

Virtual Community Outreach and its Impact on Students during The COVID-19 Pandemic at the University of the West Indies, Mona

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Abstract

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, The University of the West Indies, Mona Campus, was forced to re-examine its operations and the role of student engagement in community-based activities. Co-curricular activities serve as a progressive tool for student development and retention.

Using an exploratory qualitative approach we assessed the student services using virtual outreach programmes and their role in developing students' learning. The population sample consisted of seven students and five administrative staff from the Campus One Life programme, Chancellor Hall, and Leslie Robinson Hall. Focus group discussions and interviews were conducted and thematically coded. Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory of change was used to show the result of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation.

The findings showed that online engagement had an impact on interaction and the social aspect of learning because of the isolated virtual environment. This research proposes a model to help student services practitioners improve student engagement in online communities and explore the use of technology while examining the evolution of students' interaction.

Keywords: student engagement, virtual community outreach, social systems,

Introduction

Over the last two years, the tertiary landscape worldwide has changed significantly as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Most academic leaders were forced to shift to online platforms for teaching and learning. Not unexpectedly, administrators were encouraged to use similar types of platforms for student outreach and community-based activities, hence The University of the West Indies, Mona's (hereafter The UWI, Mona) exploration of Virtual Community Outreach (VCO). The initiative aligned with The UWI, Mona's aims to advance learning, create knowledge, and foster innovation for the positive transformation of the Caribbean and the wider world (UWI 2017). This mandate is supported through the "access frame" based on its "Triple-A" strategic frame that focuses on student-centredness and pedagogical dignity (UWI 2017). This context was important to demonstrate how student learning and welfare were maximised during this time of crisis (UWI, Mona 2022).

The closure of educational institutions because of the COVID-19 pandemic forced The UWI to examine how it operated and to re-assess how students engaged in learning, especially in out-of-classroom areas such as community-based activities. Social activism and participation are critical parts of learning and are beneficial to help students with their qualitative development. Principally co-curricular activities serve as a tool for student development, attrition, and retention (Tinto 1993). Theorists contend that the interaction directs a student's journey in the school community and affects the quality of the student experience and ultimately the throughput rate (Tinto 1993). This perspective was advanced earlier by Alexander Astin (1982) whose theory of student involvement situated co-curricular programme involvement at the core of student development. Astin defined the theory as "the quantity and quality of physical and psychological energy the student invests in the college experience" (1999, 518). Principally, the focus of the study is the motivation and behaviour of students, which differs slightly from foundational student development theories (Jones and Stewart 2016). Astin (1982) also highlighted the environment as a variable for student engagement since the college environment can influence student development. In this research, the environment is a virtual one, as we examine factors that can either inhibit or engender growth. Accordingly, the purpose of this research is to have a conversation about what existed in the virtual space while trying to encourage more students to get involved in the virtual community outreach (VCO).

The study is an investigation into the impact of COVID-19 on student involvement in VCO at The UWI, Mona Campus. At the end of the research, we propose to design a model for blended community engagement that may prove suitable for our Caribbean context. The study was guided by the following questions:

1. What is the role of students' involvement in community outreach online?
2. What are the major challenges posed by COVID-19 that affect students in community outreach?
3. What are the major benefits that students receive from participating in community outreach despite the appearance of COVID-19?
4. How can student administrators better assist students with virtual community outreach?

Theoretical Framework

Concepts of community

There are varying ways to visualise a community, but according to the Center for Disease Control (2011), there are three main perspectives one must scrutinise in the final analysis. These are namely: systems perspective, social perspective, and the virtual perspective. The study will, however, focus on the virtual perspective to fit the imperative of this research.

Virtual perspective

The CDC in its explanation of community went beyond geographically defined areas to identify virtual communities. This perspective sees people relying on computer-mediated communications to access information, form networks, and make life-changing decisions (Kozinets 2002). Social groups or groups with a common interest that interacts in an organised fashion on the internet are referred to as virtual communities (Kozinets 2002). The effectiveness and engagement of this perspective rely on the potency of these networks. The virtual perspective is the focus of this research which is to understand students' involvement in VCO which can be classified from this perspective as community networking. The study examined some of these moving parts to ascertain the quality of experience participants had and how it impacted engagement and participation.

