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Interrogating students' perceptions of their online learning experiences with Brookfield's critical incident questionnaire

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This article discusses whether the very act of accessing online students' experiences of teaching may itself foster students' sense of belonging to a learning community. The article reports and reflects on the application of Brookfield's critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) in postgraduate courses delivered online in 2008–2010 through the University of Newcastle in Australia. The anonymous CIQ is designed in part to access students' views of teaching practice, and was deployed as part of an ongoing interest in quality teaching. The article makes recommendations for deploying the CIQ in online learning spaces and concludes with some reflections on unexpected opportunities thoughtful CIQ deployment may provide. The practice of sharing students' anonymous responses may have helped to foster students' sense of a shared learning community. This may be particularly valuable in an asynchronous online learning context where students are typically geographically isolated from one another.

Keywords: reflecting on teaching; tertiary teaching and learning quality; Brookfield's critical incident questionnaire; online learning communities

Introduction

This article deals with accessing online postgraduate students' experiences of teaching practice, and explores whether the very act of seeking students' perspectives may foster students' sense of belonging to learning communities (Rovai, 2002). To access students' experiences, I used an amended version of Brookfield's critical incident questionnaire (CIQ) (1995), inspired by Brookfield's four lenses framework for developing critical reflection on teaching practice. One of Brookfield's four lenses is students' perspectives, and the CIQ is designed to access students' experiences of teaching. However, the act of using the CIQ has raised the possibility that thoughtful CIQ deployment may itself constructively contribute to fostering a sense of community (Rovai, 2002) among cohorts of students engaged in online learning, an increasingly prevalent form of adult education delivery (Dawson, 2006). A sense of community is understood to support learning outcomes and student satisfaction of learning experiences (Black, Dawson, & Priem, 2008; Lear, Ansource, & Steckelberg, 2010). The notion of learning or classroom community is consistent with currently prevalent socio-constructivist education practices, which emphasize learning as a social and interactive activity (Dawson, 2006, p. 153; Levine Laufgraben & Shapiro,

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2004). Learning was recognized as a social activity long before the advent of online education (Lear et al., 2010, p. 72), and conceptualizing learning as a social and interactive activity provides a rationale for fostering a sense of community in online cohorts: “the development of an online learning community is an important approach to enhance the learning of online students” (Tu & Corry, 2001, p. 245).

Rather than reporting on the design and results of an intended research project, this article reports on activity undertaken to support high-quality teaching through reflection on practice. As such, this article is perhaps more reflective in style than it would otherwise be. Even so, the outcomes reported here may be of interest to scholars of classroom community and online teaching and learning. The first section briefly introduces and reviews (a) the CIQ, its context and rationale for use, and (b) the literature on learning communities. I then describe the deployment of the CIQ in an online learning context at the University of Newcastle in Australia. Some students’ responses to the CIQ in two sets follow. Firstly, responses as anticipated, given the purposive use of the CIQ (i.e., to access students’ perspectives of teaching). Secondly, responses suggesting thoughtful CIQ deployment may itself contribute to fostering a sense of community. Later sections discuss the implications of the results, with particular attention to the second set of student responses, and conclude the article.

Brookfield’s CIQ and learning communities

Brookfield’s CIQ

Critical reflection on teaching practice offers enhanced teaching and learning practice informed by values in a conscious and systematic way (Brookfield, 2006b; Hedberg, 2009; Tripp, 1993; Woods, 1993a). The term *critical* “is deeply perverse in the plurality of connotations and interpretations (some of them contradictory) it provokes” (Brookfield, 2005, p. 11). Critical reflection, as used by Brookfield (1995), refers to developing awareness of the assumptions that lie behind teaching practice. Brookfield (1995) explicitly named critical reflection as “inherently ideological” and “morally grounded,” and tied it to values of “justice, fairness and compassion” and democratic processes (pp. 26–27).

In seeking to reflect critically on teaching, Brookfield (1995) advocated “look [ing] at what we do from as many unfamiliar angles as possible” (p. 28). Brookfield (1995) drew on Tripp’s discussion of critical incidents (1993) and Woods’ discussion of critical events (1993b) to refer to incidents that are understood to be important, and that invite reflection, which can reveal hidden assumptions practitioners may hold in relation to their teaching and their students’ learning. “Critical incidents are vivid happenings that for some reason people remember as being significant” (Brookfield, 1995, p. 114). CIQs are deployed in part to provide access to students’ view of teaching practice. This is consistent with Brookfield’s *students’ eyes lens* (1995), one of four lenses useful for systematic critical reflection on teaching (pp. 28–39).

