamic and evolve over time'. They also confirm that participation in a learning community is beneficial for both staff and students, especially when it is 'embedded in their regional, national and international contexts'.

There are a few common elements in the examples of learning communities noted above. Firstly, they have all been instigated intentionally for specific purposes. The study by Rima et al. (2019) was to improve performance on a single subject area and was based on elements suggested by previous studies. Weiss et al (2015) designed their study to capture whether learning communities improved retention and overall performance rates. Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) wanted to see if learning communities could improve retention and integration. My research differs from these studies in that the learning communities have formed naturally rather than having been purposefully instigated by the faculty, though in Chrysikos and Catterall's (2020) study, induction processes have been suggested as the initiating of learning communities. Another distinguishing feature of Chrysikos and Catterall's study is that they have detailed the kind of interactions that take place in a learning community, which is something my study will also do by looking at types of interactions and roles fulfilled by participants. The latter two studies also help highlight how learning communities continue to adapt to their changing contexts and are out-growing the traditional definition of learning communities. Dai and Elliot (2022) is one of the few studies that explores the inner life of a learning community.

In terms of theoretical frameworks, Lenning and Ebbers refer back to Meiklejohn's Experimental College Model, whilst Brown (1994), Kilpatrick et al (2003), Zhao and Kuh (2004) and Cresswell (2007) cite Vygotsky's social constructivism, the latter of which I too have adopted.

### 2.3. Theoretical Framework

Social constructivism claims that all learning is social and that 'Learners are believed to be enculturated into their learning community and appropriate knowledge, based on their existing understanding, through their interaction with the immediate learning environment' (Liu and Matthews, 2005, p.388). Bakhurst (1995) writes that it is through human activity that the objects

and places within our environments are given significance and meaning, which demands that we continue to interact with the world to continue to imbue it with more meaning. This then necessitates us to develop our own skills and knowledge to adapt to the changing world.

Vygotsky (1994a) suggests that the environment around the child is constantly changing in two ways. The first relates to how the environment is transformed by the child's developing intellect and psychology, meaning even if it is in the same place and with the same people, the child's understanding of them continues to change as it develops a mastery of its own behaviour and language. Secondly, the child transitions from one physical environment to another throughout its childhood, for example from nursery to primary school and then onto secondary school. Luria (1994) notes that as we normalise new ways of behaviour and thinking these become stumbling blocks for when we enter a new environment or are challenged by new systems of learning. For example, when a child moves from primary school to secondary school, the methods they had learned for dividing numbers may cause them to balk when faced with long divisions, or when a student has learned to reference one way in college, they struggle to adapt to formal methods of referencing used in universities such as Harvard and APA. Luria (1994) indicates that this process takes place over two phases, the first being a trial-and-error phase, followed by a discovery and adaptation phase. This would suggest then students will try and master the new course of study by falling back on familiar patterns and strategies and when that does not work they will try and discover new strategies for resolving the situation. Vygotsky (1994a) suggests that the final form or ideal form must exist in the environment, for example a normal functioning adult who has internalised the socio-cultural norms of society, for the child to develop the corresponding activity, characteristics, or traits. If other children of the same level of development are present, then the child will develop these characteristics, activities and traits, but the process will be slower and, in the end, may not accurately represent the ideal form.

O'Connor and Michaels (1993) highlight the role of the teacher in creating a culture in which learners see each other and the teacher as members of a shared classroom culture, a community of learners, which requires intentionality, planning and coordination of social participation. Reid (1998) notes that this could disadvantage students who are unable to recognise this culture, such as those with specific disabilities, or just unused to it, such as recent immigrants and refugees. They instead may see the teacher as the sole arbiter of knowledge and truth and therefore may be unable to fully participate within the shared classroom culture. Rogoff et al. (1993) see individual development as being contingent on the learner's ability to interact with others and become socialised into the culture of the community through a process of observing practices of their community and gradually becoming more responsible participants within

them. This links back to two related key concepts within social constructivism that are key mechanisms within learning communities: the zone of proximal development and scaffolding.

### 2.3.1. ZPD and Scaffolding

Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) is a core construct within social constructivism. ZPD is defined by Vygotsky (1978, p.38) as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers'. The level of actual development is identified as skills and knowledge that have already reached maturation in the learner, whereas those still maturing are part of the level of potential development. Therefore, Vygotsky (1978) proposes that the primary function of learning is maturation of development through interaction and cooperation with peers and the environment. Mastery at each level of development then becomes the foundation for subsequent development. The process of bridging the zone of proximal development to achieve the targeted level is referred to as scaffolding (Shvarts and Bakker, 2019).

Scaffolding was defined by Wood et al. (1976), as a process to aid a learner to grasp something which would have previously been out of their reach. Daniels (2001) suggests that scaffolding is about simplifying the process rather than the activity, with the task being distributed between the tutor, the learner and the learner's peers. Bruner (1997) explains this process as providing a sequence of the steps required to complete the task. Bruner (1997) believes that the ZPD requires that the learner is on the right level of study, and secondly, requires a tutor who understands the learner's ability level and what they need in terms of support to achieve the goal. Wood and Wood (1996) interpret ZPD as when a learner becomes uncertain of a task, it affects their ability to master it. The expert's role is to reduce the level of uncertainty or difficulty around the task by disambiguating the confounding factor. The instructor then fades the level of support offered, allowing the learner to complete the remaining task by themselves (Wood and Wood, 1996). In a learning community with multiple ZPDs coexisting, it is conceivable that some learners may have already grasped the tutor's instruction and therefore can take on the role of the expert.

Daniels (2001) suggests ZPD scaffolding does not refer to a pre-set list of instructions, rather it is seen as an interaction between the learner and the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO). He highlights that there is a range of opinions about the role of the MKO in designing and deploying scaffolding and collaborating and mediating the level of support that is required. Hedegaard (1998) suggests that the teacher guides through general concepts and engages learners in discussion around situated problem solving and then deploys the MKO to provide an appropriate

level of support. Hedegaard (2005) notes that because children experience a common process of socialisation, they can interact and collaborate. Even though every child is unique in their own way they are similar enough to be provided with a shared level of instruction to develop common knowledge and skills. Daniels (2001) adds that the weaker students are mystified by the ability of the MKO to complete tasks because the processes and steps may not be obvious to them. This can lead to frustrations and feelings of inadequacy, which can be remedied by scaffolded learning through a process called prolepsis.

Daniels (2001) notes that prolepsis is the process of forecasting or building up anticipation of a competency that is to be developed, which encourages the learner to participate in an activity at a level they may not yet be capable of without support. Wood et al. (1976, p.98) have set out a process for scaffolding that highlights the functions of scaffolding a task: 1) Recruitment, to enlist the learner in the problem solving activity and getting them to agree to the requirements of the task, 2) Reduction in degrees of freedom, simplifying the task by reducing the difficulty or complexity of the problem, 3) Direction maintenance, by keeping the learner interested and engaged in the task and not allowing their focus to drift, 4) Making critical features by accentuating the important parts, noting the discrepancies in what has been done in relation to what was required, 5) Frustration control, by limiting the learner's frustration but avoiding making them dependent on the tutor, and 6) Demonstration, providing an ideal model of how to resolve the problem by attempting the solution that was offered to the learner. If the learner correctly responds then the level of support de-escalates, however an incorrect response requires an escalation in support.

### 2.3.2. Models of Social Learning Employing ZPD

Whilst this provides a theory of how ZPD and Scaffolding can be used for the purpose of learning, particularly for children, it would be useful to understand how they may be deployed for social learning and ultimately, learning communities. To this end, I will share three examples of social learning that are based on a ZPD framework. These models of social learning are the linking concepts between Vygotsky's theory of ZPD and learning communities (see Figure 1). These are: Palincsar and Brown's (1984) Reciprocal Teaching, Hedegaard's (1998) Double Move, and Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice model.



Figure 1 Relationship between ZPD and Learning Communities

*Reciprocal Teaching and the Community of Learners Programme*

Palincsar and Brown's (1984) reciprocal teaching study was designed to improve reading in children by training expert students to mentor novice learners to improve their reading and comprehension of texts. The teacher and learners form a group. In the group, the learners take on different roles to help formulate questions, summarise and clarify the reading. Reciprocal teaching involves a group of participants and can be led by a teacher or a MKO, with the purpose of provoking 'zones of proximal development within which readers of varying abilities could find support' (Brown, 1994, p.7), meaning multiple ZPDs are in place at the same time. The Community of Learners project used the Reciprocal Teaching formula and expanded it by including tutors, older students, parents, and experts within the community to fulfil the role of the MKO to support learning and exploration of topics. The aim of the programme was to leverage the distributed expertise of learners within a classroom, by encouraging learners to become researchers and focus on what they found interesting within a topic before sharing their discoveries within their learning community. Palincsar and Brown (1984) suggest that a novice learner can be prepared for participation in a community that she is not yet fully able to engage with unaided, in anticipation of the competency that she will develop through instruction and support. Brown (1994) notes that over time the learning community develops a shared set of ideas and beliefs and a common knowledge base and voice. Voice here relates to adopting the vocabulary of the discipline that is being studied, instead of the everyday common version of speech, as members become more of a community. Ideas and concepts also spread through the community, but they are not always accepted by the community. The use of discursive practices highlighted by Brown (1994) suggest that learners who master the linguistic level landscape of a discipline are thus well placed to assist other learners to work towards mastery. Lave and

Wenger (1991) referred to this as guided participation, a concept related to their ideas of peripheral participation in communities of practice, which will be discussed shortly.

In a later study, Brown et al. (1996) defined five principles from the Community of Learners programme that underwrite the implementation of teaching and learning strategies in instructional environments: 1) classrooms in which there are multiple ZPDs require designing content so that it lies within each learner's ZPD, 2) a community of academic and scientific discourse in which learners develop their understanding and share their own insights, 3) negotiating and refining meaning through these interactions, 4) leading to the appropriation and integration of ideas into existing mental frameworks, 5) but based on the requirement of common knowledge and distributed experiences and expertise in a given topic. These principles provide a clear guide to how interactions are structured by a teacher at the grassroots level of a learning community, whilst most other studies focus on the broader concept of learning communities.

#### *The Double Move*

Hedegaard (1998) was critical of the Community of Learners study, suggesting that it focused on the social process of instruction but neglected focusing on the aim and content of the lesson. To remedy this, she developed her own method of employing ZPD in a learning community, known as the Double Move, grounded in the knowledge of the learners, a subject area which holds societal importance and a theory of personality development. Hedegaard (2005, p.236) explains the Double Move as when the teacher must plan learning to move from general laws to the concrete reality, whilst learners move from 'preconceived actions to symbolization of the knowledge they obtain'. The learners are therefore engaged with the manifestations of the general laws by investigating for themselves. The steps for the teacher in the Double Move include describing the problem clearly, demonstrating both the solution and how the problem is constructed, evaluating the results, and controlling the process. For the learner, Hedegaard (2005) suggests starting with a guided investigation of the topic, engaging with scientific concepts and procedures and then relating them to the concrete reality around them. Hedegaard (1998) indicates that the teacher guides through general concepts and engages learners in discussion around situated problem solving and then deploys the children as co-creators of their own learning through sharing their research and new found understanding. Hedegaard (2005) notes that children can interact and collaborate because they experience a common process of socialisation. Even though every child is unique in their own way, they are similar enough to be provided with a shared level of instruction to develop common knowledge and skills. In the same way, adult learners are unique and bring with them their life experiences. However, when they enrol onto a course of study, they are re-entering education at a similar

enough level of knowledge of the topic and academic ability that they can benefit from a shared level of instruction.

### *Communities of Practice*

Wenger's (1998) Communities of Practice (CoP) are ubiquitous and exist in every area of life. He reframes membership as being central to the purpose of learning in the context of CoP, which is about how you contribute to the community individually, or ensure its sustainability by improving practice and the continuity of the community and by becoming better at what it is known for. Wenger (1998) suggests that a CoP has three dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise, and a shared repertoire. Membership in a community of practice is based on the mutual engagement of participants in an activity, based on their interactions, focusing on that activity and collectively negotiating meaning. Joint enterprise suggests shared ownership of a set of goals with mutual accountability. Wenger (1998) continues that the shared repertoire of a CoP is its particular ways of doing things, the stories and symbolism that develop out of the processes, whether invented or adopted, which have become a part of their practice and denote the meaning, forms of membership and identities of its participants. Wenger (1998) contends that we develop our self-identity by learning from our social interactions with others and that much of that learning occurs from participating in the various communities to which we simultaneously belong and generate whilst engaging with other participants. According to Wenger, community is formed through groups of people interacting for some mutual benefit. Wenger (1998) also insists that we are in a constant process of negotiating meaning, even when we are taking part in mundane or repetitive tasks, which may generate new meaning. However, when we engage in important or challenging activities, we are more likely to seek meaning in them. Wenger (1998) states that in the process of negotiating meaning we encounter a convergence of participation, and reification. So even when we are not collaborating with others, we are still taking part in a common task, for instance studying, and this becomes a part of our identity, something which cannot be switched off. Being a student therefore places one as a participant in a society of learners, as we negotiate what it means to us and what it means to others, rendering it a social action.

These models set out practical steps of building on ZPD to develop collaborative learning strategies. These strategies are important steps in understanding how learning communities can make use of ZPD and collaborative learning in practice. Therefore, I suggest that ZPD is the smallest unit of interaction in any learning community, as it underwrites collaborative learning between learners, and learners with teachers. Collaborative learning models such as Brown's (1994) Community of Learners and Hedegaard's (1998) Double Move illustrate how ZPD can be built upon for use in the modern classroom. Wenger's (1998) CoP model, on the other hand, is

closer to the Learning Communities model, and it is understandable why Angouri et al (2024) have used this as their theoretical framework. However, I believe there are key differences between CoP and Learning Communities. CoPs are primarily aimed at professional networks, whereas Learning Communities have traditionally focused on educational settings. CoP maps out how individuals gain entry to professional networks in their field, progress towards mastery, mentor others and eventually move back to the periphery until they retire. Learning Communities last only as long as the course learners have enrolled onto. In a CoP, a legitimate peripheral participant is someone new to the network, or someone who has already gained mastery and is slowly moving out to the periphery towards retirement. In learning communities, someone on the periphery is not a participant. They may marginally benefit from listening to the learning community's interactions, but do not participate within it. Membership in a learning community is restricted to faculty members and students who are co-enrolled on a programme of study, whereas a CoP is potentially open to anyone from that profession, regardless of their organisation.

#### 2.4. What form do Learning Communities take?

Moore (2010) looks at the nature of interactions that take place within a learning community, and suggests that learners engage in three types of interaction in their learning communities: 1) interacting with their learning content, 2) interacting with other students and, 3) interacting with their lecturers and tutors. Moore (2010) explains that learner-content is a necessity for education to happen and varies in form from print media to online audio and visual content. It also has the potential to develop cognitive abilities and bring about a change of perspective. Learners can access learning resources such as document repositories and online libraries. In this manner, the online environment acts as a learner's support system (Bryceson, 2005; McLoughlin, 2002). Learner-faculty interactions range from in-person to distance learning, with a view to teach, stimulate or maintain a learner's level of interest in the subject matter. The faculty member then evaluates to what degree the learner has achieved their goals. Finally, Moore's (2010) third type of interaction, learner to learner, takes various forms both in-person and distanced, with or without faculty members present, and includes group-work, in-class discussions, and study groups. This type of interaction serves the purpose of stimulating, motivating and enhancing each other's learning.

A fourth form of interaction that could also be considered is the learner's internal interaction with the voices of absent MKOs. Vygotsky and Luria (1994) note the possibility of ZPD operating without the physical presence of an MKO as the influence of the MKO extends to other sites of

learning where the learner can apply the principles developed through an earlier collaboration. Vygotsky (1978) suggests that the learner would simply repeat the instructions provided to him as an internal activity, helping him to focus and organise his thoughts. Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) suggest that if the learner can hear one voice, they can also possibly hear other voices too, such as those of their peers or other teachers, essentially a community of voices. These voices may conflict with each other, which means the learner must juggle these different voices and choose a path without the benefit of a consensus. For instance, a student studying maths may have been presented with different methods of solving a problem. The learner must actively weigh up the different pathways presented to them by the voices of the past and those physically present and choose one to help them move forward. Alternatively, the learner may diligently follow one master, foregoing prior masters and other conflicting voices.

Based on the above, a learning community may be shaped by the way a programme of study is organised and the types of interactions that learners are engaged in. Whilst the courses in my study have not been intentionally organised to help nurture learning communities, unintentionally they have created an environment favourable to their development. Additionally, the interactions within learning communities are based on the standard experiences of learners in Adult FE and HE. Therefore, it stands to reason that learning communities can develop anywhere students have the opportunity to interact dialogically with their content, peers and tutors to develop and enhance their learning.

## 2.5. Where do Learning Communities take place

### 2.5.1. On-campus Learning Communities

Changes in the modes of delivering education, especially digital and online learning, have changed how individuals interact with learning spaces. In my study, the learning communities spent some time on campus but were mostly dispersed and brought together in the virtual space of Microsoft Teams. This was due to social-distancing instructions during the first couple of years of the COVID-19 pandemic rather than the programmes being intentionally designed to blend on-campus and online modes of delivery. Gurbutt and Cragg (2019) note that learning spaces are designed intentionally to be communal and maximise the efficiency of the transmission of knowledge. Gurbutt and Cragg explain that classrooms have changed to enable movement, interaction and group work. Libraries have changed too, becoming places for learning and collaboration that do not necessarily require books. The physical learning environment has certain advantages over virtual learning environments. In the adult campus of the College in my

study, the Study Zone and HE Study Room were designed for communal study, whilst the library and its bank of computers seem more suited for individual study.

Even social places can be created to enhance cross-disciplinary spaces for students to interact with each other, though Gurbutt and Cragg (2019) note it is important to include areas where students do not feel like they must spend money on food or purchasing other consumables. Furthermore, commuting students have different requirements from their institution than residential students do. Creating spaces that encourage them to stay on campus beyond class times is important for widening participation and encouraging the development of community. These spaces could include soft seating areas, social activities and places to eat that do not necessarily require the purchasing of food. This all indicates a change in the perception of a campus, from being a place for the transfer of knowledge to a place conducive to learning.

Technology has also enabled the transformation of social spaces as places of learning. Fleck (2012) notes that computers and the internet can enable learning communities to become more distributed over time and space, enabling flexibility in interaction and the potential to enhance face-to-face learning. In modern higher education settings, the physical and virtual spaces are designed to evoke a certain sense that enhances and maybe even facilitates learning to happen (Gurbutt and Cragg, 2019). However, with the disruption to the use of physical spaces caused by the coronavirus pandemic, the online space has become even more important to facilitate learning. Crook (2002) acknowledges that digital and online learning has facilitated dispersed and community-led learning, but it can also have a restrictive and disruptive impact on learners too. The tools of learning are blurring the lines of what is for work and learning with what is also used as a source of entertainment (Crook, 2002). Following the first COVID-19 lockdown, physical learning spaces became secondary to online learning spaces, used more to nurture a sense of community, than for improved learning.

#### 2.5.2. Online Learning Communities

Bryceson (2005) suggests that online learning was originally introduced to extend the reach of education providers for distance learning. It is described as a tool for educators to create better learning experiences for learners (Fleck, 2012). Bryceson (2005) explains that online learning is trying to overcome physical distance and the isolation of learners who are unable to interact directly with their tutors or peers. He sees the role of online learning as facilitating socialisation in a safe and accessible place that is moderated by a trusted person. People who undertake online learning generally choose to do so because of the convenience it offers or because it helps them overcome access issues to learning. COVID-19 created a situation in which online learning

became the only way that learners could engage with their peers and their lecturers, unable to access the campus and isolated from each other and their lecturers.

Bryceson (2005) deconstructs good online learning through the framework of ZPD and scaffolding, looking at it as a collaborative and social process to create new meanings beyond what each participant entered with. He notes that the process is frustrated by the infrequency of face-to-face contact in online learning, which he sees as an essential to identifying the balance between the learner's current level and potential level of development. Learning therefore must be scaffolded from a distance in a manner that will encourage more participation during online sessions and prompt deeper learning. McLoughlin (2002) notes that regardless of whether learners are being taught face-to-face or online, the principles of effective scaffolding remain the same and are characterised by the reduction of the risk of failure of a learner to complete the task. The purpose is to enable the learner to achieve a task that they would be otherwise unable to complete, improving the current level of development of the learner and moving them closer to becoming independent learners. McLoughlin's (2002) assertion of effective scaffolding reflects well how educators in my study responded to learning being moved online during the pandemic, treating the online platform as a virtual recreation of their physical classroom. Though the transition was not without problems as I will discuss later in the literature review and in the thesis.

Bassani (2011) defines an online learning community as a virtual classroom modelled on a campus-based classroom that may take place synchronously in real-time or asynchronously through various online tools and platforms. Online learning for the participants of my study consisted of synchronous virtual classes, asynchronous Nearpod interactive slides and journal article readings. Nearpod is an online application that allows for sharing slides with built-in assessments, such as quizzes, polls, and reflections. Occasionally, I would also post relevant news articles and videos to Microsoft Teams for them to watch and comment on in their channel feed. McLoughlin (2002) notes that the opportunities afforded by the internet for interaction and the creation of online learning communities extends beyond the learner's own peer group and lecturers. Additional social support can be offered by other friends on social media, who may themselves be dispersed around the world. Content can be recorded and written and stored for posterity on the internet by both experts and novices to the field. Online learning communities encourage the exploration of knowledge and the sharing of knowledge through recommendations, discussing ideas and helping each other overcome problems to enhance learning (Chen et al., 2009; McLoughlin, 2002).

Chen et al. (2009) focus on what motivates learners to share knowledge in virtual learning communities, which they define as a virtual space in which dispersed learners achieve their learning goals. They note that the lack of confidence in using the online interface reduces a learner's desire to engage in knowledge sharing. Therefore, it is fair to assume that learners need to be provided with some level of instruction on how to make use of the functions of the interface. Higher levels of self-efficacy in using web-based software were seen by Chen et al. (2009) to improve engagement with online learning and learners' ability to judge whether a learning goal was achievable or not. Chen et al. (2009) underline the importance of keeping learners engaged by producing meaningful content and providing reasons for them to come online and interact with the material and each other. Chen et al. (2009) suggest that the online environment is an opportunity to expand the learning community to include interactions with strangers too, however, this would negate the sense of trust and fellowship that Bruhn (2011) and community spirit that Rovai (2002) highlights as important for community. Similarly, random interactions with strangers also do not meet the minimum time commitment of one semester suggested by Rima et al. (2019). Indeed, membership of the community is essential for identifying whether a community exists (Bauman, 2001). Nevertheless, Chen et al. (2009) do note that social ties between individuals are important channels for the flow of information and resources and in motivating individuals to engage with an online platform for knowledge sharing.

Palloff et al. (2001) suggest that learning communities, both online and offline, tend to follow Tuckman's (1965) stages of group formation: forming, norming, storming, performing and adjourning. However, in an online environment, the storming stage is even more troublesome, especially in asynchronous learning environments, due to the lack of visual cues and social norms. Fleck (2012) suggests that having learners introduce themselves to each other online sets the precedent that the internet will be the main medium for communication, and when the learners finally meet in person, it becomes something of a memorable event for them. However, my own study found that learners who are introduced online first take longer to develop rapport than those who have met in person and engaged in icebreakers together. Palloff et al. (2001) also recommend meeting the learners in person first to develop cohesion between them, before moving them online. However, thinking back to Cadwallader's (1981) experiment, sufficient efforts need to be made to draw both the faculty and the students together into a cohesive learning community.

Another potential problem highlighted by Palloff et al. (2001) is that the students in a learning community may focus on developing social ties without any learning taking place. Therefore, Palloff et al. (2001) recommend that the teacher should keep students on topic, track attendance and participation, work with those students who are not actively participating and

be alert to signs that a student is struggling. Finally, they provide several indicators that suggest a learning community is working: active participation, sharing of resources amongst learners, checking collaborative learning is happening, social construction of knowledge by agreement on the meanings of things, and provision of support and encouragement between learners. In her study, Bassani (2011) notes three models based on the intercommunication between learners in a virtual learning community, which she typifies as 'no interaction', 'interaction but no involvement', and 'interaction with involvement'. 'No interaction' suggests that learners are not speaking to or messaging each other. In the second model, the messages are predominantly in response to a teacher's questions, so there is an element of sharing and comparing of messages but no real engagement with each other's responses. The third model represents active interaction, where the learners are engaging with each other's ideas and discussing them. This third model correlates best with Palloff et al.'s (2001) indicators of active participation, sharing of resources, collaboration and co-construction of new knowledge. In my study, all three of Bassani's (2011) typifications were present during online learning, with the learners' level of interaction matching their levels of participation in the session. Those who did not interact, are likely only participating on the periphery of the whole class learning community. I will return to this later in the Findings and Discussion chapter (section 5.1.4).

Online learning is often used as an extension of the classroom and during COVID-19, became a ready substitute for on-campus learning. If learning communities are about interaction with content, peers and lecturers, then online learning can facilitate this providing the learners are kept motivated and actively engage in said interactions.

## 2.6. Rapport, Membership and Roles in a Learning Community

In my definition of learning communities, I suggest that a community is made up of three or more learners working together. This definition can be widened to include any other MKOs who the learners interact with on a regular basis to enhance or increase their learning, like a student from the previous year, or a member of the support staff. Some learners are more willing participants whilst others tend to stay on the periphery without directly interacting with the learning community.

Zhao and Kuh (2004), who define learning communities as co-enrolment of learners on two or more courses and feature collaborative learning, found in their study that first year students are more likely to take part in learning communities, as well as ethnic minority students, full-time students, first generation university students, residential students and those in preprofessional courses. They note that amongst adult students, women were more likely than men to take part

in learning communities. Rima et al. (2019) discovered that students believed it was important to develop bonds within the first year of study in a multi-year course, and that learning communities facilitated the development of stronger bonds and a collaborative and supportive environment for learning. Students who participated in the faculty-organised learning communities in the study by Rima et al. (2019) also made use of student-led study groups within their learning communities. Danett et al. (2021) noted in their study of nursing education during COVID-19 that students enjoyed interacting with their peers in small groups and therefore it was important to develop a comfortable and safe environment for the learners. Danett et al. (2021) used icebreakers at the beginning of the course to develop rapport and equip the students with interpersonal skills. Small group discussions provided opportunities for interaction, collaboration and co-creation of concepts.

#### 2.6.1. Rapport

The requirement for rapport is a reoccurring theme in many of the studies on learning communities. Rapport is the close bond between learners and their tutors that provides a comfortable and safe environment (Danett et al., 2021), or a feeling of mutual, trusting social bond (Frisby and Buckner, 2017). Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) suggest that there are three essential components of rapport: mutual attentiveness between individuals, feelings of positivity towards each other regarding the interaction, and the coordination of behaviour. However, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) note that the presence of one does not automatically indicate the presence of all three in an interaction. Attentiveness could be party to aggressive intent, positivity can also lead to uncoordinated eagerness, or two highly coordinating individuals may be engaged in an argument. The presence of these three components is essential throughout the trajectory of interpersonal relationships. Initial meetings tend to be rigid and governed by culturally acceptable behaviour, with later interactions becoming more relaxed and less bound by stereotypical behaviour. This suggests that rapport increases over time. In earlier interactions, the focus of individuals is more on the positive nature of the encounter, whereas later interactions will be more indicative of the level of coordination between the individuals. Further, adding to the understanding of how rapport develops, Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) highlight the presence of nonverbal cues, which change and become more coordinated as a relationship develops. Initially, these nonverbal cues are evaluative, seeking signals of reciprocal positivity. Over time these nonverbal behaviours will become more coordinated and harmonious as familiarity develops. Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal (1990) describe these nonverbal correlations as postural mirroring and synchronisation when interacting. Vacharkulsemsat and Fredrickson (2012) suggest that rapport is the sharing of physical motions, as well as emotions and shared feelings of vitality. They

explain that this is the result of behavioural synchrony, where individuals who are interacting begin to synchronise the form of their movements and mannerisms, as well as the timing of said movements. In their study, Vacharkulsemsat and Fredrickson (2012) found a self-disclosure of personal details with relative strangers is a good starting point for the development of behaviour synchrony, which in turn results in embodied rapport. In their experiment, they found that pairings who self-disclosed personal information were better able to synchronise their interactions versus those pairings that did not. As a result, the self-disclosing pairings enjoyed higher levels of positivity, mutuality and 'aliveness' in their interactions. Nelson et al. (2016) also found subjective evidence to support the idea that people who work together and achieve an optimal experience in their collaboration undergo higher levels of rapport. Furthermore, Barnett et al. (2017) carried out a neuropsychological test with 98 undergraduate students and found that even a superficial level of rapport such as expressions of warmth and smiling at participants had a positive impact on performance.

Glazier (2016) shares that the purpose of rapport is to produce harmonious interactions between students and with faculty members and contributes to student success. Even in online learning the presence of faculty members has a humanising effect on an otherwise isolating environment. Glazier (2016) and Angelino et al. (2007) agree that rapport building in an online environment depends heavily on the instructor and requires an ongoing, continuous effort. Glazier's (2016) own attempts at building rapport with online only learners involved providing video content and welcome messages, extensive personalised feedback on assignment work and personal email contact to build rapport. She concluded that rapport building by the instructor contributed significantly to the retention and success of online learners, helping students cope with the difficulties they face from their environment, even if they lack a high level of preparedness to learn.

Frisby and Buckner (2017) highlight factors that include homophily, social support, clarity and humour as communicative behaviours that help build rapport between teacher and students. Homophily is the perceived similarity between two people. Voelker et al. (2013) add that similarity leads to connectivity, however, it can also result in the isolation of students from minority communities. Fitzgerald and Hooker (2022) found that homophily and humour were key indications of rapport generation between students and their instructors. They also suggest that negative relationships with teachers can lead to learners feeling isolated and disinclined to engage with their classmates. Sybing (2019) proposes that a teacher must also create a safe environment for the learners to interact without the fear of remonstrations. Glazier (2016) and Angelino et al. (2007) articulate that this can be done by building rapport with and between the learners and requires more attention when learning is being delivered primarily online, as was

the case in my own study. Fitzgerald and Hooker (2022) suggest that when teachers provide opportunities for interaction with peers, this can aid in reducing those feelings of isolation. Therefore, instructors play a key role in maintaining rapport and ensuring that learners feel included and positively regarded.

