

## Reimagining the Learning Management System as a “Third” Space

**Authors :** Christina Van Wingerden

**Abstract :** This paper focuses on a sense of belonging, isolation, and the use of a learning management system as a “third space” for connection and community. Given student use of learning management systems (LMS) for courses on campuses, moderate to high use of social media and hand-held devices, the author explores the possibilities of LMS as a third space. The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated student experiences of isolation, and research indicates that students who experience a sense of belonging have a greater likelihood for academic retention and success. The impacts on students of an LMS designed for student employee orientation and training were examined through a mixed methods approach, including a survey, individual interviews, and focus groups. The sample involved 250-450 undergraduate student employees at a US northwestern university. The goal of the study was to find out the efficiency and effectiveness of the orientation information for a wide range of student employees from multiple student affairs departments. An unexpected finding emerged within the study in 2015 and was noted again as a finding in the 2017 study. Students reported feeling like they individually connected to the department, and further to the university because of the LMS orientation. They stated they could see themselves as part of the university community and like they belonged. The orientation, through the LMS, was designed for and occurred online (asynchronous), prior to students traveling and beginning university life for the academic year. The students indicated connection and belonging resulting from some of the design features. With the onset of COVID-19 and prolonged sheltering in place in North America, as well as other parts of the world, students have been precluded from physically gathering to educate and learn. COVID-19 essentially paused face-to-face education in 2020. Media, governments, and higher education outlets have been reporting on widespread college student stress, isolation, loneliness, and sadness. In this context, the author conducted a current mixed methods study (online survey, online interviews) of students in advanced degree programs, like Ph.D. and Ed.D. specifically investigating isolation and sense of belonging. As a part of the study a prototype of a Canvas site was experienced by student interviewees for their reaction of this Canvas site prototype as a “third” space. Some preliminary findings of this study are presented. Doctoral students in the study affirmed the potential of LMS as a third space for community and social academic connection.

**Keywords :** COVID-19, isolation, learning management system, sense of belonging

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