Insights achieved through use of this students’ eyes lens complement those generated through the *colleagues’ experiences* lens, valuable because colleagues offer another set of eyes: a trusted, alternate, and expert perspective on teaching practice. The *autobiographies as teachers and learners* lens is valuable because it encourages teachers to put themselves in the role of the other; that is, draw on teachers’ own earlier student experiences. The *theoretical literature* lens is useful to identify

generic elements of teaching practice and so enable articulation of teaching experiences (Brookfield, 1995, pp. 28–39).

The CIQ is designed to be used weekly for the term of an adult education course. Students are allocated the last 5–10 minutes of a class to complete the CIQ anonymously. After class, the lecturer briefly reviews students' responses and draws out themes (Brookfield, 1995, p. 116). The following week, at the beginning of class, the lecturer shares with students common themes drawn from their responses. The lecturer may refer to individual comments also. If the lecturer chooses to make changes to teaching on the basis of students' responses, these changes are also explained. The lecturer may also re-explain or re-justify aspects of the course design and conduct that may not be changed.

The CIQ is a valuable tool to support critical reflection on teaching practice. It is a qualitative tool, designed for repeated use, and designed to reveal assumptions about teaching practice that, upon exposure and reflection, can allow for better quality teaching. The primary purpose of the CIQ is to assess student critical thinking, so as to allow reflection on the part of teachers in support of continued professional development (Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008, p. 410). In the next section, I shift focus to learning communities, in order to later link the two literatures.

Learning communities

Learning communities—individuals who come together for the purpose of learning—support learning through reducing attrition, promoting critical thinking skills, and facilitating achievement of learning goals (Dawson, 2006, p. 154). Learning (or classroom) communities support collaborative learning, which “enhances the active exchange of ideas within small groups and increases interest among the participants, but also promotes critical thinking” (Tu & Corry, 2001, p. 258). The argument that a sense of community supports learning outcomes and student satisfaction of learning experiences is common in the literature (e.g., Black et al., 2008; Dawson, 2006; Lear et al., 2010; Ni & Aust, 2008; Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010). Classroom community is an aspect of both face-to-face (FTF) and distance learning environments.

Attention to building community in online learning spaces is important in part because “in distance education programs ... it is a “sense of community” that attracts and retains learners” (Rovai, 2002, p. 199). Previously, Rovai (2000) drew on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) earlier and broader work on communities to define classroom community specifically as a psychological community characterized by:

A feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, that they have duties and obligations to each other and to the school, and that they possess a shared faith that members' educational needs will be met through their commitment to shared goals. (Rovai, 2000, p. 287)

Rovai (2000), Rovai (2002) and Rovai and Whiting's (2005) discussion is specifically of distance education contexts, such as online learning, also referred to as asynchronous learning networks (ALNs).

Yet the literature on the importance of community for learning in the online space is not exclusively supportive of this argument. Lapointe and Reissetter (2008) suggested that a majority of, but not all, students who value online learning also value opportunities to interact and be part of a learning community. A minority of students who value online learning value the flexibility and independence it offers,

and have little interest in engaging with peers. This led Lapointe and Reisetter (2008) to suggest that the existence of a minority of students not seeking the opportunity to interact with peers raises questions about the manner and extent to which exchanges are usefully required of students in online learning environments.

The online learning context varies from the traditional (i.e., FTF) tertiary education context in important ways (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Dillon, Wang, & Tearle, 2007). My own experience in teaching on campus and online since 2004 also attests to this. Although students in online classes learn content and report satisfaction with their learning similarly to students in FTF settings, students in each context report “decidedly different learning experiences” (Reisetter, Lapointe, & Korcuska, 2007, p. 55). Yet while there are differences between FTF and online learning contexts, Brookfield (2006b) warned against simply accepting the (double) “caricature” of online education as “an alienating, disembodied process in contrast to the warmth and fluidity of bodies gathered together in face-to-face classrooms” (p. 210).