Consequently, rapport in educational settings is something that develops and is strengthened over time and through repeated interactions, improving performance through increased attentiveness and the level of coordination (Tickle-Degnen and Rosenthal, 1990). This eventually leads to more harmonious interactions (Glazier, 2016). Rapport is not static, rather it is dynamic and changes depending on how engaged and involved learners feel. This is achieved through the development of trust, social connection and feelings of homophily (Frisby and Buckner, 2017). I will explore the concept of rapport further in my discussion (section 5.1.2).

### 2.6.2. Membership

Kilpatrick et al. (2003) and Gurbutt and Cragg (2019) suggest that within education, learning communities are a shared enterprise between learners, faculty members and administrators to develop deep learning of curriculum content by the individual students. Kilpatrick et al. (2003) suggest that the purpose of such communities is to share and create knowledge for the benefit of their individual members and the whole group. The impetus for collaboration and cooperation on achieving shared goals comes from acknowledging that one's own abilities and qualities are not enough to achieve the task alone (Zhao and Kuh, 2004; Kilpatrick et al. 2003). Collaboration goes beyond communication between individuals and is described as an act of creating new shared knowledge or understanding (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Zhao and Kuh (2004) suggest that this is because learning communities use a social constructivist approach to knowledge, with learners actively engaged in knowledge construction rather than just receiving it from an instructor. Social constructivism claims that all learning is social and that 'Learners are believed to be enculturated into their learning community and appropriate knowledge, based on their existing understanding, through their interaction with the immediate learning environment' (Liu and Matthews, 2005, p.388). The communities within colleges are subject to continuity and discontinuity, with some staff retiring and new staff joining each year, new students starting and others advancing to universities, and some even joining later in the year or dropping out midway. Wenger (1998) describes these cycles as generations, which is perhaps more marked in student bodies as the current first years will soon become second year students. These progressions require a shift in negotiated identities, as the newly old learners volunteer to mentor the fresh new learners. The new mentors must re-evaluate what they know, and they pass on what has been passed to them to maintain some of that history and possibly supplement it with their own shortcuts and innovations. This contact between

subsequent generations is what Wenger (1998) considers as learning. The problem is that without some formal direction from faculty, this generational learning is left up to chance and good will.

Collin (1997) suggests instead that we each modify our behaviour by observing the behaviour of others and therefore begin to develop social relationships and structures. This means there is no need for the formal passing of the torch, as individual development is contingent on the learner's ability to interact with others and become socialised into the culture of the community through a process of observing practices of their community and gradually becoming more responsible participants within them (Rogoff et al., 1993). The process of learning together in a classroom will have the effect of a similar level of knowledge or skills being developed by learners in the subject under study, however it will also bring about a set of social artefacts that include behaviours, interactions and rituals (Collin, 1997). Therefore, it could be suggested that learning communities are not just about achieving goals and outcomes, but also about the shared culture that develops from participation in them. This is why I disagree with Chen et al.'s (2009) suggestion that educational encounters with strangers online can also be included in a learning community, as these strangers are not participating within the community's shared culture, which will be discussed further in the Findings and Discussion chapter.

### 2.6.3. Roles

Brown (1994) notes that learning communities are made up of learners who fulfil the roles of researchers and teachers, taking responsibility for their own learning and developing a shared set of ideas and beliefs and a common knowledge base and voice. Voice relates to learners adapting to the vocabulary of the discipline as they become a community. Ideas and concepts also spread through the community, but they are not always accepted by all the members. Brown (1994) highlights the use of discursive practices, suggesting that learners who master the linguistic landscape of a discipline can assist other learners to work towards mastery too. Lave and Wenger (1991) referred to this as guided participation. Similarly, Palincsar and Brown (1984) made use of expert students as tutors for novice learners who needed support in improving their reading and comprehension skills. The tutor and tutee composition resulted in better long-term development and in larger groups saw more opportunities for peer mentoring.

The role of the teacher was initially to model the practice of reciprocal teaching, develop the abilities of comprehension fostering and monitoring, and then to instruct learners on the method and later coach them in leading their groups, as discussed in section 2.2.4. The teacher must also diagnose the needs of the learners and evaluate the ability of each learner to participate. O'Connor and Michaels (1993) note that the teacher plays the crucial role of creating

a framework for learners to participate in, using re-voicing problems and propositions to generate discussions and problem solving. This is often done by planning opportunities for learners to work together to research elements of the topic under study, group discussions or setting them a task to collaborate on producing something to demonstrate their learning. O'Connor and Michaels (1993) highlight the role of the teacher in creating a culture in which learners see each other and the teacher as members of a shared classroom culture, a community of learners, which requires intentionality, planning and coordination of social participation. Reid (1998) notes that this could disadvantage students who are unable to recognise this culture, such as those with specific disabilities, or just unused to it, such as recent immigrants and refugees who may have missed out on being socialised into the host country's educational culture. However, Zhao and Kuh (2004) would suggest that a minority status makes these individuals ideal candidates for being enrolled into a learning community of their own, what Lenning and Ebbers (2001) term as a student-type learning community, as noted earlier.

In online learning communities, Bassani (2011) suggests that the teacher's role is to facilitate, which means they must ensure that the learning experience has been planned and thought out before engaging the learning community, that they should include opportunities to encourage discussion between the participants and there should be an element of instruction within the session, either led by the teacher or assumed by the students. Sybing (2019) writes that teachers and students are on an unequal footing from the start of their relationship, because the teacher is seen as both expert and authority figure, which creates a divide between the teacher and the students. In this dynamic, a student is less likely to risk a wrong answer if they are worried about being embarrassed before their peers. One way of mitigating this imbalance is by validating the student's knowledge and emphasising that the instructor does not know everything, or connecting with them on an individual level, recognising that they each have their own experiences, interests and ambitions (Sybing, 2019).

Regarding specific roles within learning communities, in their study on knowledge sharing and creating within virtual communities, Lin et al. (2007) identified two collaboration strategies in virtual professional learning communities, which are task performance and team maintenance. Task performance strategies focus on solving problems and achieving goals, whereas team maintenance strategies help sustain relationships within the team. This is a useful way of dividing the different roles individuals play within a learning community as serving one or the other category. They break down these two categories further into different types of actions and interactions: initiating, information sharing, evaluating, recording, orienting, encouraging, gatekeeping, coordinating and clowning. Building on the work of Lin et al. (2007), Yeh (2010) combined these behaviours into specific roles observed during online learning and suggested

the following: Supervisors, Information Providers, Group Instructors, Atmosphere Constructors, Opinion Providers, Reminders, Troublemakers and Problem-Solvers. However, Yeh's (2010) analysis of the behaviours listed by Lin et al. (2007) focused entirely on the frequency of these behaviours, their usefulness for online learning communities and combining them to form eight specific roles. Yeh acknowledges that the number of behaviours and roles may vary depending on the participants and nature of the discussions they are having.

An educational community may include management, support staff and faculty members, however they are not essential to the development of a learning community as long as there is a student MKO present. The MKO is quite often a teacher but can also be an older student who has gained a certain level of mastery or is even part of the same cohort of learners but has grasped the targeted content better than their peers. In order to be considered a member of the community one must replicate the behaviours and shared culture or be in the process of doing so. Various roles exist within the learning community though they are described as different types of actions or behaviours.

## 2.7. The Value Added by Learning Communities

In the introduction I defined added values as normally referring to a school's or teacher's ability to impact a learner's outcomes, including the final grade and onward progress (Brown et al., 2016). I want to expand on this definition by exploring it in terms of learning communities. The literature reveals that learning communities offer both social and academic added value as well as improved completion rates.

The literature review by Rima et al. (2019) found evidence of an improvement in academic achievement, social outcomes, positive experiences, levels of involvement and higher rates of progression in students who have participated in learning communities. Rima et al. (2019) found that students improved their academic skills by assisting with planning, sharing ideas and developing academic skills and their collective growth, as well as improving their academic progressions and retention going into the following semester. Similarly, Chryiskos and Catterall (2020) highlight the social benefits and improvement in academic skills. Learning communities add value by enhancing the potential and capacity of its members, creating opportunities for collaboration amongst colleagues, providing a sense of belonging and shared identity as well as an increase in social capital (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). Social capital is a concept associated with Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, 'the unequal scholastic achievement of children originating from the different social classes by relating academic success ... to the distribution of cultural capital between classes and class fractions' (Bourdieu, 1986, p.243). Key to understanding the

concept of cultural capital is the idea that it is inherited and transmitted through the socialisation process, meaning that a person's academic achievement is either aided or hampered by the investment of time and importance given to educational achievement, as well as the resulting value generated for society through increased educational achievement. For instance, a higher education is a trade-off of time spent in education versus the potential economic gains after graduation. Bourdieu (1986, p.247) defines social capital as, 'the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possessions of a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition'. Therefore, social capital is derived from the connections and networks that a person gains through education and work and can call upon for help in times of need (Huang, 2019). Bruhn (2011) notes that people develop stronger relationships through their communities, cultivating social capital through their shared network of individuals, their cultural experiences, knowledge and skills. The stronger the relationships, the better people are at sharing, as Bruhn (2011) surmises that those who engage more within their community are likely to cultivate better social capital. Kilpatrick et al. (2003) further note that social capital helps foster trust, shared values, personal development, a sense of identity and thus improves learning by granting access to the knowledge of others.

Zhao and Kuh (2004) state that learning communities promote critical thinking and contextual learning, offering opportunities for collaboration and interaction that add complexity in the way students think and learn. Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that whilst participation in learning communities did not improve academic performance, which is consistent with the findings of other studies (Rima et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2015), it is positively linked to improved levels of effort, academic integration, collaboration with peers, interaction with faculty members and a positive attitude towards their institution's ability to support them. Furthermore, Zhao and Kuh (2004) found that students who had taken part in structured learning communities in the first year were more likely to continue to engage in learning communities throughout their university courses. Zhao and Kuh (2004) acknowledge that there is a likelihood that participating students are already high achievers and therefore may affect the measures of ability and outcomes. Furthermore, it is possible that respondents simply did not associate their academic achievements with their participation in a learning community.

Another form of added value identified by Zhao and Kuh (2004) and Kilpatrick et al. (2003) is respect for diversity as an indicator of a person's openness to accept change and new ideas, which has been shown in other studies to be an effective foundation for community development. Respect for diversity includes gender, ethnicity, age, ability and other dynamics in which one group is less socially powerful than another. Respect for diversity engenders a

culture of trust, allowing for experimentation and making mistakes (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). In addition to the above, Kellogg (1999) lists improved motivation, retention and intellectual development as benefits of learning communities.

Rima et al. (2019) believe that institutionalising learning communities could offer improvements in outcomes for learners and in retention and completion rates. Zhao and Kuh (2004) also believe that there is enough evidence of the effectiveness of learning communities that educational institutions should investigate the breadth and range of learning communities that exist within their campuses, as well as which students are participating in them and in what numbers. They also recommend that efforts should be made to create additional learning communities that target students who are not currently engaged with one, for instance male students, part-time learners and people who have joined a course later in the year tend to be less likely to participate.

What remains to be seen is whether these benefits are universally present in students who take part in learning communities, or whether it is specific to institutionalised learning communities.

## 2.8. Barriers to Learning Communities

Learning communities have many benefits to them, but there can also be negative repercussions too. There is the risk of groupthink, a term that refers to over cohesiveness within an in-group that overrides looking at alternative options (Janis, 1972). Groupthink can also spread negativity through the group, as once a learning community has been set up, they become autonomous and can 'coalesce around criticism of deficiencies in the learning experience, or to pursue irrelevant avenues of discussion' (Fleck, 2012, p.407). However, there was insufficient evidence of groupthink in my own study to speculate on its existence in learning communities. Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) highlight that a major barrier to academic success for first-year students is dealing with academic tutors, large class sizes and the challenges this presents to cooperation in the classroom. There are also some other barriers to effective learning communities that are specifically related to online learning that have been noted in the literature, such as the sense of isolation, and the issue of attrition from a course of study, which are relevant to my study as my learners spent much of the year online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Angelino et al. (2007) define attrition as when students drop-out of a programme of study, with retention being measured by the number of students progressing from one level or course to another. A fundamental element in these barriers is the level, frequency and medium of interaction.

In their quantitative study of the impact of interaction on course completion, Grandzol and Grandzol (2010) looked at data on time spent on specific activities that was captured by a course management system. They found that students interacting with each other was considered a significant factor in course completion but suggested that it had a negative impact. Student-faculty interactions on the other hand had no significant impact on course completion. Grandzol and Grandzol (2010) posit a number of explanations for their contrary findings, that the learners grew frustrated with the mediums for interaction with peers and tutors, which required them to spend more time online and were less rewarding than face-to-face contact time. These assumptions were based on the lack of participation in online discussion activities and Grandzol and Grandzol (2010) stressed that arbitrary participation rather than effective use of time was the issue, whilst acknowledging the limitations of their methodology and 'time spent' as a unit of analysis. Their data does not capture the actual views of the learners nor provides stated reasons for non-completion. A decade on, interactivity tools for online learning have advanced greatly. Another factor may be course design, something that was highlighted by Angelino et al. (2007) in their literature review on student attrition. They highlight the importance of good course design for the creation of learning communities, student engagement and student support for learning. Swan (2002) notes both student-student and student-faculty interaction are critical for student retention, and the amount of contact with faculty members may very well be the reason behind the difference in retention rates in online and in-class environments, though Glazier (2016) suggests that the evidence is inconclusive but promising.

Roscoe (2012) notes that online learning may boost interactivity and independent learning but is problematic in fostering social connectivity and learning communities. Glazier (2016) surmised from her literature review of studies done from 2000 to 2007 that online learning has been shown to have a higher level of student attrition in comparison to classroom-based learning, finding that retention rates are around 10% to 35% lower in online learning. Roscoe (2012) and Rovai (2002) have separately suggested there is between 10% and 20% difference in completion rates. Glazier (2016) suggests that there are at least three general explanations as to why there is a drop in retention. The first explanation relates to students' characteristics, such as ethnicity, gender and age, though the evidence in the literature is contradictory about the role of demographics in attrition rates. However, Glazier (2016) did see a consistent reference to academic preparedness in the literature. Students who are self-motivated, self-regulated, independent, and have high levels of motivation and study skills, with some experience of online learning tend to have a better chance at success in online learning. Students who have been in college longer and have developed study skills and self-management skills have an improved prospect of success in online learning too. The second explanation for attrition is factors within

the learner's environment that may affect their ability to focus and conflicting demands on their time, for example, having to look after small children, work demands and just being able to sit down to study without disruptions (Glazier, 2016). The third explanation is the design of the course and the nature of the interaction with tutors. Glazier's explanations comprehensively describe the common complaints of online learners. However, the only way faculty members can remedy this would be to ensure they have adequately adapted their delivery methods to the online medium and provided their students with enough training and guidance on using online platforms, time management and making their personal learning environment as fit for purpose as possible. At the start of the COVID lockdowns, teachers had little or no time at all to adapt to the change from in-person to online delivery and lacked familiarity with the challenges of online learning.

The model adopted for the Access to HE learners in the College in my own study involved blended learning, with the content delivered mostly via Teams and Nearpod and the learners coming in for a face-to-face session every three weeks. Roscoe (2012) suggests that blended learning offers more of a community feel over online only classes. He sees this mode of education as being primarily beneficial to institutions for expanding their student base and the ability to delegate classroom space more effectively, though he notes that there is some evidence that students on blended courses tend to perform better than those on purely online courses or those delivered face-to-face. However, Roscoe's (2012) own study found that online learning did not deliver learning outcomes as well as face-to-face classes, though he acknowledges that it is difficult to pin down why this is. He suggests that it could be because of sub-optimal focus levels outside of the classroom or that face-to-face delivery is just more engaging than recorded or online modes of teaching. Kemp and Grieve (2014) note in their study that more engaging face-to-face delivery means deeper conversations with the possibility of bouncing ideas off each other and a stronger sense of community. Roscoe (2012) also found that students struggled to stay focused during online sessions, and even tended to drop out of online classes after going to face-to-face sessions. He attributes this potentially to the attendance mark given for participation in face-to-face and the lack of attendance marks for online learning. However, online classes during COVID-19 were treated much the same way as face-to-face classes, with attendance taken at every taught session. Also, Microsoft Teams creates a log of who joined a session, and their time of joining and leaving. Therefore, this should not be considered a contributing factor to a lack of motivation. Going back to the earlier point about community, Roscoe (2007) suggests all the above factors may contribute to a decline in participation in collaborative activities and therefore result in a growing sense of isolation.

Linna et al. (2021) highlight some of the other common challenges experienced by online learners, which include poor internet connection, lack of technical proficiency, lecturers with poor technical abilities or training, slow technical support from the institution and incompatible devices. These are some of the issues that learners in my study also experienced, even those learners that had pre-existing relationships before learning had to be moved online due to the Coronavirus pandemic. Many of these issues could be dealt with through course design and training that compliments the online only or blended models used, though it must be acknowledged that with online learning being thrust upon both learners and faculty members due to national lockdowns, there was little time to prepare.

## 2.9. Conclusion

I began this literature review with some definitions of key terms and broadened my own description of learning communities to include faculty members and occasionally, support staff and administrators. I set out the theoretical framework of my study and highlighted the importance of the Zone of Proximal Development as a theory fundamental to understanding social learning. I explored three contemporary studies on learning communities in comparable institutions in the US and the UK and noted the differences in their methodologies and beliefs that learning communities have to be instigated by faculty members. I have also presented the differing forms of learning communities, how they are shaped by opportunities for interaction, the environments that they take place in offline and online, and who the participants are within them. Furthermore, I have looked at the added values of social and academic integration, social capital and improved retention ascribed to learning communities and the barriers that lead to isolation, disconnect and attrition. Through this process I have ascertained some of the gaps in knowledge regarding learning communities. There are only a few contemporary, UK based studies on learning communities; including Ison (2000), who looks at the emergence of learning communities in the Open University, and Chrysikos and Catterall (2020). There are no studies that have looked at learning communities in Adult FE or HE in FE. Furthermore, most of the recent studies note the existence of learning communities but do not describe what they actually look like on a day-to-day basis. There is also an assumption that learning communities have to be institutionalised rather than occurring naturally. Therefore, this qualitative study will set out to describe what forms learning communities take in an Adult FE and HE in FE setting. It will explore what value is added for those who participate in learning communities and attempt to identify some of the types of roles and interactions that take place within them.

## 3. METHODOLOGY

### 3.1. Introduction

This is a qualitative study that was initially conceived as an ethnography, and the final design reflected these origins. Taylor and Bogdan (1998) proffer qualitative research as an approach for research that prioritises the meanings people themselves attach to their actions and interactions. The researcher sets aside their own perspectives and views and takes a holistic view of the people and settings they are studying, rather than reducing them to variables. Frankham and MacRae (2011) suggest that we must let go of our own conceptions and instead observe the worlds that we wish to understand.

Epistemologically, the study is based on a social constructivist framework. Al-Saggaf and Williamson (2006) note that constructivism is focused on presenting the shared multiple realities of participants and as suggested by Fetterman (2010), an ethnography allows for this because of its immersive approach to studying social activities. Saule (2002) notes that there are three implications for a constructivist ethnography. Firstly, a theory cannot adequately explain a phenomenon because reality is co-constructed by multiple participants and therefore there are too many variations of experience to present it fully. Secondly, a researcher cannot be fully free of bias and therefore must make explicit their influence and positionality. Finally, constructivists believe that only through participation and interaction can the researcher come to know the nature of a social construct.

The study sought to examine and describe the activities, roles and added value of learning communities within one faculty, in one college, over an academic year, through participant observations on the College campus, focus groups and interviews. However, within a couple of months of the study starting, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic led to a second lockdown, moving all adult classes to online only. This meant that I could no longer continue to immerse myself in the physical, social and learning environments of my participants. I had pragmatically anticipated the likelihood of this happening because the guidance around COVID-19 was regularly changing and therefore, I had planned how I would adapt my study if further lockdowns were announced. A literature review by Vindrola-Prados and Johnson (2017) on rapid qualitative research methods deployed in West Africa during the Ebola outbreak between 2013 and 2016 proved useful. They listed a few methods that were used including observations, interviews and community mapping. Salmons (2016) also provided helpful guidance on how to adapt qualitative research for the online environment. I will discuss later how these changes impacted my study in terms of the methodology regarding immersion of the researcher, access, sampling, and the data collection methods. The aim of the study is to identify learning communities and explore

whether they add value for adult learners in a Higher Education in Further Education college during the COVID-19 pandemic. The following research questions helped guide me in designing the study and carrying out my research:

- What form do learning communities take in the adult campus of the College?
- What value do learning communities add for the learners?
- What role do the different members of a learning community play in providing added value?

These questions led me to consider how I would identify a learning community when it is a social construct. Lincoln and Guba (2015) note that a constructed reality only exists in the minds of individuals and can never be fully known as we can never fully capture the perspective of every individual. However, we can try and capture how a limited number of people perceive other people, objects and events around them and how they react to them. Frankham and MacRae (2011) suggest that not only are we constantly interacting with the people and the environment around us, but we are also connected to the past and the future through these very interactions, by the meaning that has been created by those who have engaged in similar tasks before us, and those who will be impacted by the meaning that we ourselves have added. In the context of my study, this would mean that each learner and faculty member is connected to all those who have previously studied or taught at the College and all those who will engage in these activities in the future, because each of them has shaped or will shape the rituals and approaches to teaching and learning. To understand this inter-subjectivity, Schutz (1960) notes that one must become familiar with the human activities that shape the social world and the motives of the actors and the meanings they place in words and symbols, so that we can map and explain the typical actions that arise from these common situations. An ethnographic approach allows for the exploration of multiple possibilities and immersion in the social realities of a study's participants (Frankham and MacRae, 2011). Observation forms the main method for data collection in ethnography, though many studies also include semi-structured or unstructured interviews too (Frankham and MacRae, 2011). These methods, which I will discuss in more detail in section 3.6, favour an inductive, insider approach to research.

### 3.2. Inductive versus Deductive

Thomas (2013) suggests that qualitative research can use either deductive reasoning or inductive reasoning. Deductive reasoning is when a researcher makes arguments based on assumptions that they have developed about a phenomenon under study and which they believe to be true before they even begin making observations (Thomas, 2013). The multiple

realities of the social world are considered too messy for a structured, deductive approach and can lead to a researcher trying to shoehorn data to fit with a hypothesis (O'Reilly, 2009). Inductive reasoning, on the other hand, develops assumptions and principles about experiences after performing repeated observations (Thomas, 2013). Therefore, an inductive approach is one in which the researcher enters the field with only a few preconceptions about what they will find, as opposed to deductive researchers who enter the field to test a hypothesis (O'Reilly, 2009). However, induction is sometimes accused of being too simplistic an approach in trying to develop theories by capturing social reality through unobtrusive observation gained from spending a protracted amount of time in the field. O'Reilly (2009) therefore suggests that researchers need to acknowledge that it is impossible to be value and judgement-free before entering the field and to have at least some idea of what it is they are looking for when they are immersing themselves in the worlds of their participants. However, they must be prepared to re-evaluate some of those preconceived ideas when the reality observed in the field challenges their previous conceptions, in order to develop new theories grounded in their findings. Fetterman (2010) suggests that even when a researcher has hypotheses to test, generally they will take an inductive approach to gathering information in the field. O'Reilly (2009) explains this by noting that all researchers go into the field with some idea of what they are looking for, something which sensitises them to ask certain questions and look at phenomena from a certain angle. There is a back and forth between data collection and developing theories of what is happening throughout the process, which allows for revisions and revisiting of initial ideas.

I had some ideas about what a learning community should look like from my own previous experiences and some initial thoughts about what I might find based on previous studies on learning communities in my literature review (section 2.3). However, I tried to keep an open mind, by not allowing my own conceptions of learning communities to limit the scenarios and situations that I observed whilst conducting data collection and analysis which I will expand on later in my methods and analysis sections. During my research I immersed myself in the online and offline worlds of my participants, by observing them in person and watching recorded sessions before carrying out semi-structured interviews and focus groups, which I will discuss further in my methods section. I allowed myself to be open to the various possibilities that may present themselves (Frankham and MacRae, 2011), and paid attention to the behaviour and conversations of my participants, seeking clues to what meanings they may be placing in their interactions (Thomas, 2013). However, despite my best efforts to capture a clear picture of learning communities embodied by my participants, I recognise that the knowledge is

provisional and inconclusive and may be added to or superseded by future research on learning communities.

Immersion is still possible when moving to online research, as suggested by Salmons (2020), through regular interactions and being open, sharing insights and knowledge with participants. O'Reilly (2009) suggests that the internet is a place with its own customs, rituals, events and behaviours that can shape cultures and in turn can be shaped by them too. However, the online classroom in my study seemed more like an extension of the real-world classroom, based on the observed behaviour of both teachers and students, rather than a virtual space that exists perpetually even when no one was using it. This is because online classes were scheduled and started and ended by the lecturer or by the students themselves. Furthermore, the lessons were mostly structured in the same way as they were on campus, with the tutors lecturing, providing opportunities for questions and answers and discussion. So, whilst this study involved video-mediated observations and internet-based interactions with my participants, the online environment was seen by the participants as an extension of the real world rather than as a separate virtual reality. O'Reilly (2009, p.217) suggests that culture can be thought of as a 'connection between things' rather than 'in terms of places or locations'. So, whilst space plays a role in shaping interactions, it is secondary to the interactions themselves in regard to learning communities.

### 3.3. Insider versus Outsider

O'Reilly (2009) suggests that the goal of an ethnographer is to gain an insider perspective of the social reality that one is studying, by collecting data as an insider within the community. O'Reilly (2009, p.110) describes the process of becoming an insider as being 'gradually socialised into the group, thereby gaining insider knowledge and understandings'. As a member of the faculty and a former student of the College, I was already an insider, which Frankham and MacRae (2011) suggests helps with defining the field, identifying key individuals, and deciding what methods of data collection would be best suited to the environment. Fetterman (2010) notes that the key task of an ethnographer is to collect information as an insider and then analyse the data collected as an outsider. As an insider familiar with the setting and context, the challenge was not in immersing myself, but rather analysing the data and seeing the process in the light of a new experience and from different perspectives (Thomas, 2013).

As a teacher-researcher, some of the issues normally facing ethnographers, such as prolonged time in the field collecting data, going native, or working in an unfamiliar area or culture (Cresswell, 2007), took on a different meaning for me. Instead of worrying about going native, the challenge was in becoming a stranger and being able to look at a familiar culture/setting

with fresh eyes, or as O'Reilly (2009) describes it, gaining critical distance. This was difficult to start with as my colleagues and students looked at me as someone familiar. Therefore, it became important for me to be aware of my own positionality and its impact on the process and participants (O'Reilly, 2009). I was able to resolve this by reflecting on being a part of the students' learning communities and therefore had to accept that they would not differentiate between my role as a tutor and a researcher, just as my colleagues would still see me as a member of their professional community. I also asked the participants about their thoughts on my dual role during focus groups and interviews to which they responded with statements of trust in my judgement, as noted in section 1.7 of the introduction.

There are advantages to researching your own institution/practice. I was not just a token member of the learning communities who participated for the duration of the study, and therefore the participants were quicker to accept me than an outsider. O'Reilly (2009) notes that this familiarity allows for a more nuanced understanding of the culture, reducing the risk of stereotyping, seeing beyond static events and beginning to capture the flow and interaction of the community around these events. Conversely, Garcia-Marques and Mackie (2007) found that familiarity with a subject led to less analytic processing of information and therefore means we are more likely to stereotype. This is especially the case when there is no categorical information about the subject's occupation. However, Häfner and Staple (2009, p.619) argue that when there is no categorical information about the subject, then this 'might enhance the judged usability of the individuating information', meaning we are less likely to stereotype when we have processed more information about an individual. I was mindful of this when entering the field as a researcher, as noted earlier, trying to see the familiar as unfamiliar to gain a new perspective. Pring (2015) notes that a researcher will undeniably affect the participants, changing the context of what one originally set out to study. However, he suggests that it is not so easy to change or influence a social reality that has already been established or is even forming, because of the negotiated nature of those realities, underlying rules and agreements. I spent a significant amount of time with the participants on campus and in live sessions online, though most of the observations took place on recordings of taught sessions. Therefore, I believe I had very little impact on the behaviour of the participants. It was more difficult for me to gain mental and emotional distance from the participants during immersion in the data, as I could almost hear the voices of the participants in my mind. However, with the passage of time, I gained more critical distance by focusing on what was said and done and the context, rather than who was saying it. O'Reilly (2009) notes that critical distance often comes in the latter stages of data analysis and during the writing of the thesis.

### 3.4. Sampling

According to Blankenship and Ruono (2007) everyone at the college is automatically a member of its community. However, Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) narrow this down to each cohort entering a course. In the context of my study, I agree with Chrysikos and Catterall (2020), as there is very little contact between separate cohorts even on the same courses in the College in my study. For the sake of convenience, I decided to focus in my study on the learners that I would be teaching during that year, but would only carry out research on sessions taught by my colleagues. I chose to do this to maintain a clear delineation between when I was teaching and researching, for both myself and my participants. However, I acknowledge that the research still benefitted from my developing a stronger rapport with the participants as their colleague or teacher.

Originally, I had hoped to have two classes from the BA CSC programme, two cohorts for the same Access to HE programme, as well as a new cohort for the L5 Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship. However, the BA CSC Foundation Year and the L5 Teaching and Learning Apprenticeship were closed due to low recruitment numbers. Furthermore, the Access to HE programme also recruited low numbers therefore was limited to one class of students. This meant that I had two classes of students. The BA CSC group was composed of six female mature learners, aged between 20 and 40. The Access to HE class started off with twenty-four students, taught as two classes of twelve students each. However, several withdrawals left only sixteen students in the class, which meant the two classes were merged into one group near the end of the first term. They were aged between 19 and 40, of which two identified as male, with the remainder identifying as female, and one identifying as homosexual. All the students were of a White British ethnicity. Additionally, the six faculty members that regularly interacted with the two classes in my study and were part of these learning communities also agreed to become participants in my study. This included two members of the support staff and four lecturers. Of the six, only one of them identified as male.