The concept of community – the virtual community in particular – in this study is located in a tertiary educational space and as such, there is intersectionality with developmental and pedagogical perspectives. In understanding the virtual community engagement process it is critical to examine student development theories and locate them contextually in the narrative where the researcher intends to create these elements.

Student development theory

Student development theories are centred on four broad types – Psychosocial theories, Cognitive-structural theories, Person-environment interactive theories, and Humanistic-existential theories. Psychosocial theories focus on the self-reflective and interpersonal dimensions of students' lives. These theories describe how students' perspectives of their own identity and society evolve through the conflicts and crises they experience. Cognitive-structural theories explain how students think, reason, organise, and make meaning of their experiences. These theories are often sequential, with cognitive development unfolding in stages as students build upon past experiences. Person-environment interactive theories focus on how the students' behaviour and growth are directly affected by the educational environment. This type of theory is used extensively in academic advising and career services. Humanistic-existential theories describe how students make decisions that affect themselves and others (Long 2012). The most applicable types of theory that emphasise the student experience are Cognitive structure theories, and Kolb's experiential learning in particular.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory

David A. Kolb (2015) theorises that learning is the process whereby knowledge is fostered through the transformation of experience. The theory presents a cyclical model of learning, consisting of four stages, namely: concrete experience, observation and reflection, the formation of abstract concepts, and testing in new situations. Kolb's definition is in concert with constructivist theorists such as Tinto (1993) and Astin (1984).

Another aspect of Kolb's work is the developmental implications within dimensions of his model, suggesting that development is marked by increasing complexity and relativism in dealing with the world and one's experience. The

experience is therefore a crucial part of this research. Kolb's views correspond with those of the Constructivists in that he includes concrete experience as part of the learning process and requires a student to test knowledge by engaging the environment (Tinto 1993, Astin 1984).

Methodology

An exploratory research design was considered appropriate as it provided researchers with the opportunity to investigate the students' interface with the virtual world in their attempts to conduct online community outreach activities (Creswell 2013). The research was conducted at The UWI Mona Campus from December 2021 to February 2022 via Zoom. Convenience sampling, attributed to COVID-19 safety protocols, resulted in a total of ten resident advisors and student leaders, and twenty students. The latter was demarcated into three focus groups.

The sample used was the purposive, and snowball sampling techniques. The purposive sampling technique was selected as it allowed students involved in VCO and resident advisors to be a part of the group who were selected to participate in the research (Yadav, Singh, and Gupta 2019). The snowball sampling technique allowed VCO students to introduce us to other students who were a part of this activity. All referrals were invited to be a part of the focus group discussion. Additionally, five resident advisors and seven student leaders were also engaged in an interview to share with the researcher the experience of students participating in the activity (Yadav, Singh, and Gupta 2019).

Ethical Considerations

Zoom facilitated the space for both the interviews and focus group discussions. The Zoom sign-in protocol was used to have participants give consent to have the interviews recorded.

Data Process and Procedure

After the interview and focus group discussions were transcribed, the researchers undertook the coding process to ensure that all information was captured and themed based on the research questions. The information was coded utilising qualitative data analysis techniques. The data were prepared and organised,

and the transcripts, notes, documents, and other materials were all printed and reviewed by 27 February 2022. During the data collection process, all persons who were a part of the focus group discussion were given letters of the alphabet as pseudonyms while the data were being explored. Initial codes were assigned, reviewed, and revised that contributed to the themes being identified.