Asynchronous discussion board interaction remains the most common form of interaction in online learning spaces (Sharpe & Pawlyn, 2009). Rovai’s classroom community scale (CCS) measures discussion board exchange volumes to provide a quantitative measure of sense of community among cohorts of students engaged in learning in ALNs (2002). Dawson further developed Rovai’s CCS (2002) to demonstrate “the existence of a significant relationship between student frequency of communication and sense of community” (Dawson, 2006, p. 160). Other researchers have made similar efforts to link sense of community with students’ online activity, as logged by online learning management systems such as Moodle and Blackboard (e.g., Black et al., 2008).

Students’ interaction with course content, with peers, and with the instructor support students’ development of a sense of community, and this in turn supports learner engagement (Lear et al., 2010). Learners’ exchanges, their engagement, and their sense of community may even constitute a virtuous spiral; that is, a self-reinforcing process that supports achievement of learning goals. Findings linking student exchanges, student persistence, and achievement are consistent with this (e.g., Morris, Finnegan, & Wu, 2005).

In the next section, I describe the deployment of Brookfield’s CIQ in an online context (1995). As noted above, my purpose was to access students’ perspectives on my teaching, in the context of an interest in teaching excellence. However, responses suggest CIQ deployment may also present an opportunity to foster students’ sense of belonging to a learning community in the online space.

Deploying Brookfield’s CIQ in the online learning space

CIQs can be used and adapted in various ways (Adams, 2001; Gilstrap & Dupree, 2008). The second edition of Brookfield’s *The Skillful Teacher* (2006b) includes discussion of using the CIQ in online learning environments. However, a recent and comprehensive literature review (Keefer, 2009) identified only one published study that refers to the CIQ being used in an online context (Glowacki-Dudka & Barnett, 2007). In this article, I draw on the experience of deploying the CIQ since 2008 through two core courses delivered online through the University of Newcastle, as part of the Master of Environmental Management and the Master of Environmental and Business Management. The discussion in this article is informed by use of the CIQ over several years, but data included in this article are all from one use of the

CIQ in 2010, deployed toward the end of the first week of *Sustainability and Ecosystem Health* (Albrecht, Evans, & Phelan, 2007/2010), offered in second trimester (late May to mid August). The CIQ was deployed purposively (Burnham, Lutz, Grant, & Layton-Henry, 2008); that is, as appropriate to the research aim, which was to access student experiences during the first week of trimester—the earliest and perhaps most bewildering stage of an online course, particularly for students new to an online learning context. The single (rather than repeated) use of the CIQ is a variation on the intended weekly use for which the CIQ is designed. Other surveys or questionnaires may have also been suitable.

The standard CIQ is worded for use in an FTF learning situation. The wording of the CIQ questions as used in FTF learning contexts has been amended by various authors for varied reasons (see Brookfield, 2006a; Keefer, 2009; Taylor, n.d.). Using the CIQ in an asynchronous online education delivery context required relatively simple modification to question wording to refer to a specific course module week (i.e., week 1) rather than a particular class period. Brookfield's (1995) standard CIQ questions refer to an on-campus, in-class learning period; for example, the standard wording for question 1 is as follows: "At what moment in *class this week* did you feel most engaged with what was happening?" (emphasis added). These standard questions were modified as follows:

- *Question 1:* At what moment in this week's discussion did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
- *Question 2:* At what moment in this week's discussion did you feel most distanced from what was happening?
- *Question 3:* What action that anyone (whether instructor or fellow student) took in this week's discussion did you find most affirming and helpful?
- *Question 4:* What action that anyone (whether instructor or fellow student) took in this week's discussion did you find most puzzling or confusing?
- *Question 5:* What about this week's discussion surprised you the most? (This could be something about your own reactions to what went on, or something that someone did, or anything else that occurs to you.)

Brookfield (2006b, p. 198) has provided a similar rewording of the standard CIQ questions for online use.

The online courses in which the CIQ has been deployed are delivered via the Blackboard learning management system (LMS) used at the University of Newcastle, and structured around 12 learning modules. Each module runs for one week, with students and the lecturer making contributions to the course discussion board across the week.