### 3.5. Access Arrangements

I gained permission from the College to carry out the study during my ethics application stage and then sought individual consent from each of the learners first via email and then later in person. My colleagues were first to respond and then, shortly after, I was given consent by the returning cohort of the BA CSC group. The email included a PowerPoint that introduced the project, an information sheet and the consent form (Appendix 1 and 2). Conscious that the year may very well be disrupted due to COVID-19, I sought permission from the participants for audio and video recording and made them aware that the study would move online if any further

lockdowns took place during the study. It is perceived that as well as ethical reassurance, mitigating the risk factors involved (including transmission of disease) is also crucial to gaining the trust of participants (Gobat, et al., 2016).

I began observing the BA CSC group of students straight away after gaining consent. I had to wait three weeks for the Access to HE students to come into College, as the arrangement for them was to have online classes for two weeks and then come into campus every third week. It took these students longer to give me consent, perhaps because they had been out of education for a while and did not know me well enough. By the sixth week of teaching, all but one student granted their consent. However, this student left the course before I began to observe this group and therefore it had very little impact on the study. Unfortunately, two months into the academic year, a second lockdown was called, which meant that I was unable to observe students on campus beyond that point. From November 2020 all adult classes were moved to online only via Microsoft Teams and continued this way for most of the remainder of the academic year. As a result, the only way I could observe my participants was either to observe live online classes or to watch the recorded sessions on Microsoft Streams. Initially, I tried to arrange for observing live sessions, however, due to conflicting timetables I decided to observe recorded synchronous online sessions instead. This had the benefit of removing any impact my presence may have had. I asked both the faculty and student participants' permission again before beginning to watch the recorded sessions and reminded them throughout the study that I was doing so. All student participants would have been aware that the sessions were being recorded as a prominent notification appears near the top of the screen informing them as such. However, I did observe that some students had to be reminded during sessions by their tutors and by their peers that the sessions were being recorded.

I developed rapport with the participants through regular interactions in the classroom, both online and offline whilst I was still hopeful of synchronously observing session. I had a pre-existing relationship with the BA CSC students, having taught them on the Foundation Year already. I was fortunate enough to have been able to observe them on campus for a couple of months at the start of the study too, having discovered that they met to study over lunch on Tuesdays in my classroom before my session. I asked their permission each time before observing them and situated myself at the front of the class, bearing in mind ethical considerations such as invasion of privacy and the risk of influencing the behaviour of participants (Hawthorne Effect). It is possible that sitting in front of the class may have led to the students seeing me still in my role as a teacher. However, the students were relaxed around me and repeated observations over two months demonstrated that my presence was not changing their behaviour from how they interacted with me in the previous year, but it is also

possible that my presence may have changed their interactions with each other. I had originally hoped to observe more in-person learning community activities but had to adapt to the changing situation presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Another possible angle for data collection would have been to gain access to WhatsApp and Facebook groups, which would have helped to flesh out the interactions between the learners, however, these are not publicly available social media as they are protected by either encryption or restricted permissions, and therefore constitute personal data under The Data Protection Act 2018 GDPR Article 4 (2023). Hennel et al. (2020) note that social media data is difficult to protect in the way of other primary data as it is not under the researcher's control, because it has been generated by someone else and can be reposted or shared to the public domain. They also note that there are ethical issues related to the study of social media, the first of which is the potential for emotional harm when something intended for the group is then reproduced as public data, possibly breaching the individual's anonymity. Another issue is that there is a blurring of lines between what is public and what is private in social media terms. Student participants are more likely to be relaxed, informal and unguarded on a social media app and risk sharing something that they may not necessarily want to be included in the research, despite having already consented to taking part in the research. In a Teams class meeting, the students are aware they are in the formal space of learning and that the session is being recorded, so even if they forget that the session will be observed as part of the research, they will still be more attentive, formal, and guarded. Ethically, the risk of abusing informed consent and encroaching on private discussions is too high, therefore I decided to refrain from including social media groups as a data source. However, in my data, the BA CSC students noted that they had a WhatsApp group and also used email to discuss assignments and the Access to HE students used a Facebook group to 'trade information that then, like, we're always like double checking. Like, if we've added enough into our work and stuff' (Anwar, April 2021, Access to HE Focus Group).

This study focused on student-student and student-faculty interactions and therefore required a few different methods, including a Padlet (online pinboard), observations, semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Observation was the main method used to study interactions, as it allowed for the gathering of data on physical, human, and interactional settings, looking for emerging signs of community, different roles and to build an understanding of the value of these interactions (Cohen et al., 2007).

### 3.6. Data Collection Methods

#### 3.6.1. Padlet

Early in the study, I invited the student participants to take part in a Padlet. Padlet is a type of online pinboard that makes use of note tiles for participants to share their thoughts asynchronously and in their own time. The benefits of this platform are that it is simple to use, accessible and allows for anonymous posting. The purpose of this was to gain an idea of their initial beliefs about Learning Communities. I did not provide them with definitions to avoid biasing their responses. The participants were also informed that they could like and comment on each other's posts too. I asked the participants to answer three questions: 1) What does 'learning community' mean to you? 2) In the past, how have you participated in a learning community? 3) What does your learning community look like now? The response rate was low, with only seven of the participants responding to the first question and only four people responding to the second and third questions. The responses varied in length, with most participants favouring a single sentence response and others providing a short paragraph. I believe that at this stage the participants were still unsure about the study, especially the Access to HE students. Had I done the Padlet later into the academic year, it is possible that it would have received a better response rate.

#### 3.6.2. Observation

Participant observation is a mainstay of ethnographic research and requires a level of immersion in the culture under study that develops over time through the internalising of hopes, fears and beliefs of the target community (Fetterman, 2010). Through immersion, what seems like a confused jumble of activities and interactions can soon come into focus and reveal a set of patterns, rituals and events that have layers of meaning. O'Reilly (2009) indicates that there are degrees to how much of a participant (immersion) or observer (distance) a person is during a study, and quite often they are practical considerations rather than mental positioning. As a current lecturer and former student of the College, I am very much immersed in the world of my participants. In order to create some distance, I decided not to make field observations whilst teaching my participants. However, after a few weeks of observation I had to acknowledge the fact that the students still saw me as a lecturer, even when I was observing them as a researcher. This relates to some of the issues identified by Pring (2015) with regards to the issues with observations.

Pring (2015) highlights firstly, that observations are not free from our personal biases and perspectives. Secondly, they are dependent on our underlying concepts and hypotheses of what is being observed. Thirdly, we need to consider the meaning and motives of the persons being observed. At the start of the study, I was keen to identify the natural settings of learning communities, such as the library, study areas, classrooms and social areas, to ensure full

coverage of the environments that learning communities interact in (Cohen et al., 2007). However, due to COVID-19 restrictions, many of these 'social' areas were off limits to the students, with limited access to the library and none to the study zones. Even the cafeteria constrained students to one person per table. The focus of the observations was to note community formation, interaction, direction and other observable behaviour, but in the end, I only found one example of learners engaging in a learning community on campus, the aforementioned Tuesday lunch-time study group.

When the second lockdown was announced in November 2020, all adult classes moved to online only. I have already noted that lessons took place synchronously on Microsoft Teams, with all sessions recorded for safeguarding purposes and shared via Microsoft Streams. This had the added benefit for learners to be able to catch up with missed sessions or to listen back to a lesson for revision or to complete their notes. The benefit of this for the study was that I could watch back sessions without having to be present during the lessons. However, this limited observable activities to whatever was recorded by the tutors. It may be argued that at this stage I became a non-participant observer, but O'Reilly (2009) notes that the purpose of participation is to gain access to the participants' world with an aim to collect data that would be otherwise difficult to access. Participation also allows for understanding the observed phenomena through the lens of an insider, being able to pick out actions and behaviours that an outsider would miss. I was more of a participant when I was observing learners in person, and more of an observer when watching the recorded sessions.

Junker (1960) conceptualises four theoretical social roles in observations, ranging from complete participant to complete observer. These vary depending on the level of comparative involvement, which are characterised by subjectivity and sympathy; and detachment, characterised by objectivity and empathy. The four theoretical roles are as follows:

- 1) Complete Participant
- 2) Participant as Observer
- 3) Observer as Participant
- 4) Complete Observer

1) Complete participant requires becoming a complete member of the in-group with the researcher concealing themselves from the participants. This mode is suited to situations where secrecy and confidentiality are required to access what is essentially a private social system. This mode is likely characterised by over-empathy and difficulty in maintaining detachment. 2) Participant as observer requires participation in the in-group but does not require concealing of research activity. This mode could limit what the researcher can access. The researcher is friendly with the participants, but kept at arms-length; accepted but not quite part of the in-

group. 3) Observer as participant is a role where the researcher has access to the group under study but is under constraints of what can and cannot be reported on. 4) A complete observer is described as a range of roles which include complete covert observation via one-way mirrors or audio-visual recording equipment, and also researching completely openly with no constraints on what can be reported.

‘At the latter kind of extreme, all levels of information are theoretically equally accessible to all participants and hence an observer would become instead a kind of complete participant – but different from what is implied by such full participation in a natural group’ (Juncker, 1960, p. 37-38).

In other words, an observer can gain the advantages of being a participant without having to resort to covert methods and deception. Importantly, Juncker (1960) explains that field workers will likely find themselves shifting between these models as required by changes in the field, changing tactics when it improves a chance of success. These conditions may range between four variables: the conditions that exist within the target population before entry into the field; the conditions arising from the abilities, identity, attachments and characteristics of the researcher; the changes in the situation itself; and changes within the observer as a person, researcher, etc. According to Juncker’s (1960) theoretical roles, in my study, I began as a participant-as-observer whilst in-person observations were possible. When further lockdowns were announced, I was switching between observer as participant and complete observer as the situation kept changing.

Gold (1958) adds some more context to the four typologies of field work, having been a member of Juncker’s research team. He suggests that the complete participant is only playing a role of participation, but he knows he is pretending to be a member of the in Group, while no one else in the in-Group knows. Furthermore, the complete participant must maintain the mask, much like a method actor, and not allow his own personality, ‘the real him’, to come through lest the participants realise he is there under false pretences. This is problematic ethically and may lead to moral dilemmas. The researcher may feel obliged to end the charade by revealing who they really are and hope the participants will understand and continue to cooperate, or the researcher may risk ‘going native’ and begin to believe that their assumed identity has become their dominant identity.

A participant as observer may sidestep these issues as both the participant and the researcher are aware that the relationship is based on the needs of the research. This allows the researcher to perform formal research tasks such as interviewing, but also to informally spend time with the participants. The risk is that their relationship may cross the boundary into actual friendship, jeopardising the researcher’s objectivity.

The observer as participant maintains distance by only engaging in formal field work with only superficial participation. The risk here is that it becomes easier to misunderstand behaviour. The complete observer has no interaction with the participants and therefore remains objective. However, this increases the risk of ethnocentrism due to the lack of interaction. Based on Gold's (1958) commentary on the four roles, I switched between the latter three roles, as despite my friendliness with my participants, I did not spend any time with them in an informal capacity even when no lockdown was in place. Arguably, this may have meant that I missed an aspect of their learning community interactions and therefore I had to rely on self-reported accounts instead. I was either teaching them or in the dual capacity of tutor and researcher when I was carrying out my observations. However, during lockdown I adapted my approach to video-mediated teaching and research.

A study by Utoft et al. (2021) is a contemporary example of research that had to balance similar issues and requirements as my own. Utoft et al. (2021) began their study as participant-as-observers, forming relationships and taking part in activities whilst also observing and analysing. The COVID-19 pandemic meant that they had to switch to video mediated observations, however the research objectives remained the same. This switch meant that they became observers-as-participants and occasionally complete observers, with 'only superficial relationships and occasional interactions with the people studied, and even occasionally complete-observers who basically eavesdropped on the meeting' (Utoft, 2021, p.246).

Utoft et al. (2021) noted an increased reliance on verbal interactions during observations rather than being able to use all their senses to capture the environmental context fully. They note that they became reliant on the other participants to provide the context and background with no way of validating this information first hand. They realised that video mediated observation limited what they could observe and therefore limited the type of data they could record to verbal interactions and statements. They highlighted their inability to share in the context of their participants, for example the temperature where they were, the smells and ambient sounds, the world beyond the fish-eyed lens of the camera. It was still possible to interpret tone, but cues from body language and facial expressions were made difficult through the Zoom platform. Not being there also meant missing out on non-task related interactions, which is even more the case when all participants are online. During my study, I continued to interact with the participants through Teams lessons and meetings; the key difference between Utoft et al.'s (2021) study and my own is that occasionally the participants would acknowledge Utoft et al.'s remote participation in the meetings.

In my study, while students mentioned me at times during recorded sessions, I was watching the videos after the classes had already happened. There is, however, a precedent for this in a study carried out by Latvala et al. (2000).

Latvala et al. (2000) studied psychiatric patients as participants in their own care. They used a grounded theory approach by including participant observations through videotaped nursing situations and recorded interviews of patients over 10 months.

The advantages of video mediated observations, according to Utoft et al. (2021), include giving control to the participants of what the observer sees by having control of the camera, and choosing when to mute the mic. In my study, the lecturer participant decided when to start recording the classes and when to stop, as well as what documents, images and videos to share in the Teams meeting. Student participants decide whether to have their cameras and mics on. It is for this reason Utoft et al. (2021) recommend embracing the avenues and context offered by uttered communication in this medium as it forces the ethnographer to listen more closely to the participants. The change from physical observation to online was seen as a continuation of involvement in what was happening in the lives of participants during COVID-19. A disadvantage is the level of fatigue experienced from watching hours of video and the possibility of this resulting in bias towards content that elicits an emotional response, and less of a focus on the mundane. Utoft et al. handled this through reflexivity on their perception of the field and what they were noting.

Howlett (2022) lauds the utility offered by video conferencing for data collection, as it allows access to verbal and nonverbal cues. The immediacy of this technology makes interviews and focus groups similar to data collection in-person as it means the respondents will not have the time to edit or overthink their responses. Whilst there are still many people within the academic community that believe online research cannot replace in-person methods from being the gold standard, during COVID-19 there was no choice but to adopt the digital realm due to social distancing measures, though Howlett (2022) observes that it does complicate the situatedness of ethnography. However, Howlett (2022) found that working with her participants through online methods still allowed her to ground herself with the participants. She found that her participants were actually more relaxed online and in their own physical environment as opposed to in-person in a neutral location like a cafe. There were still interruptions in the participants' environments but Howlett was not fully aware or alert to these because they were low level. Furthermore, because her participants were more relaxed they were more willing to engage beyond the formal meeting and talk about their experience and lives during lockdown. Howlett (2022) acknowledges that despite online field research proving fruitful, it changes both the experience of the participant research and her relationship with her participants. Video

conferencing allowed Howlett (2022, p.395) to experience 'angles of the field' that would not have been accessible in normal field work. These angles include people ignoring other distractions to a point that they were more open to disclose information that they would be reluctant to in a public place. The participants are not distracted or intimidated by recording devices, and even forget over time that they were being recorded, allowing for more natural conversations. This lines up well with my experiences of online teaching and research. Initially, the participating students and lecturers were nervous about the switch to online and took a little time in adapting to the new mode of communication. However, once they had become familiar with the technology and the novelty of the situation had passed, the participants became more relaxed and open to conversations beyond the functional requirements of a lesson.

O'Reilly (2009) suggests criteria for online participant observations which include familiarising yourself with the rules of interaction, using the interface and the culture of that virtual space. This was a useful starting point for my own observations of online learning communities. In line with this, I observed the protocols for Microsoft Teams as including using the 'Raise Hand' function to ask questions, the chat box to share ideas and thoughts without interrupting the conversation or lesson and using emojis for quick responses, such as 'thumbs up' or a 'heart' emoji to show approval. O'Reilly (2009) further recommends that the observer focus on how people interact, share ideas, follow the rules and the hierarchies of relationships online. This forms the core of the processes that include how the learner-lecturer, learner-learner and learner-content interactions take place both in person and online.

I used my research journal to record my observations and then transcribed them later as detailed descriptions to form comprehensive accounts of activities, interactions, and settings (Cohen et al., 2007). I also used my research journal to record my own reflections and insights (O'Reilly, 2009). I initially made use of context maps of the layout of the library (Fetterman, 2010), the study zone and the cafeteria, to help identify the instrumentality of space (Lincoln and Guba, 1985), but decided not to use them for the study as these places became socially restricted due to COVID-19.

### 3.6.3. Interviews and Focus Groups

Interviews and focus groups are another staple of qualitative research and ethnographies. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest that oral accounts allow for the analysis of social products, shedding light on socio-cultural processes. O'Reilly (2009) notes that interviews serve the purpose of developing relationships with participants and delving into their beliefs and feelings, as well as the events that hold some significance to them. Interviews allow for comparing responses and representing the views and beliefs of the participants.

Barbour and Schostak (2011) note that there are several issues that impact on the usefulness of interviews and focus groups. These are Power, Social Position, Value, Trust, Meaning, Interpretation and Uncertainty. Barbour and Schostak (2011) explain that power structures give context to exchanges between the person asking the questions and the ones answering them. If there is a fear of consequences of providing the wrong answer or a desire to ingratiate oneself to the person in authority, then this will affect the responses. I mitigated this by informing the learners that participation was not compulsory and that marking would be anonymised for the sake of the research study and as per normal practice, would be verified both internally by other members of staff and moderated externally by the qualification provider. Furthermore, contributions to interviews or focus groups would be anonymised at the point of analysis, which over time made it difficult for me to recognise who had contributed what, though initially I could still recognise their 'voices', as noted earlier. The more I processed the data and organised the data with coding and grouping under themes, the easier it became to maintain a critical distance so that I could focus on what the data was saying and less on who had said it. The power dynamic also ties into the second issue noted by Barbour and Schostak (2011), of social position, regarding the hierarchy within a focus group, or the difference in class, ethnicity or gender that could affect how people respond. My ethnic origin, social class and even gender differs from most of the participants and therefore, I was aware that my own interpretations of what I was observing would be inadequate to understand the realities of my participants. But these very differences could also serve to provide me with a critical distance for looking at the data. However, by triangulating the data through multiple methods, I hoped to gain a more valid interpretation of the meaning my participants placed in their interactions.

Barbour and Schostak (2011) list several fundamental concepts that impact on the usefulness of interviews and focus groups, which include value and trust. Amongst them is the value of the information being provided, which turns a participant's responses into an insight into their reality to provide more authenticity to the study. Trust is the degree to which the participant is willing to reveal the truth about their inner life, balancing the need to make a good impression and the reliance on the interviewer to use the information provided responsibly and handle it ethically. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out that whilst interviews might not be able to provide an unmediated view of behaviour and attitudes, interviews can still aid in clarifying what observed behaviours mean. Barbour and Schostak (2011) note further that interviews and focus groups help clarify meanings of an action or behaviour but sometimes there may be a layer of meaning that is hidden from the participant's conscious mind, and that the words used to convey meaning can also themselves be open to alternative interpretations. Furthermore, the need for interpretations when there are multiple realities and meanings given to actions and behaviours

does not guarantee that the researcher will be able to divine the correct meaning, in fact there is uncertainty in the whole process of meaning making. This necessitates an approach to get as close to the meaning implied by the participants as possible, through methods such as triangulation, repetition of observations and mirroring, which we will revisit below.

Barbour and Schostak (2011) offer three different strategies for interviewing, which depend on whether you want to limit the responses that the participants give so that it is easier to compare them and generalise across a population or provide a little more flexibility by including open-ended questions to explore unexpected responses and dig into the social context. Alternatively, one can go in without any pre-planned questions and ground the interview in the experiences and views of the participants. There is a clear difference in where the power lies in each of these strategies. With the structured approach, the power lies entirely with the interviewer and with the unstructured approach, the interviewee has more control over what they wish to talk about. The semi-structured approach provides a balance between the two.

Initially, I had thought to engage participants in informal interviews after face-to-face observations to get their perspective on their activities, their feelings and perceptions of value gained from their interactions (O'Reilly, 2009). However, I decided to switch to a semi-structured approach instead as I realised that my questions were quite formulaic, for example, 'what did this interaction with your peers signify?', and that having some structure could help keep interviews focused on the research aims. I used some of the original prompts for the unstructured interviews and the questions I had developed for the focus groups and then reworked them until they were fit for the purpose of my study. Fetterman (2010, p.42) writes that 'ethnographers use interviews to help classify and organise individual perceptions of reality'. It was hoped that over time and through repeated interactions, the participants would be able to reflect better on their roles within the learning communities and their own personal development, which ties in with my research questions (O'Reilly, 2009). Barbour and Schostack (2011) suggest that the interviewer should adopt the manner of the listener and the language of the participants to put them at ease so that the participants can reveal their social experiences without the imposition of the researcher's goals. Therefore, I allowed some flexibility in my line of questioning to give my participants a bit more freedom to discuss what they thought was relevant and rephrased my questions into layperson terms to avoid academic jargon.

I undertook three interviews for the purpose of gaining a perspective of what staff members understood about learning communities. Two interviews were with support staff and one with a lecturer who was unable to make the focus group date. For the support staff interviews, I omitted some of the questions and replaced them with more specific ones relating to their support role during COVID-19 (Appendix 3 and 4). The two interviews with the support staff took

place in the College Library. The participants and I wore visors and facemasks and stayed two meters apart during the interviews. The audio was recorded on my phone. The interview with the member of the teaching staff was conducted and recorded via Microsoft Teams. I transcribed the conversations as soon as possible after the interviews and then sent them to the participants to member-check them.

Member-checking is a qualitative tool used widely to give participants an opportunity to review the data they have provided. Lincoln and Guba (2015) suggest member-checking adds rigour to qualitative research, as accurate representations of participants data and the interpretation of the events increases the credibility of a study. Birt et al. (2016) list several ways that member checking can be done, such as sharing transcripts of interviews, focus groups, as I did, and even data that has been interpreted and analysed with participants. Member-checking interviews fits with the constructivist epistemology, allowing the participants to co-construct the data. However, the participants did not recommend any changes, nor make suggestions for amendments, agreeing that it was a true record of their conversations with each other and me. The interview with the lecturer and the focus groups all took place near the end of the study, as Fetterman (2010) recommends that interviews should take place either midpoint or at the end point of a study to better reflect the reality of the participants and avoid influencing them with the researcher's world view. This also allows for narrowing in on important issues and hypotheses that have emerged from the data. I did not ask the participants to focus on any particular event, instead I encouraged them to reflect on their experiences and share what the term learning community meant to them and what they felt their role was in relation to learning communities. Fetterman (2010) warns that such retrospection can lead to faulty or filtered recollections, however, as a participant observer I was familiar with the learners and the faculty members, with their experiences of education over the past year, therefore I was able to compare their reflections with my own observations.

#### 3.6.4. Focus Groups

Barbour and Schostack (2011) claim that focus groups are very much like interviews and suffer from the same issues, however they offer access to a wider range of views in less time than interviews. Focus groups are used to capture the opinions, beliefs and attitudes of a group of people, allowing them to interact and respond together to questions and prompts (Birt et al., 2016), which makes them less intimidating for participants (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Barbour and Schostack (2011) note that the group dynamic within this approach should not be overlooked, as the responses received within focus groups tend to be co-constructed rather than aggregated. It encourages participants to be more reflective in their responses and allows them to debate issues and maybe even review their own opinions, especially when the participants

are peers who have a social history together (Barbour and Schostack, 2011). All the participants were invited to take part in a focus group with their peer group, one for the teaching staff, and then one each for the BA CSC and the Access to HE groups. The three focus groups took place via Teams and were recorded and then transcribed later. The student focus groups lasted around forty minutes and the faculty focus group lasted around twenty-two minutes because a couple of the lecturers were unable to attend the focus group. Separate interviews were set for those lecturers, but only one of them was able to make time, as noted above. I transcribed the meetings on Word and then sent the transcriptions to the participants to be member-checked. The transcription process allowed me to deepen my familiarity with the data.

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note that online focus groups offer a level of flexibility due to less constraint on time and remove the need for travel, tapping into the participants' existing networks. In this case, some of the students had already established their community firmly in the real world and their online interactions were based on relationships that had been forged during in-person interactions, online classes and social media. Howard (2014) notes that there is an emerging body of evidence that engaging with peers through social media can also facilitate individual learning and collaboration. Chen et al. (2009) also found that interactions via social media can aid in enhancing both intentionality and performance of online knowledge sharing. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p.138) note that immediacy of the communication helps foster 'a more intense sense of shared experience and of a shared social world', and that, 'There is no fundamental distinction between "virtual"; and real environments in social terms' (p.139). However, my study would indicate that despite similarities in communication between the physical world and the virtual, it is perceived as being different by the participants. The online medium itself acts as a barrier to immediacy, with things often being left unsaid due to the perceived effort required to communicate, as noted in my observations.

At the start of the focus group sessions with the students, I showed them two images of adults in different situations, one with a group of adults sitting around a coffee table, laptops open and in discussion and the other with an instructor delivering a lecture to a class of adults and asked whether they represented learning communities. Fetterman (2010) refers to this as a Projective Technique, which involves using a device to elicit responses from participants to gauge their perspectives and definitions. This technique was used to supplement and enhance the focus group sessions and not as a separate data collection tool (Fetterman, 2010). After that, I proceeded to ask them questions on where and when their learning communities took place, the role of the lecturers in the learning community, the importance of rapport, the impact of being moved online on their communities and their reflections on being researched by me (see Appendices 4 and 5). I asked follow-up questions to draw out answers when I felt more

explanation was needed. I ended the focus group by thanking the participants and informing them of what would happen with the collected data.

The focus group with the lecturers also took place online via Teams, and featured fewer questions and related more to their own experiences and reflections on student learning communities (see Appendix 4).

### 3.7. Ethical Considerations

In regard to ethics, I have already discussed some of the issues related to being an Insider researcher, earlier in this chapter. In this section, I will discuss some general principles of ethics in research and specifics of power, positionality, influence and data protection. Pring (2015, p.152-153) lists some general principles for ethics in research: 1) clarify what you intend to find out and for what purpose; 2) provide anonymity for the participants and the institution as much as possible, without hindering contextualisation of the research; 3) allow for cross-examination at the end of the research; 4) provide an opportunity for participants to comment on findings; and 5) do not overstate or understate the consequences of the study, as you cannot guarantee how the data and findings may be used beyond. In addition to the above, I had to consider my role in relation to the participants, as a teacher, a colleague and a researcher, regarding underlying issues of trust and power. I already had sufficient access to participants as well as authority to ask them questions, so I did not have to modify my roles for this purpose (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). Initially, I thought I could separate my roles as teacher and researcher by avoiding data collection when I was teaching. However, the students did not distinguish between these roles and would ask me questions even when I was present expressly as a researcher. Frankham and MacRae (2022) write that this balancing act is part of ethnography, between what you are trying to achieve and the impact you have as a researcher on the daily experiences of the people you work alongside. In the end I resolved that I was a part of their learning community as a lecturer or as a colleague even when observing them as a researcher, by removing myself from the equation I would be missing a part of the reality they consider normal. The next section will explore how these relationships impacted the dynamics of power and responsibility.

#### 3.7.1. Power

The issues of Power and Positionality are essential considerations in ethnography, as the methodology involves the researcher becoming an insider within the community under study (Frankham and MacRae, 2011). This required an awareness of my own positionality and of how it influenced my interpretation of these realities, the language I used to describe the phenomenon and acknowledging that this 'subjectivity' is part and parcel of how I make sense of the reality I am studying and my inter-dependence with it (Pring, 2015; Thomas,

2013). Subjectivity is the way we individually understand and interpret any given situation, to the extent that the 'social world is nothing more than our interpretations' (Pring, 2015, p.118). This of course raises the issue of objectivity and the increased risk of bias and self-interest. Pring (2015) warns that teachers may misunderstand the meaning of certain interactions amongst students, as well as the dynamics of student groups. This indicates a risk of interpreting social interactions through just observation without fully being aware of the meaning or rules governing these interactions.

Cresswell (2007) states that writing in qualitative studies acknowledges the positionality of the writer and the stance they are taking. The writing reflects the undecided nature of the study and contains sub-texts that shape how the writer is interpreting what is being observed, considering the context, history, and the relationship between the researcher and the researched (Creswell, 2007). The researcher must only present one set of facts and do so in a chronological order, or by focusing on events, or on plot and characters, and developing the research like a story. After providing a description, an analysis of the data should follow, which includes reporting on the procedures used and highlighting key findings, evaluating and contextualising the data within an analytical framework and then interpreting the data by referring to one's own experiences and to the wider body of the literature on the topic (Creswell, 2007).

One of the issues with doing the bulk of my observations on video-recorded sessions is that even though I had gained consent to do this from the participants and regularly reminded them that I was observing their sessions, there is a likelihood that the participants forgot during lessons that the sessions would be observed at some point in time. Whilst becoming unobtrusive as a researcher is something that ethnographers strive for (Fetterman, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009), being virtually invisible means that I have the power to focus on who I want, rewind and slow down conversations and highlight certain points of the class. As noted in the methods subsection, I did not intentionally set out to be a complete observer. The situation dictated that I adapt and switching to video-mediated observation was the best fit at the time. It is for this reason that I chose to do the focus groups at the end of the study so that the learners would have an opportunity to clarify any behaviours that I may have misunderstood and share their perceptions of learning communities. Nevertheless, I was never fully comfortable with the power of being an invisible observer over my participants. However, my 'power' over the nature of the recordings was not absolute. As noted earlier, the recordings were started and ended by the participating lecturers and only what they shared on the screen was visible to me. All the participants were aware that recording was taking place as a warning message would appear on top of their screens and remained there until they clicked the confirmation button. The content on display was mostly the PowerPoint slides for the day, occasionally video feeds of the teacher

and some of the students who had switched on their cameras and at times the chat feed or virtual whiteboard. The learners also exercised their power to switch their cameras and microphones off, meaning I had no control over their level of participation during the activity. Finally, if a student forgot that they were being recorded and discussed something personal or private, they were reminded by their peers or lecturer that the session was being recorded. These moments did highlight the level of comfort that the participants felt with each other as a community, but I felt uncomfortable with using unsolicited personal conversations.