Findings

The analysis of the data from the interviews and focus groups identified four areas that spoke to creating a greater academic that contributes to creating a greater community connection. It was observed from the data that students are more involved through a sense of community while building academic success. It also noted some of the challenges that looked at the lack of getting involved – inadequate funds and various technological issues. To have more students being active in the VCO, it is important that the university put in place various incentives, assign credits for a task completed, and use a blended approach,

The Perspective of Student's Involvement in Virtual Community Outreach (VCO)

The UWI, Mona has seen several VCOs rising out of the COVID-19 pandemic. The purpose of these community outreach activities was to get more students involved in personal development while giving back to their community and appreciating themselves and their university. Based on the interview and focus group discussion the question asked people to identify the several types of VCO students were currently involved in. It was shared that students were currently involved in virtual mentorship programmes and advocacy groups that looked at mental health, health and wellness fora, and fitness sessions. A blended approach to VCO was recommended as some students also shared that planning of the activities was done online but they were forced to meet utilising COVID-19 protocols. All these platforms utilised Zoom, Twitter, TikTok, and Instagram live features. All students in the focus group shared that they had persons from different parts of the globe benefitting from their community outreach activities online.

Students have various roles to play in VCO. Moreover, community outreach in general provides the space where youth can grow, develop, and contribute to their community as active citizens through service and leadership (Martin

2022). In the study “Teaching to Connect: Community-Building Strategies for the Virtual Classroom,” it is found that students having a sense of community is integral to student engagement and satisfaction (Berry 2019). This was further highlighted by the facilitators.

Students found their involvement in VCO to be refreshing and an opportunity to share knowledge (Interview with Chancellor Hall facilitator 2022).

Students are currently benefiting from the advancement of being involved in community outreach and it is helping the students to manage more while trying to carry out their daily activities (Interview from One Life programme facilitator 2022).

This was particularly important as the main aim of community involvement was to build a relationship focused on common interests and was critical to academic success and student retention. Facilitators try to promote a collaborative learning experience by being mindful of individual student strengths and weaknesses while trying to channel these traits to transform an environment that promotes involvement and learning for all students. In all, students’ involvement in community outreach, virtual or other modalities, aided in developing personal skills and values needed to make good choices, take responsibility for their own lives, and be independent and fulfilled. As such, students’ involvement in VCO reflected the following roles: commitment to learning, exhibiting positive values, developing social competencies, and positive identity. These characteristics were crucial for students to demonstrate their role in community outreach and getting ahead in life.

I have benefitted from participating in VCO activities as I am better able to understand some of the challenges that others face especially during the COVID-19 pandemic as several persons had several mental health issues and we did not notice this until we had the mental health session. People were happy with the Instagram live activities and people said this helped them mentally . . . (Leslie Robinson Hall, Focus group discussion 2022).

They also serve as benefits that students will gain from participating in community outreach activities (in all modalities). For example, Darling-Hammond et al. (2020) reflected that students must be committed to learning in their VCO activities as they will need to understand the lasting importance of learning and believing in their abilities to accomplish that which they must.

... A lot of students have started to be mindful about their fitness journey as we have started by offering a training health and wellness session via Zoom with person's exercising. We have also noted that people have also started to share in the smoothie activities ... (Focus group discussion with Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

Students had the opportunity to develop and display positive values. Students engaged in VCO helped to demonstrate and develop positive values. They needed to develop strong guiding values and principles to help them with making healthy life choices. For example, students in their role must be caring and place a high value on helping others. Moreover, they must have a keen sense of promoting equality and social justice. Students must be competent enough in VCO to promote equality and reduce hunger and poverty in their communities (Martin 2022).

We have started to train and assist the ground worker's children with food and additional learning as they did not have the resources to operate out of school. We have provided laptops and organised with other students to help the ground workers' children ... (One Life programme, interview 2022).

Consequently, students involved in VCO activities must have integrity and believe in the cause that they are trying to share. This was shared by several facilitators as they tried to guide and monitor other activities.

This was evident with the group of men we are trying to monitor as we target guys from low-income families to get involved in mentorship activities. (Chancellor Hall, interview 2022).

The facilitators also reminded that students must act on their convictions and stand up for their beliefs. Moreover, they must accept and take personal responsibility for their endeavours. This was exemplified in the planning of the various mentorship activities.

Furthermore, students must develop and be socially competent to engage in VCO (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020). They must possess the required skills needed to interact effectively with peers and others.