The CIQ was made available to students enrolled in online courses through the surveys area in each Blackboard course site. Participation was voluntary and anonymous. Asynchronicity in the course overall was reflected in the period during which the CIQ was made accessible for student responses: during the final two days and until two days after the period for which a sense of the student experience was being sought, that is, week 1.

However, respondent anonymity through surveys in the Blackboard LMS can be partially compromised where respondents do not all complete a survey simultaneously. Blackboard updates its records in Gradebook of who has completed a survey as students complete the survey. In theory, a user with instructor privileges

(i.e., a lecturer) could repeatedly check to see when Gradebook records a student as having completed the survey, then download the results from Gradebook, thereby attributing the single set of responses to a particular student. As well as being unethical and counter to the purpose of CIQ deployment, in practice this would be a highly effort-intensive and time-consuming activity. Nevertheless, it remains a possibility.

In deploying the CIQ online I advised students that Blackboard's functioning allowed this theoretical possibility, committed publicly to ensure students' anonymity, and did not seek to identify individual student responses. An alternative approach that ensures anonymity of individual students' responses would be to establish a dedicated CIQ discussion board within Blackboard set up to allow anonymous postings. This is the approach taken by Glowacki-Dudka and Barnett (2007). However, responses would be visible to all students as soon as they were posted, perhaps influencing subsequent students' responses. Additionally, respondents could also in theory post multiple responses to each question. Alternatives outside the Blackboard LMS include online surveys. It is perhaps worth keeping in mind that the CIQ is designed not as a basis for a research project, but to quickly and easily provide an opportunity for critical reflection in the course of teaching.

Students were advised their responses to the CIQ would be collated and shared among the cohort, together with my reflections on themes drawn from aggregated students' responses. Students were also advised why this would be done: in the interests of transparency. Giving students access to their own and peers' responses demonstrates responses have been faithfully recorded through the process. The purpose of the second step, that is, sharing my reflections (standard for CIQ use—Brookfield, 1995, pp. 116–117) is to show students that their responses truly constitute feedback: their responses are received and acknowledged, and I have considered them in my ongoing facilitation of their learning experience. I am of course not obliged to act on any responses. I may or may not choose to do so. In either case, some explanation for my decision in the context of learning objectives and course structure may be helpful for students.

Responses and reflections

I begin this section by reviewing some anticipated students' responses before exploring responses that suggest the potential for thoughtful CIQ deployment to contribute to fostering community in the online learning space. Of the 50 students enrolled at the end of the first week, 27 students provided responses to the CIQ, a response rate of 54%. The CIQ has five questions, and so 27 respondents generated 135 individual responses (including two respondents leaving a total of three questions unanswered). As is common in use of the CIQ in FTF learning contexts (Adams, 2001; Brookfield, 1995), responses reported variation, including frequent contradiction, in student experiences of the same class. In this section, I draw predominantly on qualitative data analysis (Bryman, 2008) to demonstrate the richness and variation of students' experiences and illustrate the possible link between thoughtful CIQ deployment and classroom community. I also provide a limited quantitative analysis in order to indicate how widely felt students' comments are. In order to draw on both qualitative and quantitative analyses I have categorized students' responses. Categories are indicated in the text.

Anticipated responses

Student responses to the CIQ deployed in the online learning space in this instance are diverse, similar to what might be expected from use of a CIQ in an FTF learning context (Adams, 2001; Brookfield, 1995). In this section, I note some student responses to the CIQ that may be unique to use of the CIQ in an online context. Additionally I note some reflections informed by student responses.

Diversity in responses showed important differences in experiences of the first week of trimester between students new to online learning and ongoing students. The following three responses are indicative of potential variation in student experiences based in part on whether or not students are new to online learning. The responses are to question 2, “At what moment in this week’s discussion did you feel most distanced from what was happening?” The first two responses below contrast with the third:

This is my first subject as an online student, and I was very apprehensive before the Blackboard opened up, as I had no idea what I was supposed to be doing. (Student 1)

At the start of the week, simply due to the fact that I was trying to work out how the system worked, as well as the dynamics of the group. (Student 2)

I have used the BB [Blackboard] before and as a result did not feel distant at all. Front end loading [i.e., early provision of] information assisted with this nice and early. (Student 3)

Students’ responses also highlight issues that may appear mundane but clearly are important with regard to the potential for student engagement; for example, the importance of receiving course materials on time (three respondents (11% providing four individual responses) as well as familiarization with Blackboard software and online learning culture generally (12 respondents (44%) providing 19 individual responses). The following is also a response to question 2, “At what moment in this week’s discussion did you feel most distanced from what was happening?”:

When people started discussing technicalities to do with the topics on Blackboard, and I had not even done introductory reading. [P]erhaps this is because [I] haven’t yet received my textbook or perhaps [I] did not start my research early enough. Also because this is my first online course I am still generally confused about how it all works.