Students may be wary of sharing information with a teacher because of their awareness of the power dynamic. However, that dynamic may feel different to them when the teacher is in the role of researcher and therefore opens the possibility of oversharing. Fetterman (2010) refers to this as the researcher gaining guilty knowledge. I touched on this earlier when discussing students forgetting that they were being recorded and oversharing. Williams (2009) explains that guilty knowledge refers to when a participant shares information that may be potentially embarrassing for them without realising it, especially once the research is published and publicised. This is a likely occurrence when the researcher is in a multiple practitioner role, as colleague, lecturer or friend, and familiarity leads to participants letting their guard down (Williams, 2009). For this reason, I sent transcripts of the focus groups and interviews to the participants, presenting them an opportunity to flag any occurrence of oversharing that they were uncomfortable with remaining in the study. However, none of my respondents raised any objections.

I was also aware of the risk of invasion of privacy and making students feel like they had to participate (Robson, 1993). These dilemmas were mitigated through communication of the purpose, scope and methods of the study by email and in person, using an information sheet, a PowerPoint and a recorded video to provide both the students and tutors with the information in various formats. They were also provided instructions on how to opt out of the study. I carried out the study over an academic year and regularly reminded the participants that they could opt out of the whole study or ask me not to observe their current session by simply informing me. Cohen et al. (2007) indicate observation situations can carry the risk of bias due to selective attention, memory and data entry as well as the problem of inference. I mitigated this through member-checking as well as methodological triangulation and by observing the participants over a long period of time. Fetterman (2010) explains that triangulation is the process of testing different sources of information against each other and stripping away alternative explanations to work towards proving a hypothesis, improving the quality of data and the accuracy of the findings. I refrained from making value judgments based on limited data, and instead tried to

gain deeper insights over the length of the study. Nonetheless, I am aware that there may still be bias in my perceptions and selection of focus during the research.

#### 3.7.2. Hawthorne Effect

One of the issues raised during the ethics application was the Hawthorne Effect. The Hawthorne Effect refers to participants being aware that they are being studied and the impact this may have on their behaviour (McCambridge et al., 2014). Labov (2009) also draws attention to this in his book, of the difficulty of observing how people communicate when they are aware of being observed, calling it the 'observer's paradox'. I have already disclosed the steps I took to mitigate the observer effect, including emphasizing that participation would not advantage them in any way and the use of randomised internal verification and external moderation to ensure marking and feedback are fair and balanced. I also used repeated observations, data triangulation and member-checking by sharing the transcripts with the participants (Cohen et al., 2007). All the online observations were done on recorded lessons which removes the risk of the Hawthorne Effect, but, there is still a risk of bias as a result of what I chose to focus on during observations and during data analysis. However, as Labov (2009) highlights, there is no way of knowing whether I had an effect or not.

#### 3.7.3. Data Storage

The primary data collected included hand-written notes, typed notes and video content. All hand-written notes were made in my field journal which I kept with me when I was on site, otherwise in a locked desk drawer at home. Digital data such as transcriptions and video recordings were saved to my university OneDrive account. Transcriptions of interviews and focus groups were shared with the participants who took part in each for member-checking. Only my research supervisors and I had access to the primary data. All data was analysed through NVivo and secured with an encrypted password.

#### 3.7.4. Avoiding Harm

All reasonable precautions were taken to avoid causing physical, emotional and psychological harm to the participants. On-site observations and interviews were done with social distancing in place. I made full use of PPE when interacting with participants on-site, and encouraged the participants to do so too. During the study, none of the participants became distressed due to the research. However, if such a situation had arisen, I would have attempted to console them and would have referred them to the College's safeguarding and counselling services.

### 3.8. Conclusion

This study was initially conceived as an ethnography that would explore learning communities and the added value for adult learners in a HE in FE setting through participant observations, field notes, a shared Padlet, interviews and focus groups. The study was designed to adapt to

any COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions. The resulting study is partly based in the real world and partly in the online extension of the classroom. The study moved from participant observations of students interacting despite social distancing, to interacting with them through online classes and focus groups via Microsoft Teams and watching video-recorded lessons. The study concluded with interviews and focus groups with all the participants. Throughout this process I have grappled with issues of positionality, of being an insider, immersion in the reality of my participants, the duality of being a teacher and a researcher, and the ethical considerations around hierarchies of power within the research relationship and the observer paradox. Having shared the tools I used to carry out the research, I will now go on to detail how I went about collecting and analysing the data.

## 4. DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS PROCESS

### 4.1. Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the iterative approach I took to collecting and analysing the data, using the theoretical lens of social constructivism. This was done through focusing on learner interactions, themes like rapport and social roles and on shared experiences. This approach allowed me to revisit the field and even data already collected to explore emerging themes, which supports the idea that knowledge is co-constructed through interaction between myself, as the researcher, and the learners and faculty members as participants in the research. I will also discuss how I processed the data using NVivo, a Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS).

Creswell (2007) notes that qualitative researchers, despite the different approaches to data analysis, generally conform to a contour that starts with data management, reading and then writing memos on transcripts, then describing, classifying, and interpreting the data, before representing and visualising the data. I adopted a flexible approach to analysis because it would have been difficult to follow a step-by-step process as I was analysing data whilst also collecting it, taking what Rankin (2017) calls an analytic stance, having self-awareness of one's role in building up an account of the reality of the participants. Analysis in ethnography begins as soon as data collection starts and is iterative, requiring constant refinement, decision-making and reflexivity (Fetterman, 2010; O'Reilly, 2009). Each time I began data collection, I would not only immerse myself in the data, but would keep in mind what I had already analysed and sought to refine developing ideas, seeking clues to the next piece of evidence that needs to be collected, almost like a detective building a case (O'Reilly, 2009). Data was coded as soon as I could after collection using my research questions and keywords used by my participants as initial codes. As such, there are elements of Grounded Theory (GT) in my approach as I have made use of an iterative process of collecting and analysing data, coding and memoing. Strauss and Corbin (1998) alluded to the possibility of researchers using elements of GT theory and adapting it to their own approach. However, I found GT to be too unwieldy and process driven (Thomas and James, 2006), therefore chose to mostly follow the Thematic Analysis approach instead.

Despite the iterative nature of analysis in an ethnographic study, I still made use of Thematic Analysis to help provide some structure to the process of analysis. In their work on Thematic Analysis, Braun and Clarke (2006, p.87) set out six phases for data analysis, which are: 1) familiarise yourself with the data, 2) generate initial codes, 3) search for themes, 4) review themes, 5) define and name themes, and 6) produce the report. Smith and Firth (2011) note that one of the problems with this approach is that data becomes fragmented during the process of analysis, meaning as I organised my data under themes and codes, there was a risk of losing the

context of the data and then misrepresenting it during memoing. Ward et al. (2013) have written about some of the criticisms levelled at qualitative data analysis and thematic analysis and have sought to counter them. One of the most common criticisms noted by Braun and Clarke (2006) is the lack of clear and concise guidelines but being over prescriptive could lead to a loss of flexibility and limit the analysis itself. Other critiques of qualitative analysis reported by Ward et al. (2013) include the lack of transparency in coding practices and a lack of depth to the analysis process. I hope to remedy this by being more explicit in how the analysis of data was carried out to provide more context and meaning (Ward et al. 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Another criticism is the level of subjectivity inherent in qualitative research. Elliot et al. (1999) state that unlike quantitative research, which is based on positivism and the dichotomy of subject and object, qualitative research is underpinned by various traditions such as phenomenology, postmodernism and hermeneutics, and emphasises human experience and social life. Furthermore, Elliot et al. (1999) have noted several similarities between quantitative and qualitative research in their approach to empirically sound research design, such as providing a scientific context and purpose for the research, using appropriate methods and discussions and contributing to knowledge. Whilst, admittedly, there is always a risk of bias in research, it is acknowledged in qualitative research and mitigated as best as possible through awareness of the different sources of bias and through various analytic tools including reflexivity and triangulation.

There are several analytic tools used by ethnographers of which I utilised reflexivity, triangulation, identifying key events, flowcharts, and matrices to help crystallise ideas and display information and content analysis (Fetterman, 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; O'Reilly, 2009). Reflexivity on one's actions therefore is an important aspect of qualitative research and can be considered data in its own right (Ward et al., 2013; Nowell et al., 2017). Further clarity on coding practices and the development of themes is offered through maintaining an audit trail of how themes have been identified and selected to make explicit my role as an analyst in interpreting the data and tracking decisions and thought processes in my journal (Ward et al., 2013; Nowell et al. 2017). Throughout my study, I noted in my journal my reflections from the field and on the data, decisions on next steps and even initial codes and memos during the analysis process. My journal therefore became more than somewhere to record my observations; it became my audit trail for the development of the study. I triangulated my data by using different data collection tools and identified some of the key events that occurred during my observations, for example interactions and conversations that took place whilst a tutor stepped out of class. I used flow charts and matrices in the later stages of analysis

to help organise my own thoughts and provide myself with a visual map of the data (see Appendices 7, 9 and 11). I will discuss all these now in more detail below.

#### 4.2. Data Collection

I observed the BA CSC class on campus four times between September 2020 and November 2020, after which a second lockdown was announced, moving all learning to online only. I continued to observe the BA CSC students in online sessions thirteen times, as they remained online for the remainder of their year. The Access class was online from the very beginning of the term, with on-campus classes every third week. As a result, I managed to observe them 17 times from January 2021 to May 2021. All the online lessons were recorded on Microsoft Teams and watched on Microsoft Streams. This meant that I did not have to be present during the teaching of the sessions, which meant that my presence did not impact the behaviour of the students. During these observations I was looking at the student-to-student and student-to-lecturer interactions rather than on the teaching content or methods. I was particularly interested in any activity that would help nurture and develop learning communities within each of the two classes.

I noted my observations as logs in my journal. During on campus observations, I made note of interactions between the learners, what topics they discussed, what activities they were involved in and what roles they played. For example:

A group of five learners are discussing a task that they have been given by their pastoral mentor. One student, ME, is reading out what the task is. IJ & CE are making notes on what they need to do. TG is stressing about information coming from multiple sources. ME and IJ are trying to help her stay focused. TG leaves the group to go use a computer to do the work. UM is quiet throughout and working on her laptop. (Anwar, Memo, September 2020)

During online observations, I looked at what conversations occurred between learners before, during and after each session. I also noted how the lecturer greeted the learners, what methods they used to encourage interaction with the content and each other, and the different roles that emerged in the learner behaviours. A typical excerpt is as follows:

Some of the learners have their cameras on. LI talks about the importance of having cameras on to facilitate better communication. She notes that teenagers just point their cameras at the top of their heads or at the ceilings and uses this to engage the learners

in a conversation about the age of their children and whether they have children or not. This is the first class after the Christmas holidays, so it's interesting that LI is rebuilding the rapport with the learners. The conversation turns to issues regarding access to equipment, especially as they may have to share with children forced to learn from home due to COVID-19. (Anwar, Memo, January 2021)

I also managed to interview two faculty librarians on site, and an interview and focus group with three lecturers via Microsoft Teams. I wanted to cover as many angles of the learning communities as possible within the limitations of time and access. Furthermore, I did focus groups with both the BA and the Access to HE students online via Teams too. I anonymised the names of all of my participants by using a substitution cipher to systematically switch out the initials of their names.

After collecting the data, my process was as follows: a) triangulating data, b) transcribing, c) coding, d) re-coding and merging, e) using visualisation of data to help structure it, f) memoing and , g) writing my findings in report style.

This process was made easier by using the CAQDAS NVivo. Training was offered by the University, but my time was constrained by work and family commitments, therefore I chose to learn the software experientially, with some guidance from Jackson and Blazeley's (2020) book, *Qualitative Data Analysis with NVivo*, and the help section built into the software itself. Fetterman (2010) notes that CAQDAS can be used to keep track of the myriad patterns and themes, and aid in comparing categories, identifying sub-categories and developing theory (Fetterman, 2010). It also helps maintain an audit trail of the process (O'Reilly, 2009; Ward et al., 2013), though I also continued to track this in my research journal. There are limitations to what CAQDAS can do. It may have helped sort, organise, and visualise the data and even in developing a theoretical framework by facilitating the identification of important themes, however, it is still the analyst who provides the interpretation and analysis of the data (Ward et al., 2013).

### 4.3. Stages of Data Analysis

#### 4.3.1. Triangulation

Nowell et al. (2017) suggests that trustworthiness can be established at this stage by prolonging the engagement with the data and triangulating data through different collection methods. I used data from my focus groups and interviews to help triangulate the data that I collected through my observations. I scanned through all my data files side-by-side, treating each as a unique source of information, regardless of whether it was generated through interviews, focus groups or observations. The data was then separated, sorted, and synthesized through thematic

analysis. This process aided in revealing issues of agreement within the data, for instance, disagreements on whether a teacher is a required component in a learning community or not, perpetuating the need to perhaps revisit the field and the data collected to reconcile it (Fetterman, 2010). Glaser and Strauss (2004), the founders of grounded theory, describe this as theoretical sampling, using the process of data collection, coding, and analysis to aid in the decision of what data to collect next and where to look for it. For example, the above disagreement on whether teachers were required for a learning community to exist came up during a focus group with students. This led me to include it as a question during the focus group and interviews with the lecturers to triangulate points of view on the role of the teacher in a learning community.

#### 4.3.2. Transcription and Immersion

I wrote some initial memos in my journal soon after collecting the data, which consisted of short written reflections on my most recent observations, and then transcribed my journal as I went along. I anonymised my participants at this stage by giving each participant a unique set of initials for the study. I uploaded my preliminary transcripts to NVivo, just so that I could familiarise myself with the software and developed some early codes to guide my observations. I digitised my handwritten journal notes by using the *Dictate* function in Word and then read through the document to correct any mistakes and fix grammatical issues. These repeated readings helped me become more familiar with the data. The onsite interviews were recorded on my phone and then I manually transcribed them. The online focus groups and interviews were recorded on Teams and then watched back on Streams. Streams automatically produces a transcript of the audio, but it is not very accurate. I copied and pasted the transcripts and then listened back to the recordings whilst correcting the transcripts. This was an arduous process, but I probably saved some time not having to type the entire transcript out. Another benefit of Streams was the ability to slow down or speed up playback. Most of the time I listened to the recordings at x1.5 speed, but often slowed it down to x0.5 to capture a mumbled or indistinct word. As a result, I became well acquainted with my data. Braun and Clarke (2006) recommend immersion in data before moving on to coding. Once I had completed transcribing the data, I imported them as separate files into NVivo, for example *Observations of BA CSC*, *Observations on Access*, etc.

O'Reilly (2009) describes a spiral approach to analysis, where the data collected will lead to more questions. For example, during the focus group with two of my colleagues, I was struck by the importance of rapport and decided to re-examine previous data for further links to rapport. Similarly, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) suggest a funnel structure, with data analysis becoming progressively more focused until, as O'Reilly notes (2009) the ethnographer feels they

have enough data to be able to say something about the findings. I did this by rereading coded data, then recoding, merging, and grouping the codes as themes until they made more sense to me. This process meant that I was reading and rereading my data, taking it apart, examining the pieces and then putting it back together to provide me with new insights into the inner life of the learning communities in my study.

#### 4.3.3. Coding

Coding is the attachment of descriptive labels to pieces of collected data, which then gives the researcher a basis to give shape to the data in a way that makes it easier to compare against other pieces of data, what to focus on and explore in further data collection (Charmaz, 2011). Taking an iterative approach to analysis, I began generating codes as soon as I uploaded my first transcript to NVivo. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.89) advise coding as many themes or patterns as possible, without losing the context of the data being coded by highlighting some of the surrounding data too, so that you do not end up with snippets that can be misinterpreted, and that the same piece of data can be coded multiple times with different codes. I read and reread each file line-by-line. I began to add codes for anything I found interesting, especially if it related to my research questions, for example, learning communities, added value and roles. I used some of my earlier codes, but mostly used new descriptive words that were a better fit, such as crosstalk, sounding off, etc. At this stage, the intention was to revisit the codes and try to group and refine them later. NVivo offers a few ways to code data. I found highlighting the text of the data and then coding it in-line worked best for me initially when I was coming up with new codes. It was also useful to have the code panel open for a quick view of codes already generated.

*Table 2: Initial Codes Generated from Data*

Name	Files	References
Added Value	1	1
Anxiety	2	2
Barriers to Learning	6	14
Breakout Rooms	2	13
Cameras	2	22
Chat Box	2	14
Communication	8	30
COVID	6	25
Cross-chat	2	13
Debate	1	3
Developmental	7	24
Discussions	2	31

Dual roles	5	11
Environment	8	18
Formal learning	2	2
Group work	2	3
Groupthink	1	2
Hawthorne Effect	4	5
Informal Learning	3	12
Instructive	6	19
Interaction	4	37
Learning Community	8	40
Locations	6	14
Membership	6	11
Microphone	2	9
Online Learning	7	42
Peripheral Participation	5	11
Presentations	1	3
Problem Solving	2	4
Questioning	2	15
Rapport	6	38
Resilience	6	13
Roles	10	49
Shared Experiences	4	8
Social Distancing	4	7
Social Media	3	3
Sounding Off	3	7
Supportive	7	41
Tasks	2	4
Teacher Talk	2	3
Team Work	4	4

In my first pass I generated about 28 different codes, like *COVID*, *developmental* and *supportive*, but by my second pass these grew to 43 individual codes (Table 1). These were drawn from initial analysis and reflection on the data collected. An advantage of NVivo is that I was able to attach multiple codes to each passage or section with confidence that the software would organise these for me, so I would not have to unpick them later. As I moved onto analysing my observation notes I found myself using several keywords as codes that kept cropping up in the data, for example, *cameras*, *cross-chat* (conversations between learners using the chat function in Teams), and *COVID-19*. Some of the coding was generated quite late in the process, for

example *groupthink* and *breakout rooms*, which meant I had to go back and recode earlier files again.

#### 4.3.4. Visualising and Hierarchies

The next step was to create hierarchies within my coding to provide structure. NVivo has some built-in visualising tools including hierarchy charts. This helped visualise the dominant themes emerging from the data. I then placed the codes in the list view and connected the codes I felt were related to create child and parent nodes, for example I used *Roles* as a parent node, with *Supportive*, *Developmental* and *Instructive* as child nodes beneath it. The hierarchy chart shows parent nodes as large rectangles with smaller child node rectangles nested within them (See Chart 1). At this stage I also merged some of the codes together to eliminate overlap and make them more manageable. I noted each decision and step during the analysis stage in my research journal for transparency and traceability (Nowell et al., 2017). A few codes survived this stage as standalone codes due to the number of references associated with them or because they did not immediately link with the other codes.

The final step in the coding process was to read through all the data under the heading of each code. Jackson and Bazeley (2019) recommend that this is a good opportunity to re-code or un-code data to make it more focused and refined. But at this stage I was satisfied that the codes I had attached to the data were sufficient to begin development of emergent themes. The next step after coding was to begin writing memos to build up thick descriptions and deeper analysis of the data.

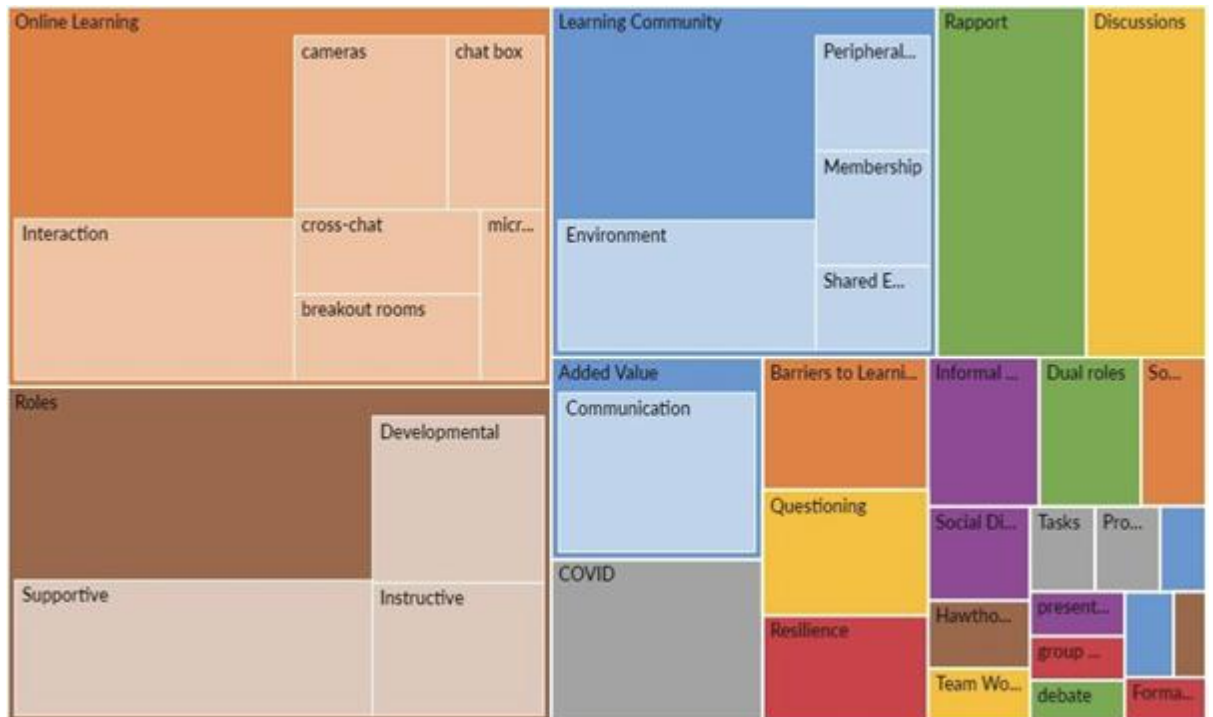


Chart 1: Visualisation of Parent and Child Node Hierarchies in NVivo

#### 4.3.5. Memoing

In this stage, I began sorting the codes into potential themes and worked on finding overarching themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) note that some codes will become main themes, others sub-themes and some may even be discarded. This process of sifting and categorising data is part of the procedure of identifying themes, rituals, and events, and then weaving them into a pattern (Fetterman, 2010). The initial organising, sorting, and summarising of data grows in its level of sophistication, which may require a revision of initial ideas and layering categories to aid in the understanding of the activities and rituals (O'Reilly, 2009). I did this by grouping some of my codes together and building up a picture of how they might relate to higher level themes, such as *Learning Communities*, *Roles* and *Added Value*, and then again when I was organising my memos, deciding where these themes fit in with the overall pattern of the data. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.91) identify two levels of refinement for themes, 'reviewing at the level of the coded data extracts' for coherence to a pattern and considering 'the validity of individual themes in relation to the data set'.

Memo writing allows you to define and check the properties of codes earlier on in the process, giving the data narrative form and allows for identifying codes to focus your data collection on, and then turning them into categories (Britsoc, 2013). Charmaz (2011) states that memos are initial analyses of the codes and the ideas developed through comparing codes, looking for the emergence of analytic categories that fit with and help to understand the data. I used the memo function built into NVivo to start writing narrative descriptions of what each code meant and how the data related to them. My memos became increasingly more narrative and analytic (Britsoc, 2013), with a view to developing emerging analytic categories, until they resolve into a theoretical understanding that is grounded in the data collected (Charmaz, 2011).

I read through the remaining data and began writing memos within NVivo, which allows linking memos to files and coded data, and coded the memos too, to help with organisation. I worked through the data, as organised under each node heading, code-by-code, writing down my thoughts and pasting in examples of data that were directly relevant. I found myself cross-referencing memos often and eventually grouped the memos under thematic headings, such as *Places Where Learning Communities Take Place* and *Barriers to Learning* (Appendix 10). Here is an extract from one of the memos written in NVivo:

Learners noted that they had developed communication skills through the work they had done specifically on the Communication in Practice module, but also noted that these skills became especially important during COVID-19 ...

They also learned specific team working skills, as a member of the faculty suggested that when given a research task, the learners allocate jobs to each other for the sake of

efficiency. But she also noted that they were not then coming together again to consult on the end product, leaving that task to a designated member of the team. (Anwar, Memo, July 2021)

When I was finished there was some coded data grouped under '*teacher toolkit*' that I had decided did not directly contribute to the study so I cut it and saved it for a future study. The *Project Map* function in NVivo helped me to map out a structure for the themed memos (Appendix 11).

#### 4.3.6. Events and Rituals

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) note the importance of using analysis to identify routine activities and rituals of the community being studied. Routine relates to daily activities, normal behaviour patterns, problems, and solutions. Analysis of routines may also reveal ritualised behaviours too, for example, 'It helps to maintain and deepen the rapport when the lecturer makes a regular effort at nurturing the bonds between the learners. This is often done at the beginning of each session and especially when the learners have been apart for a week or two due to holidays' (Anwar, Memo, July 2021). When done enough times, it takes on the trappings of a ritual and of self-consciousness of the activity becoming formulaic amongst the members of that community (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). One of the issues in my research was that the normal routines and rituals that take place in the College were disrupted by the global COVID-19 pandemic, restricting community activities through the necessity of social distancing and the move to online learning for most of the academic year. However, this led to development of new routines and rituals, as noted in the following memo:

Other strategies include creating opportunities for the learners to interact both as a formal part of the lesson, but also time and space for informal conversations during breaks and at the end of the session. (Anwar, Memo, July 2021)

COVID-19 was a major event in its entirety, however, each lockdown and the gradual lifting of restrictions seemed like key events too in disrupting the 'normal' or the 'new normal'.

Key events provide a focus within an ethnography for analysis, which Fetterman (2010, p.102) writes, 'becomes a metaphor for the culture'. Events and unexpected occurrences also have the effect of bringing into contrast the regular routines and rituals and the boundaries of what is considered normal (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The idea of what was considered normal often came from reflections made by my participants. For example, students reminiscing about the luxury of being able to browse for books in the library and walking away with a big stack of

books. Or lecturers talking about how students used to sit out on the grass together to study and have lunch. A fourth factor in observing social actors within the setting is the rules, both formal and informal, that exist and guide the actions of the social actors, and how they interpret them in different situations (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). In my setting, there are the normal rules of college, for instance be punctual and attend all sessions. Staff would come in early, make a coffee and prepare for their lessons either in the classroom or in a shared office. Students would come and either congregate at the smoking shelter or in the dining area, before making their way to lessons. During breaks and research activities, they would move along the corridors together, go buy coffee from the refectory, play pool in the student recreation area or head over to the library. During lunch times again the students would make use of all the facilities. On the days that they had no lessons they would come in for study sessions in the library, the study zone or in the HE Study Room. These normal patterns of behaviour changed when the new rules around social distancing came into effect and both students and lecturers had to learn the etiquettes of online learning and deal with a whole new set of problems:

Aside from anxieties around using technologies, a number of adult students have noted that technology creates a barrier to learning for them. This includes trouble logging in and joining online classes, software crashes, loss of connectivity for either the learner or the lecturer. They note that learning online means they can't just bounce ideas off each other the way they are used to doing in the classroom. (Anwar, Memo, July 2021)

The disruptive events of the pandemic threw the previous ways of behaving into stark contrast. Activities that we took for granted, such as discussing a lesson over a coffee or taking part in a study session in the study zone or even browsing for books, were no longer feasible. Learners were no longer able to sit together in social areas or even in the classroom, had no access to recreational areas, and were not provided any communal activities. These were all significant learning communities' activities that I had hoped to observe but were now proscribed due to the pandemic. Instead of the above activities, I took the opportunity to study a series of unique events, two naturally occurring learning communities interacting in person and online during a global pandemic, coming to terms with a new way of thinking and being. This was reflected in the data, where students developed a new set of skills to make the best of their situation.

They acknowledge that being forced to learn from home has meant that they have grown used to working independently and not relying as much on each other and on faculty members. (Anwar, Memo, October, 2021)

#### 4.3.7. Themes

A number of themes emerged from the process of organising and reorganising the data, first into hierarchies in which the codes were grouped under overarching headings, such as Online Learning, Learning Community and Added Value (See Appendix 7), and then reordered in NVivo into parent and child nodes (Appendix 9). For example, Online Learning was the parent node, and the child nodes were cameras, chat-box, cross-chat, breakout rooms, *etcetera*. This helped me write more descriptive memos in NVivo, for example:

A number of students had issues with older laptops that were either missing a camera or a working microphone, which acts as a barrier to them fully engaging with online learning. A large number of learners in the Access group do not even turn their cameras on at all during lessons. This seems to be a common experience related by other faculty members too as it has dominated staff lounge conversations about online learning. (Anwar, Memo, July 2021)

The next step was to copy the memos into Word, based on the themed structure developed in NVivo and then to reread, append and amend as required (See Appendix 10). During this stage I identified which emerging themes were most important to the study based upon my initial research questions. I merged some of the earlier headings, such as COVID-19 into Barriers to Learning, and removed anything that was not directly relevant to the study, as noted earlier. I then considered what the narrative for the findings would look like, allowing my initial research questions to provide some structure. Learning Community was the overarching focus of this study and in my mind, all the other themes were subordinate to that focus. The next level of the hierarchy was 'Places where learning communities happen', 'Added-Value' and 'Membership', as most of the other themes sat comfortably under the former, whereas the latter two were important enough to my initial research questions to be considered near the top level of the hierarchy (See Appendix 11).

Once the themes had been fully realised and organised into an overarching narrative, the final step was to write-up the analysis of the data and begin writing my dissertation. Braun and Clarke (2006, p.93) advise that the analysis must provide 'a concise, coherent, logical, non-repetitive and interesting account of the story that the data tells'. I read through the document several times and eliminated any repetition of data and ideas. The result of this endeavour follows in the next chapter.

#### 4.4. Conclusion

The data analysis was an iterative process that often followed immediately after each piece of data was collected. NVivo software was used to speed up the process of organising and

structuring the data. Familiarisation with the data was achieved through transcription and reading through the data several times whilst coding, memoing and organising the data into themes. These included high level themes: Learning Community, Places where learning communities happen, added value and membership, and sub-themes: Barriers to Learning, Peripheral Participation, Online Learning, Roles, Rapport, and Anxiety. In the next chapter I will present the data organised according to my research questions.