... Sometimes it is hard to motivate students to participate in these community activities ... Because they have all sorts of issues while at home ... The constant issues of losing the internet while at home ... (One Life programme, interview 2022)

Students doing VCO, especially where leadership is concerned, must make complex decisions and cope with new situations. Additionally, students must be

able to partake in planning and decision making, possess knowledge of and be comfortable respecting others with diverse cultural/racial/ethnic backgrounds. Moreover, students must be able to resist negative issues; as well as try to develop community outreach activities while keeping all students engaged and trying to keep students eager while thinking about innovative approaches to get additional students involved in the different community outreach activities that exist (Darling-Hammond et al. 2020).

Major Challenges Posed by COVID-19 that Affect the Perspective of Students in VCO

COVID-19, as community engagement in higher education, has increasingly reflected the influence of critical pedagogy and the need for critical approaches to service-learning and community-engaged research. Based on faculty interviews and student focus group discussions, an initial analysis of the types of VCO activities that can be maintained by COVID-19 showed that service-learning needs to be successful in meeting their learning outcomes. Undoubtedly COVID-19 and all the restrictions that came with it have posed numerous opportunities and challenges that hinder students from effectively carrying out their VCO activities. Several students found COVID-19 to be an opportunity to get more involved.

COVID-19 has made it easier to dialogue and interact further distance apart [internet access, time zones], encouraged seminars and fitness sessions to go online (Focus group discussion with Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

This has also encouraged more students to get involved with other VCO activities that they now possess. For example, Chancellor Hall had more men participating in a virtual male outreach activity extending to men in other countries. However, there have been some hindrances that have happened because of the COVID-19 pandemic, as this is no longer seen as an entertainment space that students can utilise for their various activities as a lot of their academics have now been converted to the online space, as reflected in the interview.

Students having financial challenges cannot give back as much, online platforms are sapping them of energy so they do not have much to give. When you are face-to-face you get energy from others. (One Life programme, interview 2022).

The Commonwealth Secretariat (2021) described inadequate funds, tech-

nological constraints, and demoralisation as the main challenges facing youth workers. Moreover, Gallardo (2020) reflected that COVID-19 has impacted the most vulnerable populations in any society, especially those who cannot access virtual media, thus creating great hindrance for students who are enrolled in VCO activities geared towards helping those vulnerable.

A number of our students lack proper access to being online, especially currently. A lot of the times we have meetings we realise students keep getting disconnected and re-joining to ask questions (One Life programme, interview 2022).

While there is a challenge faced by the students – of lacking proper access to internet supply, we also realise that several target groups that would benefit from the outreach activities also have their struggles. These include, for example as presented by the Urban Institute (2020), that the COVID-19 pandemic has often excluded groups such as the elderly, people with limited access to the internet or with limited computer literacy, ex-offender- citizens re-entering public life after incarceration, immigrants, people with physical and mental disabilities, homeless people, people with low incomes, people who are faced with the dynamics of poverty – all have several issues utilising the internet, thus not making them parties to benefit from the VCO activities. Hence VCO programmes geared towards helping these groups are difficult to implement. In addition, with the COVID-19 pandemic, there are rising levels of income inequality. These stand as contributing factors to unequal access to public power and are indirectly affecting students in their community outreach activities in reaching the vulnerable or their community members who they want to serve (Fedorowicz et al. 2020).

At the start of the pandemic, we had to spend some time readjusting to school or re-arranging our lives, and unfortunately participating in community outreach was not at the top of our minds. It is about a year since my community met and we started to use Zoom and think about how we good give back to our community (One Life programme, interview 2022).

A break occurred at the onset of COVID-19 with regard to the involvement of persons in community outreach at the beginning of the semester. Likewise, Ogora (2021) reported that outreach meetings were halted following the outbreak of the pandemic. “The first presidential address issued several directives, among which were that public gatherings were prohibited. With the growth of both online learning and service learning, it was natural during the pandemic to see an interest in VCO activities decline. Furco (2015) wrote that “eService-Learning

serves as a vehicle for extending the reach and impact of students' service-learning experiences while ensuring that online learning activities are relevant, contextualised, and linked to civic responsibility" (77). During the pandemic, the VCO helped to build connections and community for some students in the university, and gave them a sense of purpose that kept them engaged in the virtual format. Students also seemed to benefit from the connection the online community outreach provides.