Thus, the CIQ has been very useful for accessing a sense of students’ varied experiences of the first week of an online postgraduate course.

Sharing my reflections on students’ responses is also important, to show students my interest in their responses. This is my reflection, shared with collated anonymous students’ responses to question 3, “What action that anyone (whether instructor or fellow student) took in this week’s discussion did you find most affirming and helpful?”:

Seems to me many folks find the opportunity to engage with others to be a source of affirmation in what for some at least is a new and somewhat daunting environment. I like the reference to an “open culture”—this is how I want the course to be, so I’m glad there’s a report that it’s being experienced that way. In terms of practicalities, the importance of me providing timely responses to folks is not a surprise (it seems to me

sometimes that “good practice” and “good manners” can overlap greatly!), and it’s good to have that message coming through strongly.

Sharing my reflections on students’ responses demonstrates to students that their comments have been received and considered.

An unanticipated opportunity: a contribution to fostering community?

Use of the CIQ on which this article reports raises the further question of the reflexive influence of the act of employing the CIQ itself in furthering group development or a sense of a shared learning community. A sense of community can be important for learning outcomes (Dawson, 2006; Lear et al., 2010; Morris et al., 2005). It may be particularly important in the online context, where students are geographically dispersed, vulnerable to isolation, and likely never physically in the company of each other, or that of the lecturer, at any time during the learning experience.

Almost all students (26 respondents (96%) providing 50 individual responses) provided responses to CIQ questions that underscore the importance of exchanges and communication between students and between students and the lecturer, toward feeling comfortable in the online learning context. The following are examples of responses to question 1, “At what moment in this week’s discussion did you feel most engaged with what was happening?”:

I felt most engaged during the introductions. The responses were all very friendly, and I felt like part of a peer group very quickly.

I felt most engaged halfway through the week. I felt that there were a number of considered responses provided. In addition, I enjoyed watching how the discussions evolved.

I think the whole first week was full of information exchange where ... everyone[’s] view was different but the concept was same. So I feel I enjoyed and discussed the whole week as different folks gave their views [at] different time[s].

Started Friday but was feeling more confident Saturday afternoon after opening and reading just about everything on line.

The introductions discussion board was a great way to engage everyone straight off. Was great to read everyone’s [sic] responses and see what a diverse group there is even though we are not sitting in a physical room to learn together.

Just reading the others responses helped. As this is my first University experience [it is] all ... a bit daunting.

The following are responses to question 3, “What action that anyone (whether instructor or fellow student) took in this week’s discussion did you find most affirming and helpful?”:

[T]he [dedicated discussion board] where people posted questions about how the course works and what they are confused about in terms of course structure, assessment etc. This helped me understand a bit more about how it all works.

When a fellow student replied to what I'd written on Bb and said that she found it a useful point.

Welcome from [the lecturer] was really nice, and particularly getting everyone to introduce ourselves.

There are a number of my classmates who are very involved with the discussion process—personal greetings, responses, getting to know you, making connections. It feels like there are some old hands at the online game who know how to make it work well. I am extremely happy to be part of this group, and enjoying it immensely.

I felt that it was a combination of everyone's [sic] perspective [sic] that helped to affirm points. Different ways of thinking about things.

The exchange of information from folks [sic] experience[s] and their view[s were] very helpful.

Those that responded directly to another's [sic] questions/comments. There were some good points of true interaction rather than one way communication.

I feel that the ... questions and responses [posted to the dedicated discussion board] are very helpful. Whilst I have not as yet submitted a response, I have been able to look through these and my answers have generally been answered before I have needed to ask.