## 5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In the previous chapter I highlighted the process of data collection and analysis and noted the themes that had been drawn from the data itself. In this chapter, I explore and discuss the findings of this study by mapping the findings to my original research questions. I will discuss my findings with reference to the existing literature, specifically where my study may contribute in advancing the understanding of learning communities. The chapter is organised in line with the research questions, which are below:

1. What form do learning communities take in the adult campus of the College?
2. What value do learning communities add to the learners?
3. What role do the different members of a learning community play in providing added value?

The key findings have been nested under these three research questions. Each finding will be explored in light of my data, and then followed by discussion.

### 5.1 What form do learning communities take in the adult campus of the College?

5.1.1. Finding 1: A learning community is a group of three or more students that have come together for the purpose of learning, with a shared goal of completing their course of study.

This finding relates to the definition I suggested in my introduction of what a learning community is, and how it was borne out by my observations and the contributions of my participants. The core purpose of learning communities is similar to ZPD, to enable learners to achieve something with help that they cannot achieve by themselves. In the following example, a student MKO aids another learner by scaffolding how to perform the task better:

‘CI notes she needs to reference a couple of things that she's written down. PE goes over to CI and coaches her on how she could perhaps rephrase a reading and reassures her that she's on the right lines.’ (Anwar, Memo, October 2020)

But whilst ZPD may be the core principle that explains why learning communities work, ZPD does not necessitate a community. A learning community has to go further and provide support, motivation and mutual development.

CU: In terms of ... I think they create their own little ones, but you might end up with a couple of students that are left out. You know, like if they don't have their own little creative voice, if their bonds are quite strong within the group then you probably see ... (Faculty Focus Group, May 2021)

L1: Yeah, there's definitely like ... T and M come in every single Monday and Tuesday together to work together 'cause they just like it more and it makes him feel like more like they're at College. (Faculty Focus Group, May 2021)

So, whilst a pair of learners may be able to aid each other as MKOs, they need a third person to start developing a community. In my study, learning communities took various forms. On a micro-level, each cluster of learners that interacts repeatedly for a shared learning goal is a learning community. This is important, because learners who are merely living together or interacting for social purposes are not a learning community. In my study, the activities that represented learning communities included group work in the classroom, study sessions and even informal discussions outside of class, providing it relates to their course. At a macro-level, each class could be described as a learning community that includes the lecturers and the students. They work together to explore concepts, drawing on personal opinions and experiences to enrich the discussions, and debate to gain a better understanding.

### ***Discussion***

Vygotsky's (1978, p.38) description of ZPD as 'the distance between the actual development level as determined by the independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem-solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers', is an apt description of how learning communities work at their most fundamental level. Learners develop their knowledge and skills more efficiently by using each other and their tutors as a resource. Brown's (1994) description of multiple zones of proximal development happening in a classroom is an elegant way of describing what this may look like at a classroom level, with each student at a different point in their learning and understanding, with enough overlap with the ZPD of other students that a tutor can provide shared instruction to the class. Essentially, a learning community is multiple ZPDs that interact and overlap with each other. More knowledgeable peers and instructors provide scaffolded support to aid in understanding difficult concepts that may not be achievable through self-study, as illustrated by the example from my data, in which one learner offers guidance to another on how to paraphrase, by providing a sequence of steps for the other learner to follow (Bruner, 1997). This is different from how Hedgaard's (1998) Double-Move differentiates between a teacher providing initial guidance to the learner and deploying a peer as an MKO to provide an appropriate level of support. In my observations, the learners deployed themselves as MKOs in their learning community, without instruction from the tutor.

Membership of the learning communities seems to occur at different levels though none of the literature on community states a minimum or maximum number of participants (Cross, 1998;

Benjamin, 2015; Fink and Inkelas, 2015). Rovai et al. (2004) state that school and class level learning communities are separate but related concepts. Their study found evidence to support the idea that individual learners have distinctive connections with both the school and their class communities, both at a social and learning community level. Watkins (2005) notes that classrooms do not exist as islands but are part of a school community. These school level communities evoke a sense of belonging to the school and membership, meaning a connection with other learners at the same school. However, during the pandemic, I was unable to observe a school level community interaction. Therefore, in my study, the cohort is the largest unit of community and observable learning communities took place at a class level. At a class level, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) suggest that clusters of students are easier to conceive of as individual learning communities. There are also some learners on the periphery who only engage with the others in formal group work and tend to be part of cliques of two or more close friends. I also observed this phenomenon, but occasionally even these pairs and individuals still interacted with other learners in their class group. Bauman (2001) suggests that membership is how we recognise the existence of a community. In my study there was no formal opt-in to become a member of the community, which contrasts with previous studies where there is an opt-in point (Rima et al., 2019, Weiss et al, 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). After the initial induction activities and icebreakers, the BA CSC community formed naturally around the learners' repeated interactions and shared experiences inside and outside of class. The class level learning communities are nurtured to some degree by the tutors through regular conversations at the beginning or ending of classes that have a rapport building effect, as well as group work and class discussions. These interactions relate well to the principles of developing self-efficacy and opportunities for dialogue espoused by Brown (1994). So, whilst there may be advantages to manufacturing learning communities to meet specific goals, I argue that learning communities can develop without direct intervention from faculty members. The induction and orientation process (Chrysikos and Catterall, 2020), and ice-breakers (Danett et al., 2021) do, however, speed up the process.

#### 5.1.2. Finding 2: Learning communities can develop regardless of faculty intent and instigation

There was a consensus amongst the learners and the faculty members on learning communities taking place whenever learning was happening in a group situation, regardless of whether it was a formal taught session or an informal study session. A point of disagreement during the focus groups was whether a teacher's presence was required for an interaction to be considered a learning community activity and whether the community needed to be physically present on campus, demonstrating the difference in the experience of learning communities between the

BA CSC students and the Access to HE students: '... isn't learning community not to do [with] like ... teachers and things?' (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021).

Within my own study, I observed lecturers engaging learners in conversations following a video, a quiz, or a news article, as well as setting tasks for breakout sessions. The first of the following two examples from observations of the BA CSC online classes is on the use of discussion, and the second is an example of allowing students to use the online platform to continue discussions after the formal session is over. Time for interactions before, during and after sessions is like oxygen for the community to connect and share ideas, without which learning communities may become ineffective.

El shared a video with the learners and then allowed them some time to share their thoughts. ME and SM engaged with CI on discussing the video and challenged some of what the presenter had said in it. IG also joined the conversation to give her opinion and shared her personal experiences. The conversation flowed well and didn't end when a couple of faculty members joined the session to observe El. (Anwar, Memo, Jan 2021)

After El leaves the session, three students remain in the room and discuss the session and the assignment. The learners agreed to a follow up call to look at the assignment in more detail and then left the room. (Anwar, Memo, Jan 2021)

It is interesting that the BA CSC students, who had already been together over the previous year, believed that a teacher was not necessary for learners to interact as a learning community, whereas the Access to HE students, who had spent most of the course online, felt that a teacher's presence was essential. This would suggest that ongoing in-person interaction is important for learning communities to gain a sense of agency. Interestingly, faculty members also disagreed on whether a tutor is always needed for a learning community. LI, an Access to HE lecturer, noted that whilst a teacher can play a role in supporting the development of learning communities, the strongest communities tended to take charge of their own learning and support each other beyond the classroom. As LI notes, 'I think, to me it's more a community if it does happen, kind of spontaneously' (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021). This would suggest that a teacher may aid in starting a learning community but is not essential to their continued existence. All faculty members acknowledged the role that the lecturer plays in initially bringing the community together for the first time and nurturing rapport between the learners and with the teacher, as LI notes, 'if you don't put the groundwork in them getting them to know each other then, then they don't' (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021).

## ***Discussion***

The literature seems to suggest that learning communities can be set up and deployed at the beginning of the year by the faculty (Rima et al., 2019; Fink and Inkelas, 2015; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), however the issue with this is that the sense of fellowship and belonging that is key to maintaining community (Bruhn, 2011), does not develop straight away. Rovai (2002) notes that for learners to develop that level of trust and care for each other they must have some meaningful interactions with each other, common expectations and shared goals. It could be argued that the latter two qualities were present in first year students, however the meaningful interactions were missing. Community develops over time with or without the intervention of the faculty. Faculty members can speed up the process through the use of icebreakers and opportunities to interact to aid in the building of rapport. Rapport helps encourage better interactions with tutors (Zhao and Kuh, 2004) and develops a level of trust and comfort with each other and reassurance that they can safely share their thoughts without being judged.

This groundwork of introductions, icebreakers and group agreements is different from the purposeful development of a learning community as noted in other studies (Rima et al., 2019; Fink and Inkelas, 2015; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), as the aim of these activities is to create a cohesive environment for group work and discussions in the classroom. Perhaps the model purported by Rima et al. (2019) and others function better in setting up self-sufficient learning communities, however my study shows that learning communities will develop regardless of whether there have been purposeful interventions from the teaching staff or not, as noted in the earlier quote from my focus group data.

To facilitate learning on a programme of study someone must design, structure, and produce content for the learners, as well as assess learners progress towards achieving learning goals (Moore, 2010). Bassani (2011) suggests a few strategies to nurture learning communities include planning opportunities for the learners to interact as a formal part of the lesson, but also providing time and space for informal conversations during breaks and at the end of the session. Allowing room for learners to air their opinions can lead to them developing confidence in their peer-to-peer interactions.

5.1.3. Finding 3: Rapport is an essential component of an effective learning community  
Rapport is something that has emerged from the data as being far more important an element for learning communities than previous literature has suggested. Rapport is the close bond between learners and their tutors that provides a comfortable and safe environment (Danett et

al., 2021). I first used the term in my observations to describe how lecturers had attempted to re-establish the bond with their learners after a half-term break, as I found it interesting that the lecturer felt a need to reconnect with the learners on a personal level, for example:

This is the first class after the Christmas holidays, so it's interesting that LI is rebuilding the rapport with the learners. The conversation turns to issues regarding access to equipment, especially as they may have to share with children forced to learn from home due to COVID-19. LI starts the lesson with an ice-breaker on what is the most exciting thing that happened over the break, and invites them to comment via the chat box. (Anwar, Memos, January 2021)

However, I did not seize on the importance of rapport until much later during the faculty focus group, in an exchange between two Access to HE lecturers, LI and CU (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021):

CU: What I meant is like, initially, when you, when you first get a new class then they don't know each other, do they? So I think...

LI: Yeah.

CU: It's a responsibility on the tutor to build that rapport until like... try to help them like... not helping.

LI: Oh, yeah.

CU: You know like ...

LI: Like I'm saying, so if you, if you weren't there in the first place to bring them together and do the activities to get them meshing then they probably wouldn't form those communities.

CU: Yeah, I agree with that, Yeah.

This struck me as being significant and led me to ask a follow-up question on how important they believed rapport building to be in the nurturing of learning communities.

LI: Yeah, if you don't put the ground work in then getting them to know each other then, then they don't. Unless they're adults, because adults that, I think it just happens a bit more spontaneously where they kind of sit and go, 'So where are you from' and stuff, but I think the young ones don't do that, so I think you've got to put a lot of work in at this time. Building rapport for, for yourself as a teacher, to like make the teachings easier

but also so it fosters those relationships between them. Yeah, I think it's really important.

CU: It's their whole experience of the course, really. Like, comes down to rapport and I personally I think that is it's up there with the most important thing really. So, like you develop rapport with learners, also them having a good rapport with one another, and I don't like to see any learner left out, or you know without friends and not being able to participate in Group activities it's just essential, isn't it?

(Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

LI generalises that adults are better at forming communities than teenagers, which contradicts what she has previously said about the need for a lecturer to initiate a learning community. However, my own experiences of teaching adults suggest that an openness to connect with others varies from learner to learner, adult or otherwise.

According to the participating lecturers, the seeds for rapport begin with the learners' first day in college together, through orientation, introductions and icebreakers:

CU: They actually ... I suppose they start forming that community within the classroom first and then after that kind of friendships that they build, they kind of take that elsewhere as well. (Anwar, Lecturers Focus Group, April 2021)

Faculty members agree that it is up to the tutor to start encouraging students to come together and form communities. This is evident from the Access to HE students, who spent the first two weeks of their course learning online, before meeting only half of the cohort on the third week.

LI: I mean I think they have bonded really well, the ones that have remained, but I feel like it took a lot longer for them to start to use each other's resources and stuff than it normally would because they didn't have that close contact. (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

CU also noted that some of her 16-19 years old social sciences students had struggled too in online classes, sharing that it took them several months to develop bonds that normally come together in a matter of weeks. CU suggests that she did not consider icebreakers with this group as they were mostly online. In retrospect, she believes that this was the wrong decision:

... in the past I didn't see Ice Breakers as that much... you know... I didn't see the relevance and importance in Ice Breakers and all that kind of stuff. This year has taught me a big lesson, and that is how important it is for us as tutors to help them to start and feel comfortable with one another and kind of make friends and like them ... (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

LI agrees: 'I think to have them doing stuff together as a group from the beginning is really important'. BC, one of the Access students notes: 'It was something to get used to. I thought it would be a lot more closer, like a community if we were in every week, so being online kind of hindered that' (Anwar, Access Focus Group, April 2021). This suggests that at least one student was expecting college life to involve some form of community. Not being able to interact in-person more often has coloured her perception of her community. This was also reflected in my observations as several months into their course the Access students were still very reserved in how they engaged with each other during online lessons; not speaking directly with each other (which I have coded as cross-talk), not directing their chats to each other (which I coded as cross-chat), and not even 'liking' or remarking on each other's written comments.

In regards to the inter-group relationships in the Access to HE class, LI notes further:

I mean, I think they have bonded really well, the ones that have remained, but I feel like it took a lot longer for them to start to use each other's resources and stuff than it normally would because they didn't have that close contact. (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

This interaction led me to revisit my data and analyse it for mention or descriptions of rapport building. One other thing I noted at this stage was the suggestion that rapport is a motivating factor for learners to stay on track with their studies and see them through to the end. Indeed, CU went as far as noting that the lack of rapport was a contributor to student attrition.

My data would also suggest that shared experiences such as days out and residential visits can also serve in strengthening rapport, as these excursions promote physical motion, emotion and 'aliveness' amongst learners whilst interacting with peers (Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson, 2012). The BA CSC students often discussed a pre-pandemic educational trip to Poland and their experiences there. However, I was unable to observe any such shared experiences due to restrictions on social movement.

LI also observed that the more mentally taxing and time demanding the course is, the stronger the bond between the students will be. She felt this was particularly relevant in relation to her PGCE students. As LI states:

Because with PGCE students, obviously going through a shared experience that is really quite intense, they tend to form really very strong bonds and I don't think the online stuff is necessarily so much of a barrier because I'm still doing what I would do in the classroom and put them in groups to do activities and make sure we're constantly changing the groups and things like that. (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

My data suggests that a strong rapport served the BA CSC students well, who had already been together for a foundation year, especially when all learning moved online for the best part of the academic year. The Access students struggled to form a similar bond until much later in the year, as noted earlier.

### ***Discussion***

Chrysikos and Catterall (2020) propose in their study that inclusion in a learning community is not automatic and requires a process of induction and orientation, meaning that students just being on the same course at the same time will not automatically result in a learning community. I would argue that whilst building rapport requires a sustained effort from both lecturers and students to socialise into a common culture for their class-based learning community, especially when the primary mode of learning is online, that community will still develop, albeit over a longer period of time. I have already discussed this partly in the previous section and will look at it further in terms of online learning a little later in the discussion.

Glazier (2016) shares that the purpose of rapport is to produce harmonious interactions between students and with faculty members and it contributes to student success. To reach a level of rapport conducive for learning communities, Sybing (2019) suggests that students need to feel like they are on a more equal footing with their instructors and are seen as individuals with valid experiences that add value to the understanding of topics, otherwise learners are less likely to volunteer an answer that may come under fire from the teacher or even other students. Fitzgerald and Hooker (2022) add that positive relationship with the lecturers is also important in avoiding feelings of isolation.

Icebreakers were identified in my study as an important step in beginning the process of rapport-building and that not using icebreakers meant learners took much longer to form trusting and comfortable relationships. This correlates with Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson's (2012) suggestion that these initial interactions form the basis for behavioural synchrony and rapport. Another factor is the level of comfort that students feel around each other and their tutors, which depends on factors such as homophily, social support and even humour (Frisby and

Buckner (2017). Anything that the tutors can do to increase this sense of homophily will speed up the process of rapport building. Based on my data, behaviour synchrony only takes place when a good level of rapport is already in place. The Tuesday lunch time workgroup is a good example of behavioural synchrony in that the learners had formed enough of a level of comfort and trust with each other to be able to drop their guard around each other and did not need to explain their behaviour to each other. They would simply state what they were going to do and then do it. So whilst it is possible to deploy a learning community at the beginning of the year and even develop some rapport through icebreaker activities, the learning community will not be effective until they are comfortable in making mistakes around each other. It is only when they have that level of mutual trust that they become efficient in seeing and using each other as a resource. Bruhn (2011) suggests that trust and fellowship are essential elements to developing what Rovai (2002) calls community spirit.

One of the things that I did not get to observe, due to COVID-19 was enrichment activities, days out and residential visits, which would normally be spread out through the year. Vacharkulksemsuk and Fredrickson (2012) suggest that these excursions and enrichments help develop a sense of 'aliveness' and emotion whilst interacting with their peers. Despite this, the BA CSC students brought up their trips together enough during the year to suggest that these outings are an important factor in developing rapport. Indeed, Cadwallader (1981) felt that these outings were crucial to break down individual cliques and to bond the cohort into a learning community bonded over a common cause. Therefore, this would be another area to return to for further study.

#### 5.1.4. Finding 4: Learning communities can take place anywhere that learning is happening, in-person and online

##### **In-person**

Mature students in my study used their classrooms for eating food and doing work in their lunchbreaks, a haven away from the potentially louder, younger students who are more likely to make use of the library, study zones and social areas to interact. EI, a BA CSC lecturer, alludes to this in an observation I made of an online lesson:

After the visitor left the session, EI pointed out that the learners would enjoy the different attitude of the university to lateness, attendance and eating food in the classroom and the other general differences of being treated as an adult as opposed to the college's approach, which treats all students the same, regardless of age. (Anwar, Memo, March 2021)

Gurbutt and Cragg's (2019) suggest that learning spaces have become more adaptable to be more conducive for learning, but also for collaboration and socialising. My data suggests that whilst learning spaces have become more social, traditionally private spaces and public places have also been adapted to be more conducive to learning. There were a few events and activities that the learners could take part in at College. The College used to host an annual Criminology Conference, to which all students in the adult campus were invited to attend. The event was moved online for the past couple of years due to the pandemic. Such events allow learners to engage with other learning communities, with the potential of creating cross-course connections and relationships. Lecturer, CU shares, 'It's like a new ... it is a different community isn't it within that ... their sharing in the same experience? I suppose it redefined a community, but I think it's just a bigger one, isn't it? But everyone's learning', acknowledging that learning communities can operate on multiple levels. CG gave an example of fundraising activities for charity, which provided learners with opportunities to work as a team to arrange promotions and bake sales, as well as liaising with the charity they chose to support. CG believes that these activities, 'make them feel like they've got an identity as a group and they're together in this'. Some of the advantages of being on-campus include being able to work together in-person, to discuss ideas, interact during workshops, being able to work on research projects together and take part in college events. In my data, the students note that when they are with each other in person, it's much easier to ask for help from each other, than when sitting at home. They add that telephoning somebody for help feels more of an imposition and instead they will struggle with the issue alone for hours. The learners often use each other to discuss ideas or ask questions that may or may not be related to their learning. IG explains, 'To understand things a bit more is better as a group, to try and talk about it ...' SM adds, 'It gives opportunity to get other's opinions and views and things, doesn't it and other people's takes on things'. Other locations used for independent and group work include the HE Study Room, which was eventually re-opened for learners to use for independent work but was used for group-based activities in the past. Additionally, the Library and the Study Zone were also used pre-pandemic for group study sessions. When the College reopened, the library books were quarantined, computer banks were interspaced with tape and signs to enforce social distancing, and the study zone had also been designated for independent study instead of group work. I spotted students using a soft seating area on the first floor, which had somehow escaped the social distancing livery of high visibility tape and warning notices. It seems, at least for these students, that the need for community outweighs the potential risks of catching COVID-19.

The participants also identified some places off-campus that they accessed as learning communities; these include places of leisure, the partner University library and organised trips.

A few of the BA CSC students indicated that they spent a significant amount of time together off campus. This included going to a pub and spending some of that time working on assignments or group projects. The learners often visited each other's homes, even during the pandemic after lockdown restrictions had been eased, to work on assignments or just to take part in an online class whilst sharing a physical location but still socially distanced. Prior to the lockdowns, they also made regular visits to the university's library for both independent and group study. ME shared that she missed the tactile sensation and freedom of browsing for books in the library during the pandemic. Finally, day trips and residential trips were also seen as an important part of developing rapport by both the students and the lecturers, as CG notes: 'We might do... trips out, good for bonding. Erm, we might do team-building exercises, so it could be something fun where they have to work together to succeed, and that maybe competitive or not'.

The BA CSC group were a smaller class and have had time to develop as a community and have studied group work and communication theory as part of their course, as noted by a learner during the focus group, 'Yeah, definitely, 'cause it's been a big part of this year, hasn't it? We've done about communication skills; we've obviously done group presentations? So, I think we've all improved, haven't we, in them areas,' (Anwar, BA CSC Focus Group, April 2021). Discussions were inclusive and each member was listened to. The Access students did not have the same opportunities to form community, nor training on effective teamwork, though they had some limited input on communication skills. Discussions were often dominated by a few individuals and there was very little interaction between members of the group until much later in their course. Online learning was not only enhanced by the existence of learning communities but was necessary for communication and collaboration to happen with and without the teacher present, though some of the Access to HE learners may have felt excluded during online sessions. In my study, learning communities existed mainly at a class level and as small groups within the class learning community. Communities form over time and the BA CSC learning community had more time, therefore they were more comfortable with interacting with each other, even online. The learning communities took place mainly online with some interaction in-person too.

LI notes during the focus group that adult learners are better at spotting students on the periphery and at pulling them into the fold, in comparison to younger students who, '... once they've got their group, they're very kind of reluctant to reach out to others'. However, it is important to note that she was referring to in-person interactions, as this was not always the case online, though there are a few instances of students trying to draw their peers into a conversation, for example:

LI gave the students an opportunity to discuss their results as she left the meeting to make some calls. BQ kicked off the discussion by asking what the others had got for the 'mean'. There were a few questions thrown around and, once they had agreed their responses, they went quiet again until LI returned. (Anwar, Memo, April 2021)

### **Online**

A common issue observed by the lecturers in this study was that learners were unwilling or unable to switch on their cameras or their microphones. This is despite all the lecturers reminding the learners at the beginning of each session to turn on their cameras so that their attendance can be verified, and safeguarding staff can check to see that they are safe at home during the lockdowns. LI shared that more of the 16–19-year-old learners switch on their cameras, however it is common to find that they have either tilted the camera so that only their foreheads or the ceiling is visible. Adult learners will either have the camera on properly or have it switched off. A few adult learners lacked a device with a working camera or microphone. This meant they were only able to participate through the chat box function. The College resolved this issue eventually by providing those learners with laptops to use at home. The students with their cameras on were the most likely to have their microphones on, and to interact and speak during online sessions. They were also the most likely to instigate conversations during breakout sessions, which I will look at in more detail later in this section. Students who avoid turning on their camera and microphone can still communicate with the lecturer and other learners using the chat box. The BA CSC group all used their cameras and microphones and were more engaged with the session than the Access students. Learners who do not turn on their cameras show up as initials on place-cards. When the lecturer shares their screen, the students' video feed gets pushed to the bottom of the screen, prioritising students who have their cameras on and are responding to questions using their microphones. Place-cards usually get relegated into a consolidated stack with a number below it to indicate how many other participants are in the meeting. This means that instead of one or two reluctant participants, you have many students disappearing to the periphery. The problem is compounded when students are placed in breakout rooms and these place-card students are not engaging with the others, because they are 'ghosting', meaning they are logged on but are otherwise absent.

The chat box function in Teams and on Zoom allows for some bilateral communications to take place during classes and gives students who lack confidence a say in the conversation too. The chat box is represented by a speech bubble on the toolbar and once activated, shows the name of each person commenting in a sidebar. The chat box also allows for responding to comments with a small number of emojis or text. In my study, the learners sometimes wrote down a

question in the chat to avoid interrupting the teacher, though there is also a *raise hand* function built into Teams. However, I noted that whilst lecturers were in full-screen present mode, they were unable to see questions posted in the chat. This then places the students who do not have access to a microphone or are unwilling to use one at a disadvantage within the community. Microsoft has recently introduced new presentation modes that try to remedy this situation.

Other uses of the chat box include getting learners to provide feedback, or a definition for terms, or to take part in a silent debate. I observed lecturers respond to comments with an emoji (usually a thumbs up) or highlight them by reading them out. This is useful for getting the other students to pay attention to what someone has written and thereby engaging them too. However, I have also observed some lecturers read out all the comments, rather than asking the learners to read out what they have shared, which is a missed opportunity to promote interaction. One innovative use of the chat box was to generate raw data for analysis during a session on how to do research. Another use noted in my observations was learners sharing their notes and links to the sites that they had looked at. However, the potential for interaction was limited by the willingness of the learners to engage in Cross-chat or Crosstalk. I use the term cross-chat to mean when students communicate with each other during the lesson using the chat box. Similarly, crosstalk refers to when the students are speaking directly with each other via their microphones, rather than through their teacher. For example:

Other students turned on their mics at the end of each presentation to offer congratulations and ask follow-up questions. This is the most crosstalk I have seen between this group of students and particularly important because the conversations were supportive and instructive, especially during questions and answers. Each presenter was also allocated at least two peer assessors. (Anwar, Memo, April 2021)

One of the issues observed during an Access to HE class was that students rarely communicated with each other directly through cross-chat or crosstalk. Instead, students prefer to direct their communications to the lecturer as in the following example:

CG instructs the learners to use the chat box for a recap exercise, but then afterwards ask them to share some of their recap questions for the others to answer. There's a good amount of interaction, but with most of the subject related conversations being channelled through the lecturer, as opposed to directing them to each other. (Anwar, Memos, August 2021)

This relates to what I noted at the beginning of this chapter, regarding the Access to HE students' belief that the lecturer is the lynchpin for their community. Sybing (2019) offers a potential explanation for this over-reliance on the teacher, suggesting that it is down to the power dynamic between learners and teachers.

Another issue that I observed is that when the lecturer invites learners to post a response in the chat, the sheer volume and speed of the responses often means that the students cannot keep up and therefore do not read each other's comments. The teachers acknowledged this issue during their focus group. I suggested that lecturers should encourage them to read each other's comments and at the very least use the 'thumbs up' emoji to show that they like or agree with a comment.

Whilst using the chat box is not as engaging as speaking directly via microphone and camera, it does offer a way for less confident students to participate. Furthermore, it can be used alongside microphones to create opportunities for different types of interactions, making it a useful tool for engaging whole learning communities in theory. In practice, interactions can be haphazard as there is a likely risk that a comment will be missed because the lecturer is in the full flow of teaching, or it has been lost in a stream of simultaneous communication.

Breakout rooms are another tool for creating opportunities for learning communities to interact during online classes. Initially, Teams did not have a Breakout Rooms function, however, this feature was added a little later in the year. This allows for the lecturer to place learners into multiple virtual rooms. The lecturer can either allocate rooms randomly or select where to place each learner. Unfortunately, the faculty members who I observed had not worked out how to record breakout rooms, so I was unable to observe them directly. However, discussions after the breakout sessions filled in some of the gaps of what the learners had talked about as noted in this journal entry:

The learners gave feedback after they returned into the main room. One person from each group provided responses to the quiz questions, indicating that the group had already discussed their answers and then perhaps agreed who would provide the feedback. (Anwar, memo, August 2021)

One of the issues with breakout rooms is that unless the lecturer visits each room, they cannot know for sure if all the learners are engaging. Once, I observed a learner returning to the main room in frustration at the lack of interaction in her breakout room.

Students have been given a task and put into breakout rooms. One learner (BQ), returns to the main room. CU asks if she's been kicked out. BQ notes that nobody talks in the group with only one or two carrying the whole group. (Anwar, memo, February 2021)

However, having some form of feedback or product from the breakout room, such as a PowerPoint, leaflet, or poster or individual feedback, aided in getting more learners to engage in breakout sessions, as in the following example:

A group activity took place early on to identify different types of female killers. The groups were asked to create a leaflet on their topic. During feedback, four students had their cameras on. The students took it in turns to give their feedback, even though they worked in groups. The breakout rooms weren't recorded but group three detailed some of the division of labour on the task. (Anwar, Memos, March 2021)

### ***Discussion***

Primarily, studies of learning communities have focussed on either on-campus communities, for example, Rima et al., (2019) and Weiss et al., (2015), or on online communities, like Bassani (2011), Chen et al., (2009) and McLoughlin (2002). My data suggest that learning communities take place wherever learning happens, on-campus, as suggested by previous studies (Fink and Inkelas, 2015; Rima et al., 2019, Weiss et al, 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), but also off-campus. Being on-campus allows for more opportunities for interaction (Gurbutt and Cragg, 2019), however being online allows for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Chen et al., 2009; Fleck, 2012).

### **In-person**

Gurbutt and Cragg (2019) suggest learning spaces can be intentionally designed to encourage learning and social interaction and give commuting students reasons to stay on campus beyond class times. Fleck (2012) notes that advances in technology and wireless connectivity have enabled learning communities to become more dispersed, transforming social spaces and homes into extensions of the classroom. Knowledge can be accessed anywhere, at any time, changing our perception of the educational institute as a place that facilitates learning rather than just a knowledge transfer site.