Since then, community outreach meetings have been indefinitely suspended: "face-to-face meetings with different stakeholders such as victims' communities, religious leaders, cultural leaders, the media, academic and legal institutions, and CSOs [civil society organisations] can no longer take place in the prevailing COVID-19 situation" (Ogora 2021). COVID-19 has shown that the core attributes of community engagement professionals to the work, no matter what format, remain consistent. The types of service learning that have the biggest impact on students, community partners, faculty, and campus morale focus on ways to build real connections, relationships, relevance, and a sense of civic purpose. It is important to work ahead of the course with community partners and faculty to both plan for the integration of the projects into the core course themes and to work within a critical service-learning framework that emphasises power dynamics, authentic relationships, and systems-level analysis of social problems (Seru 2021). However, with these various challenges, we can understand how other communities have become more involved in reaching out to communities.

COVID has had an impact. They no longer like virtual space anymore. Yes, freedom is there but there is an association with work and school not "fun and play" (Interview with Chancellor Hall facilitator 2022).

Lastly, Berry (2019) noted that virtually cultivating or creating a sense of community can be difficult for students. This is so, as limited opportunities exist for students to interact with their peers in person. As a result, there may be an increase in feelings of distance and this presents an undermining of the student's ability to feel a sense of connection in distance programmes. In addition, the students can struggle to create and maintain friendships while pursuing their professional and personal development (Berry 2019).

Major Benefits that Students Receive from Participating in VCO Because Of COVID-19

There are numerous benefits to gain from participating in VCO because of COVID-19. These range from learning, personal, and social to career benefits. Berry (2019) reflected that “a sense of community has academic and social benefits for students, in both online and on-the-ground programs” (11). This was reflected in the focus group discussion by several students.

As a med student, I can manage and carry out my work. I have also managed to get other students involved in fitness. They are even competitive . . . I do not have any issue with it affecting my work. I am better able to focus, especially while doing these fitness activities (Focus group discussion with Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

There are academic benefits of a sense of community. These include increased classroom participation and deep learning. In general, the social benefits of the community include an increased ability to manage stress and greater overall emotional well-being. Students who feel a sense of community are less likely to drop out of an academic programme.

All the final year’s students that I had engaged in my VCO have graduated at the top of their class. I also have one who has offered to still assist us with our meetings (One Life programme, interview 2022).

Participating in these VCO has better helped me to focus. It has helped me to balance especially through developing a hobby of engaging in fitness activities through VCO activities (Focus group discussion with Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

The statements shared by the students in the focus group discussion also demonstrate the importance of the learning benefits from VCO, which also reflects the following: positive impact on students’ academic learning; improve students’ ability to apply what they have learned in “the real world”; positive impact on academic outcomes such as demonstrated complexity of understanding; problem analysis; problem solving; critical thinking; cognitive development; and lastly, improved ability to understand complexity and ambiguity. Learning is diverse, and the hands-on experience via a virtual platform or in other modalities aid students to apply what they have learned in these modalities in the classroom settings.

Having participated in these community outreach activities, me and my friends

feel good about ourselves, especially when we help the primary school students with their schoolwork . . . There is a joy in just doing community work (Focus group discussion with One Life programme 2022).

The discussion demonstrates that there are personal outcomes that students can benefit from when engaged in VCO. For example, students will have a greater sense of personal efficacy, personal identity, spiritual growth, and moral development, as well as greater interpersonal development, particularly the ability to work well with others, and build leadership and communication skills. As reflected earlier, these are skills that students need to possess for the virtual world and they gain or strengthen them after being engaged in the VCO platform (Vat 2012). Moreover, there are social outcomes that students can benefit from. As students engage in VCO, they will have a better understanding of their community, especially in the service activity, and will aid in reducing stereotypes and help the student to have a greater intercultural understanding of their community. Being engaged in VCO activities will improve the student's social responsibility and citizenship skills. In the end, it will also yield greater involvement in community service after graduation (Rawlings 2017).