I liked the way some students (obviously those who have completed a good few modules) took the lead on the discussions. I thought this was good and what might be more helpful is if the course leader explained how students can and should use the discussion board as online learning is new to many students.

Students' responses made positive reference to active engagement in communication (20 respondents (74%) providing 25 individual responses), as well as to the act or experience of observing others communicating (22 respondents (81%) providing 43 individual responses). Some respondents (nine respondents (33%) providing 14 individual responses) also referred positively to becoming aware of the diversity of peers' perspectives.

However, the data also contain some contradictory findings on the relationship between the volume of exchanges and students' sense of community, at least in the first week of an online course. As noted above, 26 of 27 respondents provided CIQ responses that underscored the importance of exchanges with peers and the lecturer toward feeling comfortable in the online learning space. Of those 26, six respondents (22% of all respondents, providing eight individual responses) also made reference to the high volume of online exchanges as being a barrier to their engagement. The following two responses (to CIQ questions 1 and 5) illustrate this:

[I]t did become intimidating trying to be involved when there were so many discussion threads advancing quickly.

Probably same as question three, it is my second semester and there is a difference in the more senior students and how they interact in the online student environment, their confidence comes through. This is good but for the new student it can be a little daunting, afraid to give their views. It will wear off though;o)

The basis for this finding is extremely limited. Nevertheless, it may suggest greater complexity to the relationship between discussion board exchange volumes and cohorts of online students' sense of community than may be identified through a purely quantitative analysis, as suggested by Dawson (2006). It may be that attention to qualitative aspects of discussion board exchanges (e.g., discussion participation, content, structure, timing, and evolution) will complement and enhance quantitative analyses, and so provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between discussion board interaction and online students' sense of belonging to a learning community.

Discussion

Deploying the CIQ has been helpful in accessing students' perspectives on teaching in the first week of an online course, consistent with Brookfield's (1995) four lenses approach to critical reflection on teaching practice. In some instances students' voluntary, anonymous responses confirm existing hunches about what is important to supporting students' engagement in learning; for example, the timeliness of replies to student queries by email or posted to the dedicated discussion board on the course Blackboard site (six respondents (22%) providing six individual responses). The importance of the immediacy of lecturer communication to students in online learning contexts has been discussed in the literature (e.g., Ni & Aust, 2008). Responses also showed important differences in experiences of new and ongoing students.

Other results are perhaps more surprising. For example, the strength of the feeling of destabilization reported by students whose hard copies of course materials arrived late reinforced the absolute importance of something that could easily be underestimated; that is, the timely delivery of course materials (three respondents (11%) providing four individual responses).

Deploying the CIQ online has also raised the question of the impact of the deployment exercise in fostering a sense of community among student cohorts. This may be an additional and not previously considered benefit of using the CIQ, unique to its deployment in an online environment. Brookfield (1995, pp. 118–123) has identified five benefits of CIQ use, that is, that it can (1) provide alerts to disaster, (2) promote learner reflection, (3) legitimize diverse teaching practices, (4) build trust in the classroom, and (5) suggest possibilities for teacher development.

In the single study identified in the literature that reports on use of the CIQ in an online context, Glowacki-Dudka and Barnett (2007) used the (unmodified) CIQ in part to track group development (Tuckman, 1965; Tuckman & Jensen, 1977) for cohorts of students over the terms of two online adult education courses, through Tuckman's (1965) and Tuckman and Jensen's (1977) sequence of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning. Glowacki-Dudka and Barnett's (2007) focus was on the impact of CIQ use in accordance with its design; that is, supporting students' critical reflection on their learning, rather than the reflexive effect of the act of deploying the CIQ to potentially foster a sense of community in a student cohort.

However, using the CIQ online has suggested an unintended and additional benefit for students: an unexpected contribution to a shared sense of belonging to a learning community. The act of engaging students in the CIQ, that is, announcing the CIQ, making the CIQ available, having students complete the CIQ, then reflect-

ing on student responses, and finally sharing anonymous student responses together with my reflections, fosters community in two ways.