Many of the on-campus learning communities that I had observed or were noted by students and faculty members, transpired in the classroom, both in and out of lessons. This study took place during the global pandemic and, therefore, it may not fully represent what learning

communities looked like pre-pandemic in the College, or even what they may become post-pandemic. Access to social areas and study zones was restricted for social distancing purposes making it difficult for study groups to interact. However, the faculty members in my study believe that the classroom is seen by adult students as a familiar place that is away from the distraction of other students, music, and ambient noise. The literature on classroom perception tends to focus on factors such as relationships between learners and the administration of a course (Johnson, 1996), the student-faculty relationships (Kealoha, 2006), or task-orientation and personal attainment (O' Fathaigh, 1997). I was unable to locate research on how adult students utilise classrooms in a campus shared with younger students. This is perhaps an area for future research.

In describing what learning communities looked like pre-pandemic, faculty members in my study noted that as well as making use of the library and the HE Study Room, they had witnessed learners sitting outside on the grass revising and studying together or using the picnic tables dotted around the grounds of the adult campus. However, many formal learning community activities, such as discussions, group work and research tasks take place in the classroom. Firmin et al. (2012, p.6-7) quote one of their study participants 'I wouldn't say it made the course work easier, but it was nice just to be able to bounce ideas off of each other or remind each other of when things are due, or to work together on projects', and they note that this was a typical sentiment amongst their other participants. This was also noted by both groups of student participants in my study.

Hills and Eraso (2021) did a study on non-adherence to social distancing rules and found that there was no significant demographic pattern in behaviour. However, they did suggest that those who had a lower vulnerability to COVID-19 were more likely to have a lower intention rate of adherence to social distancing rules, less social responsibility and having a higher self-interest. Those who were clinically vulnerable were more likely to adhere to social distancing rules. Another factor in non-adherence could be feelings of loneliness, as Mattias et al. (2020) remark that loneliness and isolation during pandemics can have a detrimental effect on mental and physical health and could possibly result in negative long-term health consequences. Furthermore, the transition from online learning to in-person learning at the end of the first lockdown happened in stages and not everyone was comfortable with it, which may have caused further disruption to learning, much in the same way as switching from in-person to online had caused disruption (Becker et al., 2022).

Communal activities such as conferences, celebrations and fundraising provide opportunities for collective action and social consciousness (Delanty, 2020), and aid in the development of mutual

trust and social capital (Bruhn, 2011). Events such as these also create opportunities for learners to apply theoretical learning in more concrete situations (Hedegaard, 1998).

Co-location, with learners together in-person, both on and off-campus, offers a more diverse range of opportunities for potential collaborations than online learning. However, online learning was thrust on these communities by the situation and was not their elected mode of study, whereas prior to COVID-19, mostly people who had elected to do so studied online (Bryceson, 2005). Nevertheless, online learning has its own range of tools to facilitate learning communities and physical co-location may even be seen as a distraction if the purpose of learning is to memorise information, however, if the intent is to go beyond surface learning, then co-location can aid in better understanding through discussion (Senior and Howard, 2014).

### **Online**

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Online Learning became the main learning environment for my participants. This was primarily through the video meeting platform Microsoft Teams, which was used for live classes and the sharing of session PowerPoints and any additional reading. Palloff et al. (2001) recommend meeting learners in person to develop cohesion before moving online, however, due to the pandemic the Access to HE students only met each other every third week, therefore their initial interactions were online. I have already discussed the impact of this on rapport development earlier in this chapter. McLoughlin (2002) suggests that effective scaffolding of learning is the same regardless of whether the learners are online or in a classroom, the purpose being the reduction of the risk of failure. Bryceson (2005) notes that infrequent face-to-face contact frustrates the process of providing scaffolding as the instructor is unable to form a rapport with the students when they are talking to placeholders instead of seeing them live, either in person or online.

I have previously highlighted in my methodology chapter that the study had to be adapted due to the switch to online learning early in the academic year due to the ongoing pandemic. The College mandated the use of Microsoft Teams and for sessions to be recorded for the purpose of safeguarding. I have also discussed in the Data Collection and Analysis chapter how I made use of these recordings and the features of Microsoft Teams and Microsoft Streams. What is of interest here is how online learning was used to maintain and nurture the learning communities in my study.

There are several tools within the Teams online learning environment that can aid in facilitating interactions, including Camera and Microphone, the Chat Box and Breakout Rooms. Cameras and microphones are the main tool for interaction during online meetings, allowing all participants to see each other and communicate. Chen et al. (2009) found that higher self-

efficacy in using web-based software improves engagement with online learning, however, when learners switched to online learning during COVID-19 they were only provided basic instructions on the functionalities of Teams and Zoom. Pellas (2014) also suggests that computer self-efficacy and metacognitive self-regulation are significant factors in engaging with online learning.

Chen et al. (2009) suggest that social ties between individuals are an important factor in motivating individuals to engage fully whilst using an online platform. Amongst the Access students, those who were more forthcoming during discussions and responding to questions both online and in-person also tended to be the ones who had their cameras and microphones switched on. It could be that the more engaged learners have more confidence and self-esteem, as suggested by Pellas (2014) who found that self-esteem has a direct effect on cognitive engagement in online learning, without ruling out other factors such as technical self-efficacy. My data would indicate that rapport with the teacher and with other students is also a significant factor.

Cooperation between the learners should have been forged at the outset through icebreakers to make them see each other as having a shared goal. Johnson et al. (1998) suggest that this is a step in predicating success on cooperation. Then, when the lecturers send learners into breakout rooms, they should make them all accountable by informing them that each member of the group will have to share what they have learned from the interaction. Johnson et al. (1998) note that making learners accountable also gives them a sense of being included and that their contribution is appreciated. Next, the students should be encouraged to be supportive of each other and ensure they are skilled enough in communication and conflict management to deal with differences of opinions, and finally, ensure that they understand group processes. Chen et al. (2009) note social ties between members of the community aid in the flow of information and resources on online platforms.

The literature alludes to the lack of engagement during online sessions as potentially due to the lack of face-to-face interaction with tutors and peers and frustration with the medium for interaction (Grandzol and Grandzol, 2010). Bassani (2011) typifies these modalities as no interaction and interaction but no involvement. Again, this relates back to the importance of developing rapport early in the course, as it is a significant element in helping learners feel comfortable with each other and grants them an opportunity to get to know each other on a one-to-one level, which is difficult to do in a general online classroom. The sooner that happens, the sooner they can start using each other as a resource.

Adults are a lot more flexible in who they work with. A number of writers (Özdemir et al., 2021; Gerson and Nielson, 2014; Antonio, 2001) suggest the maturation process plays a big part in

this. Specifically, the individual differences and contexts in the socialisation process makes certain individuals more open to accepting individuals from outgroups, meaning people who are not currently members of the group. For instance, their exposure level to diversity through early friendships, the ethnic composition of their classrooms and the social climate created by their teachers and lecturers will impact how willing they are to engage with diversity. The main difference between adolescent students and adult students is that adult students have had more time to mature and develop prosocial skills, though younger students are more likely to have experienced diversity in their friendships and classrooms than older students (Gerson and Nielson, 2014). Another factor to consider is that the participants in my study mostly identify as female, and females have been found to be more tolerant of outgroups than males (Özdemir et al., 2021).

Palloff et al. (2001) provide a series of indicators to check if online learners are working as a learning community: 1) active participation, 2) sharing of resources amongst learners, 3) collaborative learning is happening, 4) social construction of knowledge by agreement on the meanings of things, and 5) provision of support and encouragement between learners. In my study, the BA CSC group had their cameras and microphones on most of the time, participated actively in discussions, commented on each other's responses, and were encouraging and supportive of each other inside and outside of class. They stayed in touch with each other throughout the pandemic.

Despite the best efforts of the lecturers in my study, online learning focuses mostly on content delivery, due to the limitations of the medium, which Sybing (2019) suggests places emphasis on the lecturer's knowledge, rather than validating the learner's knowledge, experiences and interests. Much of the literature indicates that most learning community activities take place during structured interactions (Danett et al., 2021; O'Connor and Michaels, 1993; Palincsar and Brown, 1984). In the view of Lenning and Ebbers (1999) and Fink Inkelas (2015), learning communities are designed by the faculty as curricular models or by the institution as residential models, and even in the design of the spaces in which learning happens (Gurbutt and Cragg, 2019). One of the best descriptions of how a formal learning community is structured comes from Shochet et al. (2019), with larger learning communities (whole year cohorts) broken down into smaller learning units. Each unit is made up of around five to eight students and two faculty members, balanced for gender and ethnicity to reflect the diversity of the cohort. However, this is not to say that there is a requirement of intentionality behind the fostering of learning communities. Learning is often structured, but community develops as a result of interactions, experiences and common goals (Bauman, 2001), growing in tandem with the sense of trust and social capital (Bruhn, 2011; Frisby and Buckner, 2017). Also, based on my own data, whilst formal

learning requires planning and structuring, learning communities do not and will develop without lecturers and tutors addressing them directly.

A potential reason for the lack of engagement in online learning could be that learners are only participating at the periphery of the learning community, or perhaps they feel disengaged due to the sessions being online. Wenger (1998) describes peripheral participation as being on the edge of a community because you are either a new entrant, or are still unfamiliar with the culture and language of the community. Active participation and interaction with other members of the community are required in order to become a full member. Grandzol and Grandzol (2010) blame arbitrary participation on frustration with the medium of delivery and finding online learning as less rewarding than face-to-face. Roscoe (2012) suggests that learners have sub-optimal focus levels outside of the classroom, and that learners do not find online learning as engaging as in-person learning. He found that learners are more likely to drop out of online classes too. Glazier (2016) believes it could be down to other factors, such as lower levels of self-regulation, self-management, or environmental distractions, like small children. The latter three writers note that participation and engagement will result in a better experience and less attrition from the course. Reduced attrition is cited by a number of writers as a key benefit of learning communities (Weiss et al., 2015; Rima et al., 2019; Chryssikos and Catterall, 2020), which suggests that a factor in attrition is being excluded from or failing to participate in a learning community.

Mavor and Trayner (2003) suggest that it is not as straightforward as that. They explore the idea that there is a threshold for when someone becomes part of the learning community, however, they highlight that there are moments when an individual may feel like an insider in the community or an outsider depending on whether they felt included in the discussions and whether people were responding to their contributions. When conversations are dominated by a few insiders or the topic is outside a person's field of knowledge or experience, then an individual may feel excluded from the community (Mavor and Trayner, 2003). Therefore, non-participation in discussions in the lessons I observed may have resulted from feelings of being left out of the conversation rather than apathy, which may have resulted from some learners dominating the conversations or from the lack of validation of previous contributions, as suggested by Mavor and Trayner (2003).

According to Johnson et al. (1998), cooperative learning is most effective if there is a pre-existing community. They note that placing students randomly into groups does not result automatically in cooperative learning as they may not understand how to work cooperatively and may default to competitive and individualistic strategies. My own findings suggest that the formation of

learning communities is an important precursor for developing rapport and mutual trust, and for collaborative learning to become effective in the physical classroom, as well as online.

#### 5.1.5. Finding 5: Learning Communities have their own social norms and values and a lifecycle

I found it interesting to observe learning communities coming alive around the disruptions to normal proceedings of online classes. Even the quieter students got involved in discussions when a technical fault occurred or when the lecturer momentarily left the class alone. Interactions of this nature occasionally relate to content or tasks set during class, as in the examples below, but more often are used as opportunities to catch up with each other. I think this is a significant discovery because it suggests that communities need space during formal sessions to develop. As a lecturer, I try to make use of every moment of my sessions to cover content and assess that learning is happening. This could mean overlooking the social needs of learners, especially during COVID-19 when many of the learners only saw each other during class. Palloff et al. (2001) identified this as a potential problem for online learning, as students may instead focus more on developing social ties and less on the learning taking place. However, my study indicates that allowing some opportunities for students to socialise at the beginning of sessions, both online and in-person sessions, may benefit discussions on learning topics too. Shochet et al. (2019) share that developing a sense of community benefits the development of trust and is the basis for collaborative learning. In online sessions, this could be achieved by opening the online room early and encouraging learners to join sooner to give them time to talk. Here are a couple of examples of this from the data:

LI left the group to get on with the task whilst she made some more calls. BQ initiated a conversation on whether they had all (the students) recorded the data correctly. LI returned to respond to the question. LI explained again what that task required, but there were further questions from BQ and UI. LI decided to demonstrate the exercise for the group task, which led to more conversations with LI. (Anwar, Memo, August 2021)

When CU's connection dropped the students became much more animated and began to chat with each other about what to do. One learner (BQ) tried to keep the other learners focused on the task until CU came back in. This suggests that when lecturer/tutor is present the learners believe that they should only talk through the tutor. (Anwar, Memo, July 2021).

Both of these observations are from the Access to HE class with two different tutors (LI and CU). In each example, the lecturer leaves the online session which precipitates the learners to engage

in a conversation with each other. It is likely that had I observed this session live, the learners would have not engaged with each other in this way. What marks these events as even more interesting is that normally during lessons these students hardly ever interact directly with each other. Instead of discussing their queries with each other, this group of students would instead only direct their questions and thoughts at the lecturer. Initially, I thought this was because they lacked confidence in their skillset as learners. Zhao and Kuh (2004) suggest that these perceived weaknesses in their skills as learners can become the impetus for them to begin collaborating and cooperating with their peers, meaning that they are seeking to connect with other learners to address said weaknesses. Initially, I had been concerned that the Access to HE students had been unable to form a learning community because of their reticence during online lessons, but these later observations suggest that this was no longer the case. This learning community developed its own social norms around online learning because of their hybrid experience of Adult Education online and on-campus.

The dynamic of a learning community can become imbalanced when the makeup of the group is changed. This was evident when the two groups of Access students from the same cohort were combined half-way through the academic year. The Access to HE students had most of their classes online, however, every third week they would come on campus for in-person learning. The class was broken up into two groups on campus for the first term to maintain social distancing. But after a few students dropped out of the course during the first term, the two groups were merged in the second semester. No effort was made to help ease the two groups into the merge, perhaps because they were already sharing online classes. There was some initial anxiety amongst the students:

BC: Nerve wracking like when you join the other half of the group and you're all like new people and I will obviously got used ... like got to know them... the other half of the group. It's better being as one. (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021)

However, the two groups combined without any issues. Perhaps being mostly online helped minimise friction between stronger personalities, as noted during the Access to HE focus group:

UI: Yeah, I love the big group that we've got now.

OC: Yeah. But I think we were all quite nervous about swapping over, because obviously we didn't really know them people, so I think it's more of a worry that you don't know them, so you're not gonna fit in. (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021)

Despite the two groups never having met in person, their time online had helped them form an identity around their shared experiences and goals, which Bauman (2011) suggests groups use

to differentiate themselves from other groups. Both the BA CSC students and the Access to HE demonstrated that they could take in new members or merge with another group of learners. TS joined the BA CSC class in its second year together. Initially, she would sit by herself, away from the rest of the class, who had already formed a strong learning community. Within two months, through repeated interactions, she became a full member of the learning community, taking her lunches with the others and sitting with them during class. However, all the student participants noted that they prefer to work with people within their own learning community. Some of the reasons provided by the learners in this regard include comfort, trust, avoiding awkwardness speaking in front of others, being able to ask each other questions and discussing ideas. Even learners who normally only comment in the chat box switched on their microphones to discuss COVID-19 or what they had been watching on television. This may suggest that reticent students merely lack confidence in discussing academic topics where there is a risk of being judged, as noted by this Access to HE student:

UI: It could be awkward, sometimes asking questions in front of people that you don't necessarily know and... So, when you get to know people, I think you latch onto it. Do you know what I mean? 'Coz It's comfortable and ... (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021)

This again highlights the importance of providing learners with instruction and guidance on how to communicate effectively and collaborate with each other (Johnson et al., 1998), as well as giving time for learners to feel more comfortable with each other. The BA CSC students completed a module on communication at the beginning of the first semester, and the Access to HE students had two Study Skills units, which included presentation and interview skills. Whilst these interventions may have contributed to fostering learning communities, this was not intentional, but rather were part of the curriculum for each course. These interventions may have contributed to better interactions, as noted by another Access student:

BC: You feel comfortable to ask some stuff and then also we know each other quite a bit then going up and talk about random things sometimes rather than doing work, like we still end up doing the work at the end like. But yeah, we're still end up chatting a bit [laughs]. (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021)

I asked the BA CSC learning community of six students about how they would handle other students when they move onto the University for the remainder of the course. They all seemed

positive about inviting new members to join them or even merging their group with another one, though they acknowledged that it may be hard at first, as noted in the extract below:

SM: Erm, no, I don't know. I just think it will naturally happen. We've got our little group, but I think we... we are welcoming people. We're not gonna, you know... Have our own little... We were all adults at the end of the day. We're not like children anymore where we have our own little clique.

TS: We need to make our group a bit bigger really, don't we? We're the ones that are gonna look like lonely ... loneliness. 'Cause it's only a few of us, might be bigger group. So, then what we might want to tag onto their team, not the other way around. (Anwar, BA CSC Focus Group, April 2021)

### ***Discussion***

A learning community may seem impermeable from the outside, as alluded to by Cohen (1985) regarding the symbolic boundaries of a community, but it is flexible enough to induct new members or even merge or nest within other larger learning communities (Delanty, 2010). However, the dynamic of the learning community is not as constant as it can be disrupted by new entrants and existing members withdrawing, as the invisible boundaries of a community are permeable (Delanty, 2010; Cohen, 1985). Bryceson (2005) believes frequent contact is essential for developing collaborative and social processes for the purpose of scaffolding learning. Thus, despite struggling to form a cohesive and effective learning community in the first semester, the two halves of the Access to HE groups became one whole and found common cause with each other.

This supports what Stadtfeld et al. (2018) found in their study of student social networks that most students perform academically better when collaborating with peers, especially when they have a good relationship with their collaborators, and particularly so if they are friends before the collaboration. Firmin et al (2012) similarly indicated that familiarity with the members of a learning community encourages better involvement in activities and discussions, and feeling more at ease, which lead to more optimal learning experiences. Senior and Howard (2014) also found that there is a positive correlation between friendship and improved conceptual understanding, but normally these groups tend to be focused on specific objectives and, as also noted by Davies (2009), will likely disband once the objectives have been met.

Etiquette around online interactions is not a new area of study. Scheuemann and Taylor (1997) described 'Netiquette' as a catchall for the various norms around online etiquette, some of

which may now seem outdated, such as avoiding abbreviations and emojis. Heitmayer and Schimmelpfenning (2023) sought to update the concept of netiquette as digital social norms through a series of focus groups. They found that digital interactions encouraged more formal exchanges in comparison to in-person interactions. Participants felt less incentivised to engage in social interactions once the formal purpose of the online meeting had been achieved. Heitmayer and Schimmelpfenning (2023) note that their participants suggested that informal exchanges felt less acceptable in digital settings and there was also the awareness of the presence of a moderator. This is perhaps why the behaviour of the learners in the Access to HE class differed so much from that of the BA CSC class, as the latter had already developed a more trusting relationship with their tutors and each other over the previous years. Their online interactions were built upon existing, offline relationships and there was less of a concern about being moderated by their tutors.

Student progression signals either the natural end of a learning community, as noted by Rima et al. (2019), as is the case for the Access to HE class, or the transfer to a new institution, as is the case with the BA CSC class. Wenger alludes to the 'generational' cycle of learning communities, which suggests that moving on from a learning community is a natural part of the process. Rima et al. (2019) notes that learners who have previously engaged in a learning community are more likely to join another learning community when they progress to the next year, which is likely to occur with the BA CSC students, depending on their modular choices at the University. Christie et al. (2014) carried out a longitudinal study on the effects of transitions for learners progressing from further education to university, interviewing them over the length over their HE courses. A common theme for the first-year students in their study was having to go through a process of learning, unlearning and relearning the norms and practices of each learning community that they entered. Learners are constantly reconstructing themselves to fit in with the evolving process of their learning journey. Virtue et al. (2019) found that the learning community bonds are formed because of a shared situation and therefore the community only lasts if that context remains. Davies (2009) suggests that is because the context of friendships in learning communities is extrinsically focused on achieving goals. There is no formal mechanism for me to track my participants to see if their learning communities survived the transition to university, and whether some of them are still in contact with each other.

## 5.2. RQ2: What value do learning communities add to the learners?

5.2.1. Finding 6: The true added value of participating in a learning community is the different types of the interactions, which are: supportive, developmental and instructive. In my introduction, I introduced and defined what added value means in the broader sense, as a teacher's or school's ability to impact learner outcomes beyond the advantages or disadvantages of socioeconomics and the student's own attitude towards learning (Brown et al., 2016). I also noted the meaning of the term in relation to learning communities as the cultivation of academic, social and employability capital (Rima et al. 2019; Bruhn, 2011). In my study, I have taken the latter meaning.

It is expected that learners will gain some study skills, subject knowledge and that they will be assessed on what they have learned during their course. However, what I am interested in is what additional benefits there are when participating in a learning community in terms of skills developed through learner interactions, as well as the less tangible benefits of being a part of a learning community.

Learners in my study believed that they had developed several skills which include communication, teamwork, personal development, content knowledge, presenting in front of others, reassurance, and increased self-esteem. Furthermore, through the pandemic some of the participants improved their online working skills such as self-organisation, self-efficacy, self-motivation and online collaboration. For example:

UI: Better understanding ... makes me articulate things better.

HQ: Confidence.

BC: Working as a team, because it's even working with one another.

OC: I think reassurance as well, like so when we're in the group chat and somebody doesn't understand or you just asking a question to, to make sure you're on the right track. It's the reassurance you get from those people. (Anwar, Access Focus Group, April 2021)

Learners noted that they had developed communication skills through the work they had done specifically on the Communication in Practice module, but also noted that these skills became especially important during COVID-19 to maintain their learning community, as TS notes:

You know considering everybody got different... different things, especially during lockdown when everyone had different priorities and different timings. In the days where we could all get together and speak over something, we still managed quite well, I think. (Anwar, BA CSC Focus Group, April 2021).

They also learned team working skills, as a member of the faculty suggested that when learners are given a research task, they allocate jobs to each other for the sake of efficiency. But CU remarked that they subsequently do not come together to consult on the finished product, leaving that task to a designated member of the team, which links to Johnson et al.'s (1998) point about personal accountability being a key element in cooperative learning.

### Types of Interactions

Interactions within learning communities can have different outcomes or effects on learners. From my observations and focus group data I was able to identify three types of interactions, Developmental, Instructive and Supportive. These types of interaction are not limited to individuals with specific traits, but are available to anyone engaged in a learning community. Furthermore, the teachers in my study were able to ascertain which type of interaction would best suit the needs of the learners. For example, lecturer LI states:

... So, at the start of the year it might be quite instructive, like we're going to work together as a group now and it might be around icebreaking and, and just trying to kind of get to know each other. And then, you know, it might then be supportive, you know, use each other as a resource, and then it might be more just kind of developmental, so you know, why don't you work together on this or you know, encourage in the start, study groups and things. I think it changes across the year depending on the cohesion in the group.

My data analysis led to typification of interactions within learning communities that focus on the nature of interactions that differ from those outlined by Moore (2010), which are student-content, student-student and student-lecturer and focus on who students are interacting with. I suggest that there are three types of interactions, Developmental, Supportive, and Instructive. During my analysis, I codified 24 items as Developmental, 19 as Instructive and 41 as Supportive (see Appendix 6). For example, the following extract from my observations makes reference to both supportive and instructive interactions:

This is the most crosstalk I have seen between this group of students and particularly important because the conversations were supportive and instructive, especially during questions and answers. (Anwar, Memo, April 2021).

I will now breakdown each type of interaction further, provide examples from the data and then relate back to the literature.

## Developmental

Developmental interactions are when participants in a learning community help improve each other's social skills and other transferable skills. It could also include the sharing of information, notes and resources, such as the name of a book, notes made during a class, case studies or a link to a useful website.

There was another group task set during the break. The students were asked to do individual research on the topics and record their feedback on the chat. After the break, four students put their cameras on. The learners not only shared their notes but also shared links to the sites that they had looked at demonstrating how they are sharing learning within their community. (Anwar, memo, April 2021)

On several occasions students discussed tasks set by their tutors or pastoral mentors, helping each other understand what is required of them and how best to go about completing these tasks. The following is from an in-person observation before the second lockdown:

The two discuss how much research they have done for this essay plan and note that they have never read so much for an essay plan before. I suggest that they will have less to do when they write up the full essay. They have a brief discussion about two of the writers, debating whether they were friends or if one of them was a critic of the other. (Anwar, Memo, October 2020)

In some cases, a peer may provide more hands-on support by coaching a fellow student in developing a skill that they have not yet mastered:

ME discusses the Iron Law with CI. CI notes she needs to reference a couple of things that she's written down. ME goes over to CI and coaches her on how she could perhaps rephrase a reading and reassures her that she's on the right lines. (Anwar, Memo, September 2020)

Learners also correct and rebuke each other and advise on how to improve. This may be simply correcting a piece of information that another learner has erred in, like the year of an Act, or telling them to be more focused.

When CI notes that she was going to email her assignment to her tutor EI, TS and IG ask her why she hadn't done it earlier last Thursday, when she had made the changes to her work. CI said that they know how she is. (Anwar, Memo, March 2021)

The role of faculty members in developing students beyond nurturing the initial rapport between the learners is summed up by CG as being about facilitating the acquisition of study

skills and knowledge through problem-setting, group work and peer assessment. I would argue that one purpose of the educational experience is to develop individuals, to tap latent resources that exist within them and give them opportunities to explore and grow. The following example from an interview with a member of the support staff describes this type of development:

There was a student a few years ago. He came in from the army. Didn't have any qualifications. He left school at fifteen, didn't think he was worth anything ... and he became the most left wing [chuckles], political, motivated [laughs] person you ever met because he was learning so much about sociology and psychology ... you know ... He was just so excited that this world had opened up for him. (Anwar, KD Interview, October 2020)

The Access course is normally made up of adult students who are returning to education after a long break or who have previously had bad experiences in education. They are often lacking in confidence and have low self-esteem, especially regarding their academic abilities. Adult education therefore needs to be developmental as well as instructive to rebuild their confidence and overcome their self-doubt. This is done partly through the efforts of teaching and support staff and partly through the supportive efforts of learning communities.

#### Instructive

Responses in the focus group suggest that not only do learners help each other better understand a concept, but often share new information or additional information beyond what is received from the lecturer. This could be from wider reading undertaken by a learner for an assignment or research task, or even the sharing of personal experiences. This instruction can be provided during on-site lessons, when one learner helps another learner understand a new concept, or during a breakout session and subsequent feedback, during study group activities and when delivering presentations or engaging in discussions and debates. The following examples demonstrate how learners step in when they identify a gap in the knowledge and experience of their peers to provide both insight and new information:

BQ initiated another conversation over the freedom programme [a domestic abuse programme developed by Pat Craven] and stereotypes of abuses, though her peers did not join in with her. She offered to flag up useful resources that she had come across during her volunteering at a domestic violence charity. BQ later contributed a case study on a female who murdered her abuser. (Anwar, Memo, April 2021)

ME was a key member of the BA CSC learning community and would often fulfil the position of MKO for the other learners. Sometimes, I would use ME to scaffold learning by asking her to provide her understanding of what I had just covered for those in her class that had not yet

grasped a concept. This links with my third research question, what role do the different members of the learning community play in providing added value, and I will provide more detail on roles there.

### Supportive

Supportive interactions are those in which learners help each other overcome barriers to learning, comfort and motivate each other. The learners seem to take comfort and reassurance from each other's presence once they have a good rapport. It provides them with a sense of confidence that they will be supported by their friends if they get something wrong, or to provide moral support:

TS: I feel reassured when I'm with somebody else. More reassured, sorry.

SM: I think you; I think you gain confidence of others as well, don't you? When you're working in a group. You give each other confidence.

IG: Yeah, when you're on your own you doubt yourself a lot, don't ya'?

Self-doubt and a lack of confidence are one of the many challenges experienced by adult learners. However, having a supportive learning community provides reassurance and helps shore up confidence. There are a number of examples of this supportiveness that I have observed throughout the year, some of which are shared below. I think this learner describes the nature of a learning community nicely:

SM: I think we've got to know each other's strengths and weaknesses, haven't we, like? We know certain people really don't like, erm, perform... you know, like doing a presentation or something. So, we'll ... we'll try and make it easier for each other by, you know, putting things in place so that it's...ah... we can help each other through it sort of thing. We know how ... how each other works really, don't we? (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021).

It leads me to believe that this is a major function of a learning community, to provide a supportive circle that acts as an oasis on the journey of personal development and learning. Learners who have known each other for a while are good at identifying the strengths of their peers and in utilising them, as TS notes '...you can guarantee you're gonna have a look through all ... all of your Contacts and I'll pick which one of you is ... is probably gonna be able to help' (Anwar, BA CSC Focus Group, April 2021).

Whilst I have primarily focused on the support provided by peers within a learning community, it is important to acknowledge that the learners also see faculty members as a part of that

supportive learning community too. This has been highlighted by the students in various ways, such as one-to-one meetings with tutors, email and Teams chat exchanges and even informal chats outside of lessons. For example:

BC: Yeah, like talking together or with a tutor is kind of usually more helpful than just Googling it, 'cause it's just like writing on the screen. Whereas, if you ask someone to explain it to it, you get a more understanding of it and it's easy to like process what it is. (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, August 2021)

A caring and supportive role is also highlighted by the BA CSC students in an observed session as they look forward to continuing the course on the University's campus.

The students talked about next year and who would look after them in university. They also talked about how previous students were doing at uni. SM knows a few of the students in their final year. The learners have some anxiety about the differences between the College and the University, whether they will receive the same level of support and being part of a larger cohort, something which they have discussed often with their lecturers. (Anwar, Memo, February 2021)

The tutors and support staff fulfil a pastoral role too within the learning community that goes beyond providing instruction, content and study skills. It includes giving advice and guidance on how to deal with the many challenges learners experience in their private, study and work lives. The role of support staff became even more important during the pandemic as noted by WN, a faculty librarian:

... pointing them in the right direction, supporting them through their studies, helping them with study skills, providing one-to-one support, you know, if they're struggling with I.; that sort of thing ... There's an opportunity for us now to be more appreciated by more tutors, about the support we can give, because we've been supporting tutors to provide online resources, they come to us in a ... in a different way, because they need us ... to help their students. So, I see it as a great opportunity for ... for joined up thinking, shall we say, and joined up service. (Anwar, WN Interview, Oct 2020)

### ***Discussion***

There is evidence from both the literature (Rima et al., 2019, Weiss et al, 2015; Bruhn, 2011; Zhao and Kuh, 2004); and my own findings that learning communities benefit their participants through increased motivation and retention as well as the development of skills. Rima et al. (2019) suggest that learning communities offer both social and academic skills for the learners,

such as increased intellect and social capital, the value of resources and networks that aid in achieving shared goals (Bruhn, 2011), and improved retention for the institution.

Zhao and Kuh (2004) note that learning communities may not directly impact performance. They instead highlight the positive link to improved effort, academic integration, and interaction with faculty members. Bruhn (2011) suggests that people develop stronger relationships through their communities, cultivating social capital through their shared networks, their cultural experiences, knowledge, and skills. Those relationships are key motivating factors for continuing in a programme of study and could be said to add value for learners, which is in line with the findings of other studies that suggest participation in a learning community improves student retention (Rima et al., 2019, Weiss et al, 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004).

Other examples of added value from the learning communities I observed as noted by the learners include: being better able to understand theories and related academic vocabulary, improved articulation of ideas, confidence, teamwork, and reassurance, as noted in the earlier example from the Access Focus Group. The pandemic placed some limitations on the learning experiences of these two groups of students by moving their learning to mostly online and on engaging in social events and trips, as noted earlier. However, it also meant that they have had an opportunity to engage with several online communication packages, such as Microsoft Teams and Zoom, and have become more confident in collaborating and accessing and sharing files online, which can be considered as added value for online learning communities. The main vehicle for gaining added value from engaging in a learning community is interaction. However, it could be argued that learners can develop soft skills, like communication and collaboration, through social interactions, and will have developed study skills from being on an academic course, without ever having to interact with a learning community. I would argue that there is more value in learning communities than just social skills and study skills. The true value of learning communities are the interactions that learners engage in within their learning communities.

### **Developmental**

The nature of most interactions that I have observed during my study points to a developmental focus, with the goal being to develop learners' skills and attitudes to become more independent as learners. Bassani (2011) and McLoughlin (2002) have identified Developmental interactions as a major function in online learning. This includes sharing information, notes, and resources during face-to-face and online sessions, which Bassani (2011) and McLoughlin (2002) see as a sign of a collaborative practice in a healthy online learning community but also applicable in face-to-face interactions. Chen et al. (2009) also highlight the importance of relationships

between learners to improve the flow of ideas and information sharing between participants, which suggests that learning communities impact the transferal of knowledge, information and ideas from learner to learner. Other developmental interactions observed include discussions on academic writers, responding to questions and validating information, such as the correct year of an act or the right terminology to use.

### **Instructive**

Instructive interactions help peers understand a task or difficult concepts, as also noted by McLoughlin (2002), in scaffolding new content, and by Brown (1994), by taking the lead in teaching new content. Instructive interactions can be learner-instructor based or student-to-student, helping to scaffold new concepts and ideas as co-participants (McLoughlin, 2002). Students could even take the lead in teaching new content (Brown, 1994).

Daniels (2001) notes that scaffolding in this way simplifies the process involved in completing the task as some students may not have fully understood the process. In my study, learners scaffold ideas or skills for each other by simplifying instructions and then checking to see if their peers have demonstrated an improved understanding. For example, ME helped CI understand how to paraphrase a reading and then reassured her that she was on the right lines.

### **Supportive**

Rima et al. (2019) also note that learning communities provide the infrastructure to develop social capital through interactions and collaborations and integrate into the social system. This links with the second type, Supportive interactions, to provide comfort, reassurance, and motivation to members of the learning community. Both Bryceson (2005) and McLoughlin (2002) see the supportive role as a major function of learning communities online. Many of the interactions I observed were supportive in nature, with learners offering each other reassurance during conversations, advice on studying and on life and motivating each other throughout the year. Various studies have shown that participation in a learning community is positively linked to increased motivation and persistence and therefore can be said to add value for learners (Rima et al., 2019; Roscoe, 2012; Angelino et al., 2007). This idea supports previous studies that claim learning communities improve student retention and keep learners motivated to complete their course of study (Rima et al., 2019; Grandzol and Grandzol, 2010; Kellogg, 1999). The tutors and support staff also have a role in providing support through advice and guidance and occasionally emotional support.

To conclude, most learners who participated in the learning communities in my study gained added value in two ways. The first is through the development of transferable skills and social

capital, which is well supported by the literature. The second type of added value is in relation to the kinds of interactions they had with their learning communities, which gave them access to support and additional instruction and development from their peers. Those who do not participate in a learning community have to rely more on themselves and their tutors.

### 5.3. RQ3 What role do the different members of a learning community play in providing added value?

5.3.1. Finding 7: Individuals within learning communities fulfil a number of observable social roles, of which I have identified eight distinct roles

Having identified what learning communities were taking place in the College, and the added value they provide, I also wanted to understand what roles individuals fulfil within them. Studies on ZPD suggest that anyone can be a More Knowledgeable Other (MKO), but there must be more to a learning community beyond the roles of 'instructor' and 'instructed'.

As a result of my repeated observations of learners and lecturers, I have identified various social roles that have helped me understand the behaviour and composition of the learning communities.

During my data analysis, I coded the term 'Roles' 42 times. Further analysis of the data coded with this term led me to identify eight different social roles fulfilled by members of the learning communities in my study, namely: the Parent, the Interpreter, the Organiser, the Resource Finder, the Nurse, the Instigator, Tech Support and the Recruiter. There is some overlap at times between these roles, with an individual fulfilling more than one role at a time, for example, the Parent may also play the Nurse role, or the Nurse may fulfil the role of the Recruiter. However, this fits with Masolo et al.'s (2004) characterisation of social roles being dynamic properties. Below, I have provided descriptions and examples of each role from my data:

**The Parent:** Lecturers/tutors, and potentially even a student, are often responsible for initiating a learning community, through rapport building when the students first meet. They also nurture fledgling communities and encourage the members of the community to interact with each other. This is not to say that learning communities can be manufactured wholesale, but they do require a nudge and some cultivation. The dependence on the tutor varies based on the level of rapport amongst the students and their level of resilience when faced with new challenges. For example: 'LI notes, "Like I'm saying, so if you ... if you weren't there in the first place to bring them together and do the activities to get them meshing then they probably wouldn't form those communities".' (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, April 2021)

**The Interpreter:** This is the expert student who often reads widely around the topic area and has an ability to scaffold concepts in a way that the lower ability students can easily understand. For example: 'CI notes she needs to reference a couple of things that she's written down. PE

goes over to CI and coaches her on how she could perhaps rephrase a reading and reassures her that she's on the right lines.' (Anwar, Memo, October 2020)

**The Organiser:** This student keeps the other students aware of what deadlines are coming up, arranges the study group and delegates tasks in group work. For example: 'TG follows HG into the room and exclaims loudly that she is annoyed with a member of staff, then asks whether the others have done the work assigned by their pastoral mentor' (Anwar, Memos, September 2020). Here, TG is reminding her classmates of a looming deadline.

**The Resource Finder:** These students are good at finding resources and sharing them with their peers, such as books, articles, and websites. For example: 'UM suddenly pipes up and announces that she has found a good resource for another assignment they are all also working on.' (Anwar, Memo, September 2020)

**The Nurse:** These students and staff members play the role of comforter and look out for the emotional wellbeing of their community. For example: 'TG is stressing about information coming from multiple sources. PE and IG are trying to help her stay focused.' (Anwar, Memo, September 2020)

**The Instigator:** Some students, like BQ, have an ability for instigating conversations or asking questions that draws out a more detailed explanation from the tutor. For example:

CG describes a behaviour she has witnessed often: 'Yes. Yes, I think students often will talk about what they've learnt, how they found it, and others will chip in and sort of say "well my understanding was this" and encourage them to look at it in a different way.' (Anwar, CG Interview, May 2021)

**Tech Support:** This can be a member of staff or another student, offering support in using IT and software. For example: 'KD: I'm here to, I suppose, facilitate learning for students, just to make it as easy as possible for them to get on with doing their studying, erm, support them with finding books and IT services...' (Anwar, KD Interview, Oct 2020)

**The Recruiter:** This student or teacher looks out for other learners who may be on the periphery of a community and brings them into the fold. As LI notes, '...adults are a bit better at noticing when there are people that are solitary and ... and trying to make an effort to bring them in'. (Anwar, Lecturer Focus Group, Apr 2021)

This is by no means an exhaustive list of all the roles that may manifest in a learning community, but rather only what I have observed and identified within my sample groups. Many of these roles can be fulfilled by a member of staff or by a student, but altogether, these roles help instigate, nurture and maintain a learning community.

## ***Discussion***

Golder and Donath (2004) write that there are many roles in society that are well-defined and clear to understand, such as familial, legal or employment roles. However, Golder and Donath (2004) note that some roles are not as unambiguous and usually go unnamed but are presented through repeated interactions and patterns of behaviour. Masolo et al. (2004) summarise the characteristics of social roles as being non-rigid properties that are not fixed on a single person and can be switched at any point. The nature of social roles is to follow relational patterns, as each role helps us understand how others respond to these roles. Finally, Masolo et al. (2004) write that social roles are context-based, as different contexts require different roles and can change how each role is perceived by others. In the same way, I have used social roles to help better understand the behaviours and interactions of students within the context of their learning communities, both online and offline, so that it is easier to identify and generalise social roles when observing other learning communities.

There are a couple of studies (Lin et al., 2007; Yeh, 2010) that have also attempted to categorise social roles in learning communities. In Lin et al.'s (2007) breakdown, these roles combine interactions for the purpose of encouraging and gatekeeping. Yeh (2010) analysed Yin et al.'s list of behaviours for frequency and categorised based on their usefulness in online learning. Yeh's (2010, p.145) social roles are as follows: Supervisor, Information Providers, Group Instructors, Atmosphere Constructors, Opinion Providers, Reminders, Trouble-Makers and Problem Solvers. Yeh's roles have some similarities to those that I have identified, for example in Yeh's (2010) online roles, Supervisors, who set schedules, assigned work and made suggestions for work, and Group Instructors, who offer clarifications to avoid misunderstandings, which are similar to my Parent role, but do not highlight the nurturing role of the Parent. Yeh's (2010) Reminders, who keep the group informed of deadlines and timetables, are like my Organisers; Yeh's Opinion Providers, who contribute opinions during group work, are like my Instigator, who asks questions to open up conversations. Yeh (2010) notes that presence of these roles may vary depending on the participants and the situation, which again is in line with Masolo et al.'s (2004) characteristics, suggesting that there may be other roles within learning communities that neither Yeh (2010) nor I managed to observe, but may become observable in different contexts. This is evident as I identified some roles, such as the Recruiter, the Interpreter and Tech Support, that do not correlate with any of Yeh's (2010) social roles, and *vice versa*, Yeh identified Trouble-Makers and Problem Solvers which do not correlate with the behaviours I observed. I do not believe all these roles are essential for a learning community to exist or operate, however some of the roles I have noted begin to manifest almost straight away, such as the Parent and the Recruiter, with one member of the learning community becoming the initiator of the community

and Recruiters informally bringing peers into their cliques. Other roles begin to emerge as the learning community develops and becomes more goal orientated, as opposed to relationship orientated. Yeh acknowledges that the number of behaviours and roles may vary depending on the participants and nature of the discussions they are having.

These categories can provide teachers and instructors with a quick way of identifying key members of a learning community through the functions that they play in both online and in-person interactions, which may aid in delegating tasks and responsibilities within the community. It is possible that future researchers may identify other social roles that I have missed or even disagree with the roles I have listed, however, I do believe that my list adds to understanding of what roles exist within a learning community, and thereby improving knowledge on the inner-life of a learning community.

#### 5.4. Barriers to Learning Communities

Whilst I have addressed my initial research questions above, I have also identified some of the barriers to participation in a learning community as experienced by my sample group during the COVID-19 pandemic. These mainly relate to issues with technology and external issues, such as illness, childcare and other distractions. Some students are anxious about being at a disadvantage due to their long absence from education, and now being engaged in a higher level of study than before. This also relates to their lack of experience with online learning and uncertainty of coping with these changes and speculation about how they would have performed had they been on campus, as HQ from the Access students notes, 'I was at college before, erm, before um this course and I found it really difficult not being in the setting'.

In the focus groups, both students and lecturers noted the limitations presented by the pandemic on their ability to work as a learning community. Social distancing meant that even when the learners were on campus, they could not sit together in the canteen or work together in the study zone and library. LI, a lecturer, notes that because of COVID-19, students were unable to form little study groups and meet outside of college, which pre-pandemic was a normal occurrence for adult students. Even the psychology research assignment had to be done with social distancing in place, disrupting the learners' normal experience of studying at college. Therefore, adapting to the technology initially was a barrier for participation, especially whilst trying to cope with the other stressors of adjusting to a new way of living during the pandemic (Utoft et al., 2021)

##### 5.4.1. Technology

The pandemic highlighted the gap in ICT skills and access to learning technologies. Technology was reported by my participants as a barrier to learning and engagement with their learning

communities, despite it also being their main means of maintaining their community during COVID-19. Many of the adult learners refer to anxieties about using technology, for example, as one student notes, 'And there's also barriers, isn't there to doing it online, like faulty techno... technology and things like that, yeah?' (Anwar, BA CSC Focus Group, April 2021). They had to grapple with new content, build new relationships with peers and lecturers, and deal with new learning platforms like Microsoft Teams, almost entirely online. Some learners in the past have even struggled with how to turn a computer on and open a Word document, so online learning was a major challenge for them.

Several adult students have noted that technology creates a barrier to learning for them. This was partly because a number of students had older laptops that were either missing a camera or a working microphone, which acted as a barrier to them fully engaging with online learning. Other issues included trouble logging in and joining online classes, software crashes and loss of connectivity for either the learner or the lecturer.

My participants acknowledge that being forced to learn from home meant that they grew used to working independently and not relying on each other and on faculty members as much, as noted by IG, 'We've had more time to... work on our own. But you need the time... If you don't understand something or ... To understand things a bit more is better as a group, to try and talk about it ...' (Anwar, Access to HE Focus Group, April 2021).

### ***Discussion***

Some of these have also been highlighted by Linna et al. (2021) as common challenges experienced by online learners, including lack of training and poor technical abilities, slow technical support and even incompatible devices. Some of the adult students noted that learning online means they cannot test ideas with each other as they were used to doing in person, which is supported by Kemp and Grieve (2014) who suggest that face-to-face delivery tends to have more engaging delivery, deeper conversations and lead to a stronger sense of community. Roscoe (2012) also agrees that online learning is less engaging but suggests the cause may be a sub-optimal level of focus in online learning.

Glazier (2016) suggests that there is a link between academic preparedness and attrition levels in online learning. CG, a BA CSC lecturer, also suggested that conversations did not flow as naturally online as they do in person and there are other disruptions to contend with too, 'We find interruptions or background noise which can just interrupt those people sharing thoughts and ideas.' This includes children seeking attention, pets, boiling kettles, televisions playing in the background and workmen in the streets. Furthermore, many adult learners were also sharing internet connections and devices with children, who were also learning online during

the first year of the pandemic. Glazier (2016) writes that such distractions in the learner's environment are another common factor in student attrition rates.

The lecturers all shared their frustrations with online lessons, content, and accessibility, whilst the students' bemoaned feelings of isolation. ME, a BA CSC student, highlighted how even a simple task such as browsing libraries for books had been replaced with a Click and Collect approach. CI, a learner who struggles with grasping new concepts, often laments that she wants to be back in the classroom. Online classes lack the organic participation and dynamic conversations that are commonplace in a physical classroom. CU, the Access to HE course leader noted that online learning was a major factor in students choosing to leave the course, which correlates with the literature (Roscoe, 2012; Angelino et al., 2007; Rovai, 2002).

#### 5.4.2. External Issues

CG, a BA CSC lecturer, notes that the attendance of adult students is affected by things external to college, 'quite a few that have other things going on and challenges, which means their attendance isn't as good and I think that does have an impact' (Anwar, CG Interview, May 2021). Some of the students were key workers and had to cover for colleagues who had fallen ill with COVID, and as a result had to arrange for childcare and schooling. That year we also had students dealing with long-COVID symptoms, inflexible working hours, a divorce and bereavements. One downside to a close-knit community is that major life events tend to reverberate through the rest of the community too. I observed a number of conversations in the BA CSC group about the challenges that they were facing outside of class, below are just a few examples of this:

The discussion about the COVID-19 vaccination and the panic around conspiracies, was even more animated with all the students, except ME, taking part. ME is dealing with some serious issues at home which is affecting her participation. ME does eventually join the conversation to explain structuralism and agency theory. (Anwar, Memo, August 2021)

Some of the learners come back early from break and have a quick chat with each other. They discuss how recovery from COVID-19 was causing IC and UM to feel drained and unable to concentrate. (Anwar, Memo, August 2021)

ME shared that she had made a mistake on her student finance application. UM & TS talk with her about her application, whilst CI shared her own experiences with student finance. The conversation shifts to an assignment for NA [me]. UM complains that she

has rambled on. ME notes that because she had things on her mind and had trouble sleeping, she just stayed up a few nights and wrote the assignment and emailed it to OB to see if it was any good for a pass. (Anwar, Memo, August 2021)

The BA CSC group were very open with each other and their tutors, their learning community, about what they were going through in their personal lives. Class sessions normally began or ended with a catch up on how each member of the community was feeling and the things they were going through.

### ***Discussion***

Markin (2011) found that groups with high levels of empathy can more accurately gauge an individual group member's emotional state, because there is a perception that all the members of the group are similar to each other. This was borne out in the above observations. The more time learners spend in each other's company, the higher the level of rapport and the more likely they are to develop high levels of empathy. Markin notes that this is known as assimilation, which 'may represent a process of projection or assumed similarity' (Markin, 2011, p.4). Waytz (2016) notes that high levels of empathy can be physically exhausting and deplete mental resources with a negative effect on performance and can also contribute to absenteeism. However, attendance remained good on the BA CSC programme, with absences related only to illness, childcare, appointments and a bereavement.

### **5.5. Conclusion**

Learning communities are a complex set of relationships and interactions that can occur both in physical and virtual places. They include learners and faculty members and are shaped by the advantages and limitations of the spaces they inhabit and the rules of the institution that brings them together. Whilst traditional conceptions of learning communities suggest that learners have to be co-enrolled onto multi-disciplinary courses and intentionally manufactured by the faculty (Chrysikos and Catterall, 2020; Rima et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004), learning communities are flexible enough to encompass different modalities of interactions and education, with the key element being peer interactions (Fink and Inkelas, 2015; Lenning and Ebbers, 1999).

There are several findings that are significant for this study. The first of these is that learning communities do not need to be intentionally manufactured by faculty members. They can grow naturally after the first meeting of learners through repeated interactions and development of rapport over time. However, they will form more quickly with some intervention from tutors.

Good rapport is important for the effectiveness of these learning communities as without it, interactions for learning tend to be channelled through the tutor. I believe that previous studies may have underestimated the significance of rapport to the development and maintenance of a learning community. Rapport building needs to start as soon as a new group of learners is brought together, to enable learners to use each other as a resource, and needs to be refreshed regularly, especially after learners have had a break from meeting each other face-to-face on campus or online. The beginning and end of sessions are a good opportunity to allow for the development of rapport between learners, as well as during organised group activities, breaks and interruptions to the lessons. Therefore, faculty have an important role to play in developing and maintaining rapport. Lecturers are key members of learning communities because they are often the instigators of learning communities, even if it is done unintentionally. Without rapport, learners are less likely to interact with each other, even when asked to do group work. Therefore, they nurture budding communities, provide them with communication skills and structure for interactions in the classroom between learners. This may be achieved through normal teaching and learning activities, such as task setting, directed studies and curriculum design. Whilst learning environments are designed to accommodate learning, they are also used by some of the participants as a place to eat and socialise. In my study, I found that learning communities also interact outside of campus too, at member's homes and in public houses, combining socialising with study sessions.

The added value of a learning community is that it provides a network of people that aids in the individual's personal, social and technical development (Chryiskos and Catteral, 2020; Bruhn, 2011; Kilpatrick et al., 2003), though it could be argued that this is simply the result of participating in education. My study also found that learning communities can provide additional added value through the types of interactions that occur when participating in a learning community. Learning communities provide instruction in understanding new and challenging concepts, and may offer support during moments of self-doubt and hardship, and motivation to complete tasks and continue on the course. Learning communities also help develop communication and technical skills by supplementing what the College provides through ad hoc advice and support from peers. The added value provided through developmental, instructive and supportive interactions encourages learners to see each other as a resource, not only in the future as part of their social capital, but also during their studies.

In providing this added value, I identified eight roles from the data, which add to the knowledge of the inner workings of learning communities. These include: the Parent, the Interpreter, the Organiser, the Resource Finder, the Nurse, the Instigator, Tech Support and the Recruiter. Members take on various roles in learning communities, as Yeh (2010) suggests depending on

the participants and the situation. There are potentially other roles that may be apparent in different learning communities, evident from the variations between the roles that I observed and those that Yeh (2010) has suggested.

The study also identified some of the barriers to participation, which primarily relate to the COVID-19 pandemic and include both anxiety and lack of IT skills that could partially be addressed through IT and communication training. In the next chapter, I will expand on these conclusions and note this study's contributions to knowledge.

## 6. CONCLUSION

When I was studying for my PGCE, I experienced a sense of community with my peers that I had not experienced in my previous education. This led me to question whether this was a common experience for adult learners or something unique to my PGCE group. Therefore, I understood this study with an aim of exploring whether learning communities exist, and what added value they provide to their participants. The study took place during the COVID-19 pandemic, which significantly impaired my ability to observe learning communities on-campus. I had a contingency plan in place and moved to observing recordings of live online classes and using Microsoft Teams to conduct focus groups and semi-structured interviews. The year was punctuated by several national and regional lockdowns and social distancing measures were in place the entire year. Still, I managed to observe one of my groups on campus for a couple of months and witnessed how the social distancing measures had disrupted the development of learning communities in the second group. The learners were forced to develop their IT skills and adapt to the new normal of online classes hosted on video conferencing platforms Microsoft Teams and Zoom and came to terms with trying to form relationships through distance learning mediums and tools.

In this chapter, I will revisit and answer my research questions, summarise the key findings and arguments of my study. I will conclude by emphasising the contribution of my study and its limitation, and provide some recommendations for future research and practice. My three research questions were as follow:

- What form do learning communities take in the adult campus of the College?
- What value do learning communities add to the learners?
- What role do the different members of a learning community play in providing this added value?

### 6.1. What Form Do Learning Communities Take in the Adult Campus of the College?

In answering the first of these questions I discovered that learning communities are clusters of three or more students who interact and collaborate to scaffold each other's development, provide encouragement and support and also instruct each other in-class, around class and outside of class, both on and off campus. Learning communities are based on Vygotsky's theory of ZPD, with each learning community made up of multiple ZPDs that interact and overlap each other (Brown, 1994). Planned learning gives learning communities purpose but they thrive through group work and discussions in and out of class, just before and after lessons and even during planned and unplanned breaks to taught sessions. Unlike the learning communities in

previous studies, the learning communities in my study developed naturally and were not planned by the faculty, and learners did not have to formally enrol onto a learning community as in other studies (Chryssikos and Catterall, 2020; Rima et al., 2019; Weiss et al., 2015; Zhao and Kuh, 2004). However, academic staff have a role to play by bringing learners together through the 'getting to know you' activities and icebreakers at the start of the first term and nurturing rapport with the learners. Unfortunately, the 'getting to know you' activities and icebreakers were missed due to learning being moved online during COVID-19. As a result, the Access to HE class took longer to develop as a community in comparison to the BA CSC class which had pre-existing rapport from the previous year. Learning Communities are sustained by repeated academic and social interactions and ongoing efforts by tutors to maintain rapport.

The advantages of an established learning community with a strong rapport was clear as the BA CSC group continued to thrive, remaining fully engaged throughout the year. The fledgling Access to HE learning community struggled to develop rapport. Therefore, I suggest that rapport is essential for the development and maintenance of a learning community, for meaningful interactions to take place and for learners to gain confidence in sharing their opinions without the fear of ridicule.

## 6.2. What Value Do Learning Communities Add to the Learners?

It was perceived that learners in my study benefited from learning communities in several ways, including improved employability skills such as communication, teamwork, self-organisation, and self-motivation, improved academic skills such as self-efficacy, problem-solving and content knowledge, and socially, through the development of interpersonal communication, emotional intelligence and social capital.

Further, improved self-regulation and motivation may contribute to retention of learners too. These findings are well supported by the literature, such as Rima et al. (2019), who note the social and academic benefits, Bruhn (2011) highlights the cultivation of social capital through shared networks and cultural interchange of experiences, knowledge and skills. Glazier (2016), Weiss et al. (2015), Roscoe (2012) and Rovai (2002) all note the value of learning communities for improving retention, and Zhao and Kuh (2004) also suggest that learning communities improve integration of learners into academia and loyalty to the institution too. Furthermore, my findings suggest that learners also benefit from providing each other with developmental, supportive and instructive interactions during their learning. The development of study skills and learning attitudes is a key purpose of the Access to HE course and Foundation Year of the BA CSC course. Interactions with tutors and other learners aid students to develop core

competencies until they are able to take full responsibility for their own learning. I found that developmental interactions underscore many of the interactions that take place during a course of study. However, supportive roles, such as the Parent, the Organiser and the Nurse, are more a key function of learning communities, as also noted by Bryceson (2005) and McLoughlin (2002), through the offer of reassurance, comfort and motivation. Other studies also support this finding and link participation in a learning community with increased motivation and persistence (Rima et al., 2019; Roscoe, 2012; Angelino et al., 2007). Learners also benefit from each other through one-to-one and group instruction, helping each other better understand taught content through scaffolding learning, or aiding each other by linking study content with personal experiences and knowledge.

### 6.3. What Role Do the Different Members of a Learning Community Play in Providing This Added Value?

Having categorised the different types of interactions in adding value to a learning community above, I also set out to identify the different roles within these interactions that aid in nurturing and maintain the learning community (Yin et al., 2007). To capture the different idiosyncrasies of different participants, I decided to label each role in a way that would make it easier to understand the behaviour on display. So, I typified eight different roles observed in the learning communities in my study, based on my collected data.

1. The Parent: the role of instigating and nurturing the development of learning communities.
2. The Interpreter: a learner who interprets difficult concepts and then scaffolds them so that other students can grasp them easier.
3. The Organiser: organises study groups, delegates tasks and reminds others of deadlines.
4. The Resource Finder: learners who like to identify and share links and resources.
5. The Nurse: provides emotional support and encouragement to the learners.
6. The Instigator: learners who have a knack for drawing out detailed explanations by asking questions and instigating conversations amongst learners.
7. Tech support: troubleshoots technology related issues, especially in online learning.
8. The Recruiter: students who actively try to bring new and peripheral participants into the group.

These social roles can be grouped under the different categories of interaction that I identified earlier. The Parent and the Organiser are both Developmental and Supportive. Tech Support and the Resource Finder engage in Developmental interactions, the Recruiter and the Nurse provide Supportive interactions, and the Interpreter and the Instigator provide Instructive interactions. These roles are not an exhaustive list as they are based on observable behaviours during my study. I have discussed in the previous chapter how Yeh (2010) identified two additional roles which I did not observe, Trouble-Maker and Problem Solver, but he did not observe any parallel to my Recruiter, Interpreter and Tech Support. It is possible that observation of additional groups will lead to the identification of other roles. They are performed by learners, faculty members and occasionally support staff too. Sometimes the roles will overlap as one person may play multiple roles in any given situation.

#### 6.4. Limitations

In my introduction I noted some of the limitations of this study. My study was done on a small sample of two groups of students and therefore my findings may not be wholly generalisable, but may still be transferable to other similar institutions. I have acknowledged my subjectivity and how I have mitigated the Hawthorne effect, by getting to know the participants, through repeated observations and triangulation of data through various methods of data collection. I have also attempted to mitigate participant bias by informing participants that there is no extrinsic advantage in taking part in this study.

The COVID-19 pandemic provided its own challenges to data collection and to the learning communities. I was unable to spend as much time as I would have liked observing students engaging in learning community activities around campus, nor did I socialise with them and therefore have missed an element of their community interactions. However, I got to study learning communities in the extraordinary circumstances of a pandemic. I designed my data collection tools to be adaptable to the changing situation, which meant that I was able to study a hybrid version of in-person and online learning communities. This experience led to the contribution of a case study to Sage Research Methods titled, 'Adapting an Ethnographic Study of Learning Communities During a Global Pandemic' (see Appendix 14). A second case study has been submitted to Sage Research Methods on Video-Mediated Observations During COVID-19. I would have liked to have studied the online sessions as a participant observer but was unable to do so due to scheduling clashes and other commitments. However, watching recorded classes meant I was able to observe far more of them than I would have in person and avoided the Hawthorne Effect on the learners.

I would have also liked to have kept in contact with all the learners who participated in this study, to see if they continued to participate in learning communities and whether they are still in touch with each other. It had not occurred to me at the start of the study. As it is, all of the BA CSC students graduated from the partner university last year, with at least one of them still involved in academia as a researcher. Of the Access to HE students, I have had no news, but hope that they too all graduated successfully.

If I was to redesign this study, I would include student social media as a source of data too, as this would have offered a more intimate facet of their interactions. I would also have asked the lecturers and faculty members to become co-researchers and get them to journal their experiences and observations of learning communities to provide me with their deeper insights. I believe these two additions would provide an even more revealing understanding of the inner life of learning communities.

### 6.5. Contributions to Knowledge

The gaps in knowledge around learning communities include the lack of research done on FE in HE and Adult Education in the United Kingdom. Indeed, there are only a handful of studies on learning communities in Britain. Previous studies have also focused mostly on outcomes that relate to university goals, such as retention, persistence and results. Also, studies on the inner life of learning communities are under-researched.