First, by structuring a conversation between students and lecturer, CIQ deployment invites additional student interactions, beyond those directly related to specified learning activities (e.g., assessment tasks). There is a strong relationship between the volume of students' interactions and their sense of community (Dawson, 2006). The act of employing the CIQ as described in this article requires communication exchanges of students consistent with those referred to in students' CIQ responses as important to their sense of participating in and belonging to a learning community. Employing the CIQ requires communication from the lecturer to students (an email and a Blackboard announcement on Thursday of week 1, and a reminder announcement on the Monday of week 2), inviting voluntary and anonymous participation. Students' responses in turn spark reflections from the lecturer. Lastly, sharing the collated student responses and lecturer's reflections provides students with access to their peers' reporting of their experiences, as well as the lecturer's reflections on students' responses. This was announced on Thursday of week 2, shared via a dedicated discussion board, and viewed 38 times by students during the one-week period the board was available (i.e., Thursday of week 2 through Wednesday of week 3). In short, CIQ deployment supports meaning and ongoing conversation between students and lecturer.

Second, and more fundamentally, an ongoing conversation between students and lecturer about course structure and functioning may facilitate students' capacity to conceptualize and value learning as an interactive activity. The content of CIQ-anchored discussion may encourage an appreciation of learning as an interactive activity in students who have not previously considered learning in such terms. As noted earlier, socio-constructivist understandings of learning are prevalent in the literature. However, not all students will necessarily be attuned to this perspective, and instead value flexibility and independence in online learning, and not the potential for interaction with peers (Lapointe & Reisetter, 2008). Thus the CIQ, by virtue of its focus on critical reflection and its facilitation of an openly and inclusively iterative approach to course management, may also offer the opportunity for students who are not so disposed, to reflect on the possibility and value of engaging in learning as an interactive activity.

Fostering community is not a specific aspiration of the CIQ as commonly used, and is additional to the five benefits of CIQ use claimed by Brookfield (1995, pp. 118–123). However, it may be particularly useful for supporting learning outcomes and student satisfaction in the online space, where students are typically geographically dispersed, vulnerable to isolation, and unlikely to ever be physically in the presence of their peers and lecturer.

Conclusion

This article has reported on online deployment of Brookfield's CIQ with the aim to access students' experiences of the first week of an online postgraduate course. Successful deployment of the CIQ in an online learning environment confirms Glowacki-Dudka and Barnett's (2007) experience that the CIQ is usable in an online context, albeit with some simple and minor amendment in this instance. Use of the CIQ via the Blackboard LMS has revealed the potential in practice for students' anonymity to be vulnerable to compromise in the course of their participa-

tion in a CIQ or any other survey. This article has also noted alternatives to using Blackboard's survey feature for online CIQ deployment.

Even though the CIQ is designed for repeated use toward deeper interrogation of assumptions behind teaching practice, even the limited use of the CIQ in an online context described in this article has helpfully confirmed some expectations of students' experiences and revealed more unexpected aspects also. Brookfield (1995) argued that "the most fundamental meta-criterion for judging whether or not good teaching is happening is the extent to which teachers deliberately and systematically try and get inside students' heads and see classrooms and learning from their point of view" (p. 35). Online learning is a relatively new but increasingly prevalent format for tertiary education (Black et al., 2008). This suggests there is merit in tertiary teaching staff deploying the CIQ (or similar tools) to seek access to student perspectives of online teaching.

The very act of employing the CIQ online may have the unexpected and reflexive benefit of fostering the creation of a shared learning community for students in two ways. First, the act of engaging students in the CIQ, that is, announcing the CIQ, then making the CIQ available, having students complete the CIQ, then reflecting on student responses, and finally sharing anonymous, collated student responses and my (the teacher's) reflections on responses with the group overall, may have contributed to the creation of a sense of a shared learning community in the online space simply through facilitating an increased volume of student exchanges. Second, and more deeply, an ongoing conversation between students and lecturer about course structure and functioning may facilitate students' capacity to conceptualize and value learning as an interactive, social activity. Fostering community is not a specific aspiration of the CIQ as commonly used, and is additional to the five benefits of CIQ use claimed by Brookfield (1995, pp. 118–123). However, repeated use of the CIQ, for which it was designed, across the term of a course may amplify the CIQ's contribution to fostering a sense of community and so support learning outcomes and student satisfaction in online environments, where students are typically geographically dispersed, vulnerable to isolation, and unlikely to ever be physically in each others' presence, or in the presence of the lecturer.

Notes on contributor

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