The following are my contributions to knowledge:

1. Learning Communities are still a relatively under studied area of education, and there are even fewer qualitative studies on learning communities. My study took a qualitative approach to studying learning communities in a Higher Education in Further Education College, in the Northwest of England. My study provides a window on the inner-life of these learning communities, providing descriptions and explanations of the relationships, interactions and behaviours therein.
2. I have provided a clear and unambiguous definition of learning communities, that at their heart learning communities are based on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development and the scaffolding of learning, but for it to be a learning community there must be at least three students interacting for the purpose of learning over a period of time.
3. The learning communities in my study have formed without a formal opt-in and have developed naturally through repeated interactions on-campus, online and off-campus in social settings. Learning communities in all previous studies have had a formal recruitment and enrolment process. Learning communities differ from friendship

groups because they come together for a specific purpose, for a specific amount of time. They do not always include every member of a class, and multiple learning communities can coexist within a cohort.

4. I have identified rapport building as a significant element for starting and maintaining learning communities both on campus and online. Without rapport, learners will not form trusting relationships with their peers and tutors, which will impact their level of participation in the learning community, both in-person and online and can lead to them dropping out of the course of study.
5. I have identified the added value of learning communities through three types of interactions, which are developmental, supportive and instructive. Previous studies have alluded to the developmental and supportive nature of learning communities, but have not used these terms to categorise interactions.
6. In identifying the added value of learning communities, I have typified eight different social roles observed in the members of a learning communities in my study, which are: 1) The Parent, 2) The Interpreter, 3) The Organiser, 4) The Resource Finder, 5) The Nurse, 6) The Instigator, 7) Tech Support and 8) The Recruiter. These social roles better help understanding the inner-life of learning communities.
7. I have provided a deeper look at the inner life of learning communities in an adult education setting.

#### 6.6. Implications for Practice

COVID-19 had a massive impact on teaching, learning and research at its height and it continues to affect them even today. In the years following the COVID-19 lockdowns, I have observed that students who experienced learning during pandemic tend to be more socially anxious than learners prior to COVID-19. They are less willing to socialise with each other on and off-campus. They form small cliques and are happy to remain in them rather than developing their social capital. Another challenge for learning communities is the rapid expansion and ubiquitousness of AI having observed firsthand how quickly learners have adopted Generative AI and are more likely to turn to ChatGPT than a classmate for help and support. These two developments have become a barrier to learning communities forming by themselves. Now, more than ever, they will need a guiding hand from the faculty and tutors to aid them in developing community and engaging in supportive, developmental and instructive interactions.

## 6.7. Recommendations and Future Direction

Mirroring Zhao and Kuh's (2004) recommendation, I would suggest that more British Universities and Colleges should investigate the learning communities that exist on their campuses and identify ways of supporting and nurturing them as there are clear benefits to both the students and the institutions in terms of course completion and progression, socialisation into the academic world and a sense of belonging and loyalty to the institution. I would especially recommend to my own College that they recognise the value added by learning communities and make efforts to support them through more communal events and activities for adult learners and enhance existing spaces for social interaction.

I would still like to spend time studying in-person communities and see if learning communities in other educational settings feature the three types of interactions and the eight different roles that I have identified at the College, and whether there are additional types of interactions and roles that I have not so far been able to observe. In 2021, the University of Central Lancashire opened a multi-million pound student centre that embodies the principles set out by Gurbutt and Cragg (2019) for learning spaces that do not require the purchase of goods. I would very much like to continue my studies by looking at how this space and others in other universities and colleges are being used by learning communities for social and academic interactions. Other gaps identified in my findings were the lack of research on how adult students use their classrooms in a shared campus with 16-18 year old students, and the impact of trips and outings on breakdown cliques and providing learners with a sense of shared purpose. Finally, AI is the new disruptive technology that is impacting every industry and every role, including learning, teaching and researching. There is scope for studies on how this disruption is impacting learning communities, and its potential to support rather than prevent the development of learning communities.

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## 8. APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: Information Sheet

Dear Learner or Colleague,

#### **An exploratory study of the value added by learning communities for adult learners within a Adult Further Education/Higher Education setting**

You are being invited to take part in a doctoral research study. Before you decide whether or not to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

#### *What is the purpose of the study?*

The aim of this research is to explore how learning communities within adult FE and HE learning settings can add value to the learning and employability of students or learners. Learning communities are 'groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning' (Cross, 1998, p.4) and include both students, teaching staff and support staff. This investigation will be achieved by answering the following questions:

I. What form do learning communities in an adult college in England take?

II. What value do they add to the learners' learning and development?

III. What roles do the different members of learning communities play in providing this added value?

Learning communities are 'groups of people engaged in intellectual interaction for the purpose of learning' (Cross, 1998, p.4) and include both students, teaching staff and support staff. Previous studies on learning communities have focused on (primarily American) university settings that have a residential element to them (Fink and Inkelas, 2015), but they are an understudied area in the UK, especially in relation to adult colleges. Furthermore, there is limited awareness of the role and purpose of learning communities within Further Education and Higher Education settings, and of how they can be used to improve the overall learning experience offered by the college. It is important to note here that the focus of the study is not on individual participants, but rather on the learning activity and interactions within learning communities.

#### *Why have I been invited to participate?*

You have been invited to participate because you are enrolled as an adult student or a member of staff at XXXXXXXX College. You will be one of approximately 50 students and 5 staff members taking part. Participation in the research is **entirely voluntary**. It is up to you to decide whether to take part. If you do decide to take part, you will be given this information sheet to keep and be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part, you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason. Furthermore, you can leave the study at any time by simply informing me either in person or by email. However, please note that your data can not be withdrawn once it has been anonymised as this could put the research project at risk. **Choosing to either take part or not take part in the study will have no impact on your marks, assessments or future studies.** We will be using anonymised marking and the college has a robust internal verification and external moderation in place to ensure that this is the case.

The study will consist of observations, informal interviews and focus groups. You will be initially invited to take part in an initial online and anonymous discussion using an app called Padlet. The next stage will be observations. Students and staff being observed can ask me to go away if they are uncomfortable with being observed, or you have the option to be recorded rather than observed. If you are in a group of people who have consented to being observed and you have not consented, then you will be asked again if you wish to consent, otherwise,

you will be asked if it is okay for the observation to go ahead with the caveat that your interactions and contributions to the group will not be used or analysed for the study. At the end of each recording/observation, the researcher will check that you are still happy for your data to be included. Those who are participating in an interview or focus group do not have to answer any questions, and can leave/end the interview/focus group at any point. If there is another lockdown which requires lockdown to take place, the study will shift to observing online classes and hangouts, virtual focus groups and interviews on Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Again, you can choose to opt-out of the session or the study at any time before the data is anonymised. In the case of social distancing rules being implemented, the researcher will wear appropriate personal protection equipment and ask learners to observe correct hygiene protocols.

All written data will be anonymised at the time of collection, and confidentiality of responses will be maintained unless there is a safeguarding issue. Recorded data will be anonymised on transcription. Consent forms will be digitalised, and the physical copies securely destroyed. All digital data will be stored on UCLan's OneDrive and password protected. Physical notes will be secured in a locked filing cabinet. The researcher will follow UCLan's data protection and privacy guidelines, which can be found here ([Privacy Notices – Research Participants](#)).

#### *What will happen to me if I take part?*

Observations will be carried out whilst you are involved in group work either during lessons, in a designated study area or in a social area. I will observe up to a maximum of one hour. I will carry out the observations in person and will make notes on a paper based journal. If you would prefer that the observation be done remotely, a recording can be made of your session to analyse later. In this case, you will be asked to listen to the recording immediately after the session to provide your interpretations on what was happening, and at this point can ask for the recording to be withdrawn if you are unhappy with it. Data will be anonymised at the point of collection for observations, or once transcribed in the case of recordings, after which it will not be possible to withdraw consent without damaging the research project. In the case of further lockdowns due to COVID-19, you will be invited to take part in a virtual hangouts or classes, online focus groups and interviews using Zoom or Microsoft Teams. I may ask you to take part in a follow-up informal interview to seek clarification on something I have seen or heard. Interviews will be digitally audio/video recorded with your consent. Focus groups will be used in a similar way to interviews for the purpose of clarity. Again, these will be recorded digitally after the consent of the whole group has been provided. The focus groups and interviews will give you an opportunity to clarify your intentions and to ensure that your words or actions are not misconstrued.

The findings of the study will be reported in college newsletters and participants will be invited to attend a presentation at the end of the study. Participants can also request to receive a copy of the findings via email.

#### *What are the possible benefits of taking part?*

The study is seeking to understand the benefits of learning communally within FE/HE, both short-term and long-term. The findings may help shape the improvement of services in your college as well as in other Further Education and Higher Education settings. You may find it interesting to take part in a research study, but there is no obligation to do so.

#### *What are the possible risks of taking part?*

The study has been designed in an ethical manner and there is no perceived risk to taking part in this study. The study will take place in college, during normal working hours. The research will be done around your regular schedule and focus groups and interviews will take place at time convenient to participants. If you decide to not participate it will not affect your grades or disadvantage you in any way. We will be enabling anonymised marking for all written

assessments and face-to-face assessments will have a second marker present. Furthermore, XXXXXX College operates a two-stage verification process of all marked work. A range of submissions from each assessment will be verified internally by another teacher and then verified again by an external moderator.

If for any reason you feel uncomfortable with participating or feel that you do not fully understand what the study is about, you should decline to participate. You do not need to offer a reason for declining to participate.

*Will what I say in this study be kept confidential?*

All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) in accordance with guidelines published by British Educational Research Association (BERA). Data will be anonymised at point of collection. Extracts from the study may be used in the publication of research material but will be anonymised. Data generated by the study must be retained in accordance with the University of Central Lancashire's policy on Academic Integrity and data generated in the course of the research will be kept securely in paper or electronic form for 5 years from the end of the project.

*What should I do if I want to take part?*

You can take part by signing and returning the consent form to your teacher, or by contacting the researcher in person or by email.

*What will happen to the results of the research study?*

The results of the research will be used in my dissertation or thesis for the partial completion of my Doctorate in Education. If the research is published in the public domain, a link will be shared with the College for distribution.

*Who is organising the research?*

I will be conducting the research personally as a student at UCLan. I am also a member of the faculty at XXXXXX College, within the Public Services School.

*Who has reviewed the study?*

The research has been approved by the University of Central Lancashire Research Ethics Committee and by the management at XXXXXX College.

*Contact for Further Information*

For further information feel free to contact me on the above provided details.

If you have any concerns about the way in which the study has been conducted, they should contact University Officer for Ethics ([OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk](mailto:OfficerforEthics@uclan.ac.uk)).

Thank you for taking the time to read the information sheet.

Kind Regards

Nasrullah Anwar MA  
Lecturer in Public Services

## Appendix 2: Consent Form



### CONSENT FORM

An exploratory study of the value added by learning communities for adult learners within a FE/HE setting

Please read the following statements and initial the boxes to indicate your agreement

- Please initial box
1. I confirm that I have read and have understood the information sheet dated 24/08/20 for the above study, or it has been read to me. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.
  2. I understand that taking part in the study involves taking part in online and offline video/audio record interviews and focus groups, being observed in college when studying and follow-up face to face audio recorded interviews.
  3. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to stop taking part and can withdraw from the study at any time without giving any reason and without my rights being affected. In addition, I understand that I am free to decline to answer any particular question or questions.
  4. I understand that if I withdraw from this study data collected prior to my withdrawal that has been anonymised will be retained but no further data will be collected.
  5. I understand and agree that my participation maybe audio recorded / video recorded and I am aware of and consent to use of these recordings for the following purposes:
  6. I understand that the information I provide will be held securely and in line with data protection requirements at the University of Central Lancashire.
  7. I understand that signed consent forms and original audio/video recordings will be retained in a secured UCLan OneDrive folder, only accessible by the Student Investigator until the completion of the research study.
  8. I agree to take part in the above study.

Participant name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

Name of person taking consent \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

Signature \_\_\_\_\_

**Principal Investigator**  
Claire Stocks

**Student Investigator**  
Nasrullah Anwar

Version 0.02

## Appendix 3: Interview Questions for Support Staff

1. What does the term learning community mean to you?
2. What do you feel is your role in relation to learning communities?
3. Has Covid-19 made fulfilling this role any more difficult?
4. What measures have you put in place to overcome these difficulties?
5. Do you want to add anything else?

## Appendix 4: Faculty Interview/Focus Group Questions

1. Which of these activities would you include as a part of a learning community: lecturing, class-based group work, workshop sessions, conversations about studies during break times, research groups and school events?
2. Where have you seen learning communities taking place? For example, the classroom, library, study area, restaurant/café area, or even outside?
3. What role do you see for faculty members in a learning community? Developmental, Supportive or Instructive?
4. How important is rapport building for nurturing a learning community? Do you feel that rapport building contributes to students becoming better learners?
5. And what actions have you taken in the past to develop a sense of community in your learners?
6. How has being online affected you and your students as a learning community?
7. How do you feel about me observing your lessons that you have recorded on Microsoft Teams, and asking you questions, considering I'm also a colleague?

## Appendix 5: Focus Groups Questions

### Focus Groups Questions Based on Initial Hypotheses

- Which of the following activities would you include as part of your learning communities: classroom-based group work, formal study sessions, conversations about studies or college work during break time, trip planning meetings, research groups, school events?
- Which of these behaviours (show illustrations or written descriptions of observed behaviour) do you feel represent people engaging with learning communities?
- Bearing the previous two questions in mind, where do learning community activities usually take place, i.e., classrooms, study areas, social areas; be as specific as you can.
- When you are working with other members of your community, in what ways do you feel supported? How does this benefit you?
- When you are working with other members of your community, have you benefitted from being instructed (helped to understand something better, learned something new, or able to apply something better, etc) by either another student or a faculty member?
- After working with other members of your community, do you feel you have developed new skills, qualities and attributes, e.g., communication, social skills, team-working? Do you believe this is a direct result of engaging in learning communities? Can you share examples of how you are better able to something as a result?
- Do you feel more comfortable with working with the same set of people rather than working with other students and lecturers? Why do you think that is?
- Do you believe that previous interactions with certain members of your learning community make it more likely that you will want to work with them again? Can you share examples of when this has happened?
- How does working with the same people help or impede you to complete tasks better? Be careful not to sound as if you already expected them to answer “yes” to the question about working with the same people.
- How has being online affected you as a community of learners?
- How do you feel about me observing you as a researcher and asking you questions like in this focus group?

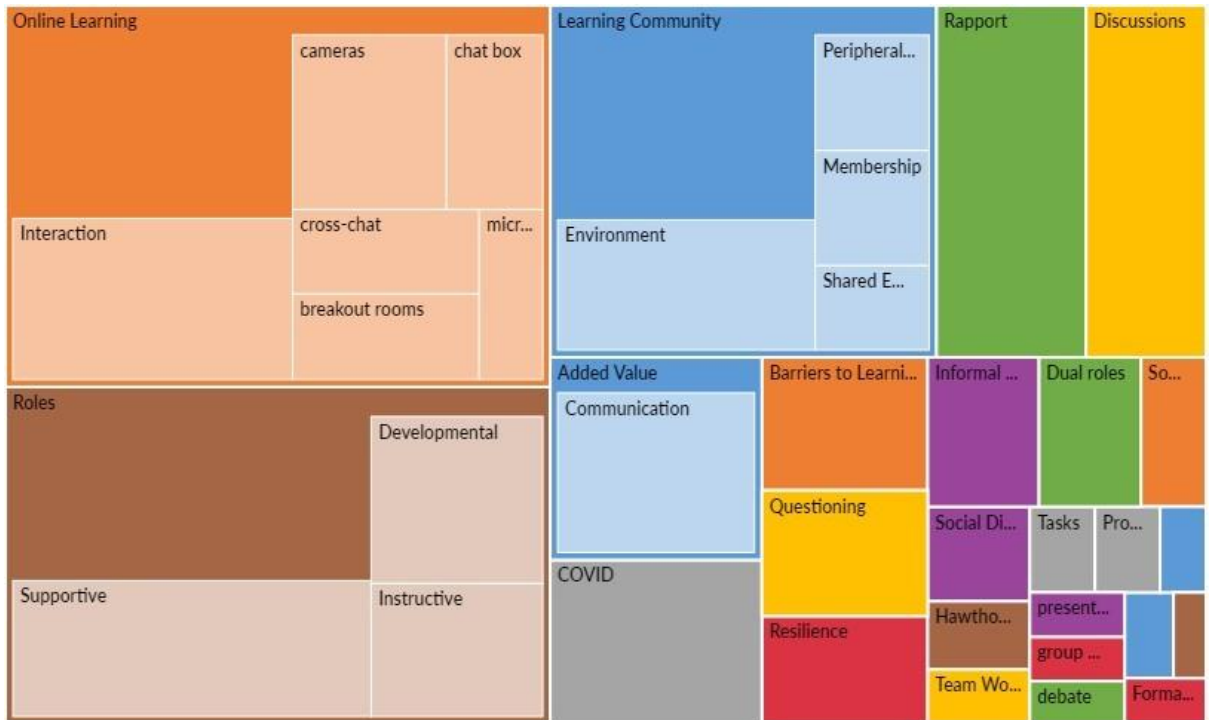
## Appendix 6: Initial Codes Generated from Data

Name	Files	References
Added Value	1	1

Anxiety	2	2
Barriers to Learning	6	14
breakout rooms	2	13
cameras	2	22
chat box	2	14
Communication	8	30
COVID	6	25
cross-chat	2	13
debate	1	3
Developmental	7	24
Discussions	2	31
Dual roles	5	11
Environment	8	18
Formal learning	2	2
group work	2	3
groupthink	1	2
Hawthorne Effect	4	5
Informal Learning	3	12
Instructive	6	19
Interaction	4	37
Learning Community	8	40
Locations	6	14
Membership	6	11
microphone	2	9
Online Learning	7	42
Peripheral Participation	5	11
presentations	1	3
Problem Solving	2	4
Questioning	2	15
Rapport	6	38
Resilience	6	13
Roles	10	49
Shared Experiences	4	8
Social Distancing	4	7
Social Media	3	3
Sounding Off	3	7
Supportive	7	41
Tasks	2	4
teacher talk	2	3

Team Work	4	4
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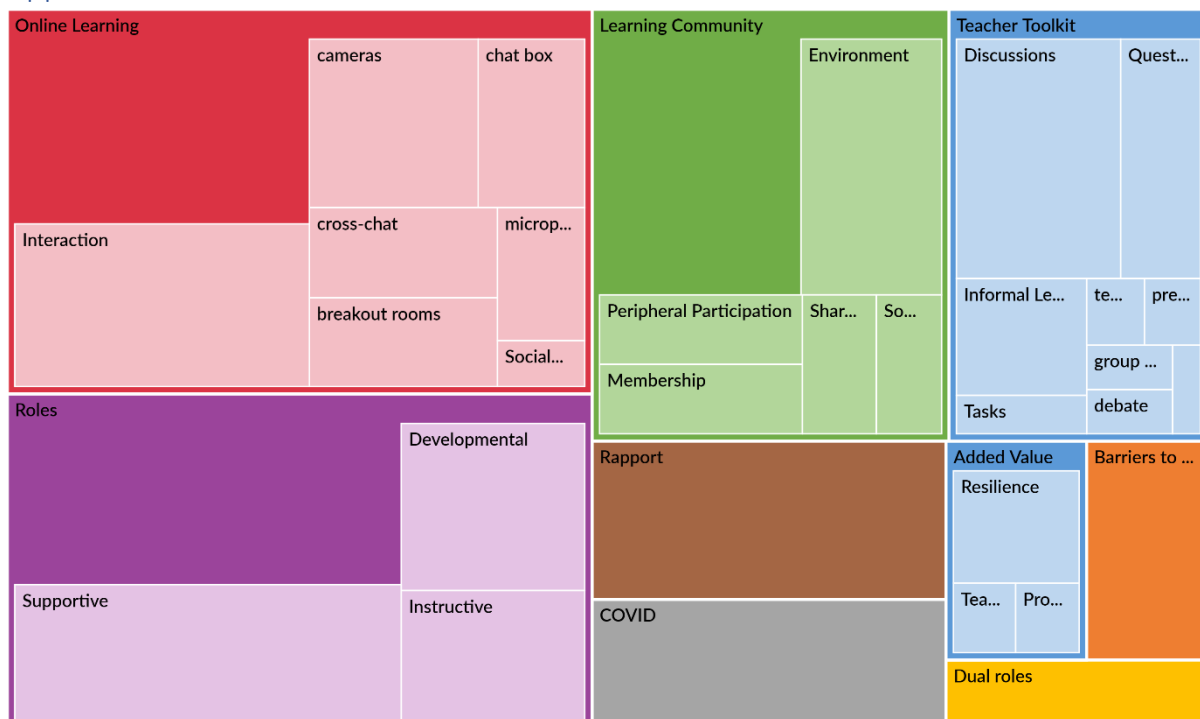
### Appendix 7: Hierarchy Chart Visualisation



### Appendix 8: Top Level Codes in Hierarchies

Name	Files	References
Added Value	0	0
Barriers to Learning	15	34
COVID	13	37
Dual roles	7	21
Learning Community	17	68
Online Learning	16	62
Rapport	16	70
Roles	17	77
Teacher Toolkit	0	0

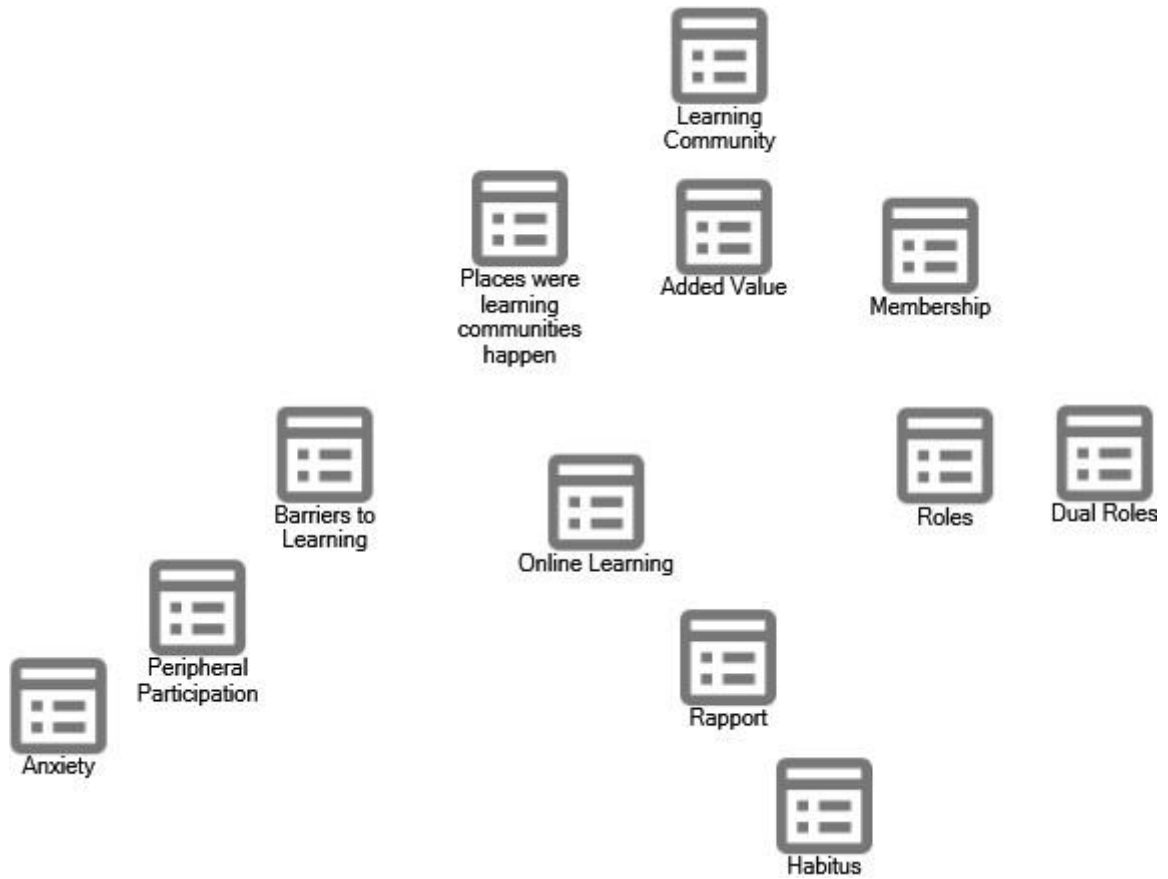
## Appendix 9: Visualisation of Parent and Child Nodes



## Appendix 10: Memo Headings

	Name	Codes	References
	Added Value	6	10
	Anxiety	8	13
	Barriers to Learning	12	25
	Dual Roles	8	17
	Habitus	9	14
	Learning Community	7	21
	Membership	5	12
	Online Learning	21	58
	Peripheral Participation	13	23
	Places were learning communities happen	4	11
	Rapport	15	33
	Roles	22	87

## Appendix 11: Themed Memos Structure



## Appendix 12: Padlet Responses

Q1: What does learning community mean to you?	Q2: In the past, how have you participated in a learning community	Q3: What does your learning community look like now?
<p>My learning community is really important. I find when we are together, our collective ideas, thoughts, and opinions are an essential component to further my learning. I also find that this is the best environment to problem solve. "Two minds are better than one"!</p>	<p>I have always been included in some form of learning community in the past. They are an essential part of gaining knowledge and bettering performance. A learning community doesn't have to be in the same room, it can be across the country on the telephone as long as you are collectively trying to achieve better. Coming from a results-driven sales background, having the shared opinions, thoughts, ideas ensured success. It also provided a really effective problem-solving tool. We would always hear about successful attempts to better performance, and actively</p>	<p>At the moment i really miss face to face interaction. Having the opportunity to bounce ideas and thoughts off others is lacking. I'm having to think about problems and issues before hand, which means I loose the advantage of asking spontaneous questions. Having people to be a sound board when smaller issues arise in the moment just isn't there, which above all is frustrating. I feel somewhat alone when it comes to independent learning. Having reassurance that I've done or said the right thing makes all the difference.</p>

	encouraged to explore the potential to do better. Learning communities gave way to try new things, and never be afraid of failure; the likelihood is someone has already failed and has the solutions to ensure you don't. Having a fresh new perspective can mean the difference between good and exceptional!	
where a group of people learn about a certain subject together	regrettably I have only participated in school and not so much any further learning	Currently very technological. Very impersonable due to current restrictions
Learning communities are important for a sense of belonging, support and shared consciousness.	I have always had a form of a learning community throughout school and college through new friendships i've made along the way. In the past it has been in the form of help each other revise for tests and working together on homeworks when we had been struggling	When we were in college, this was in the form of sitting together in the study room, working together to do tasks and sometimes just chatting so we have a balance of work and fun. At the moment, this is more online in group chats and video calls
A learning community to me is a group of individuals that help and support one another .important for progress	Through school and college I have initially made friends from lessons i have taken , building the bonds and creating the community in the lessons and out to help with work and also socialise as a result of learning together, its nice to make friends and also learning and working together	At the moment it's just messaging through group chats and seeing each other on the video calls for lesson. Its harder now as when we were able to go into college we were able to sit together in the study room and work together helping each other out, being able to just ask someone next to you their ideas or ask them a questions was much easier and helpful, its a lot harder currently being online all the time
I think a learning community is important as you are all learning something new and can support and share thoughts and ideas to help each other's learning.		
a learning community is very helpful as having a group of people to share discuss and get along. It's useful when learning or		


studying a subject, it really makes the time worthwhile having the people with you on the same wavelength and have the same ideas as you		
A learning community to me is important as people learn differently or at different rates. As a learning community group is it easy to feel comfortable asking for more info on different topics along with having meaningful conversations around each topic were interested in enhancing lectures into conversation		


### Appendix 13: List of participants (anonymised)

Faculty Members	
LI	Lecturer
CU	Lecturer
CG	Lecturer
EI	Lecturer
KD	Faculty Librarian
WN	Faculty Librarian
Students	
DJ	BA CSC
JH	BA CSC
MC	BA CSC
PD	BA CSC
UH	BA CSC
VN	BA CSC
BC	Access to HE
BO	Access to HE
BQ	Access to HE
CO	Access to HE

DB	Access to HE
DC	Access to HE
DI	Access to HE
DN	Access to HE
FD	Access to HE
FH	Access to HE
HQ	Access to HE
OC	Access to HE
UE	Access to HE
UI	Access to HE

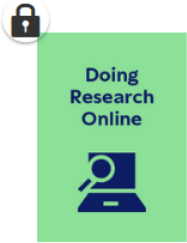
# Appendix 14: Adapting an Ethnographic Study of Learning Communities During a Global Pandemic

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## Adapting an Ethnographic Study of Learning Communities During a Global Pandemic

By: [Nasrullah Anwar](#)  
Product: Sage Research Methods: Doing Research Online  
Publisher: [SAGE Publications, Ltd.](#)  
Publication year: 2022 | Online pub date: March 01, 2022  
Discipline: [Education](#)  
Methods: [Ethnography](#), [Focus groups](#), [Data collection](#)  
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781529600872>  
Keywords: [adult education](#), [adult learning](#), [colleges](#), [learning communities](#), [publications](#), ... Show all

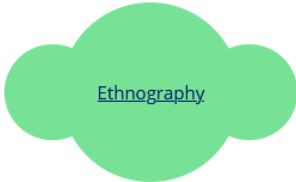
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Case

### Abstract

This case study is an example of how a real-world ethnographic study can be adapted for online data collection during the coronavirus pandemic. The aim of the study was to explore the value of learning communities for adult learners in an adult campus at a tertiary college in the northwest of England. However, the study was disrupted by lockdowns and adult learners having to move to online study. This case study will demonstrate how a flexible ethnographic methodology was used to adapt the research to the changes dictated by the external environment, moving from in-person to virtual research. An important finding of this study is the importance of rapport building for online research and learning. This case study will help other researchers and students to consider building in contingencies during research design and to choose methods that afford flexibility in the field.

On this page



[Ethnography](#)

Discover method in the Methods Map

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