A lot of the people we ask to promote our Instagram live are social media influencers. They have a huge following, especially when they did the Instagram live about mental health in Jamaica (Focus Group with Chancellor Hall, 2022).

Students who also use the social media pages will have the opportunity to connect with professionals within the community and the community members in general for learning and career opportunities. In the end, the students' academic learning will be enhanced or improved, as well as their leadership skills, and their powerful personal efficacy can lead to greater opportunity after and during their academic tenure.

My students are involved with networking, especially when they take on a blended approach. They connect with other professionals to try and meet their objectives . . . (One Life programme, interview 2022).

On the other hand, not only do the students benefit, but so does the faculty that they belong to as well. The faculty will be satisfied with the quality of student learning. There will be new avenues to engage for research and publication through new relationships that would have been built between the faculty and the community that the student would have engaged. Great networking opportu-

nities would have been created as well with other disciplines or institutions thus overall, gaining a strong commitment to their community outreach activities. However, as the students shared, they recognised that VCO activities should be blended into its approach.

It should be blended case by case as physical aspects have benefits such as hall life and hall spirit to try and build a feeling of being refreshed and to motivate students (Chancellor Hall interview 2022).

Most of the VCO activities have been blended. A lot of our planning is done virtually (Focus group discussion with Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

Blended learning is an approach the student shared with us as an effective approach for VCO. Several students in the focus group discussion shared that they are currently involved in this approach for their VCO activities. However, this is an activity that has been employed by other students. As something our students have started to benefit from, there is a growing emphasis on building learning communities to increase student participation and foster learning in online and blended learning environments. It is argued that creating and sustaining a learning community is valuable to enhance student satisfaction and learning through community involvement (Akyol 2009). However, it has been shared that it is not an effortless process to create an effective VCO, as it must be planned and opportunities for interaction built specifically into the online spaces as they are activities that students must get involved with both virtually and face to face (Akyol 2009).

Recommendations for Students Who Participate in VCO

There are various activities for students who participate in VCO. The activities can be meaningful engagement, contribution, and development. For meaningful engagement and contribution to the VCO, students have presented the following recommendation to better support their throughput rate at the university

A student shared that a “win-win” approach is needed to get them more involved. It was therefore shared that credits need to be assigned to all their community engagement. The community engagement pedagogies, often called “service learning,” combine learning goals and community service in ways that can enhance both student growth and the common good. In the words of the National Service-Learning Clearinghouse (2019), it is “a teaching and learning strategy

that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities” (21). Community engagement is incorporated into a course or series of courses by way of a project that has both learning and community action goals.

The idea that was shared is that VCO activity collaborates with the faculty and community partners, such as non-governmental organisations or government agencies, therefore students get to apply course content to community-based activities. As students shared that they gained experiential opportunities to learn in real-world contexts and develop skills of community engagement while affording community partners opportunities to address significant needs, they also therefore believed that they should be credited and some of these activities should contribute to their GPA. While participating in VCO activities, a student shared that this form of community engagement should reflect some areas of the award.

Credit for voluntary hours, credit and incentives, motivational efforts such as phrases, and a theme day on social media (Focus group discussion with One Life programme 2022).

Additionally, the issue of low internet access by many students was a major concern; it was also shared that the university should think about how it can help students in Jamaica to gain better access to the internet by lobbying government officials to achieve this, as students were often having connectivity issues. They believed with that approach students could participate more in the VCO activities.

While students enjoyed the role they played in VCO activities, they realised that the university should think about some form of incentive to get all students involved and should also ensure that they use other social media influencers to guide the process as they also consider this opportunity as a form of networking.

Using influencers, incentives for engagement, participation, etc., one must strive to ensure that participants can provide positive feedback . . . TikTok videos, short clips, etc. (Focus group, Leslie Robinson Hall 2022).

Social science research has shown that access to social support is another important factor in academic success (Coleman 1990) and that individuals’ positions in social networks can explain success in many domains of life (Burt 2004). In a VCO activity the social influence and selection processes in friendship and advice networks (Lomi et al. 2011), and the link between digitally measured interaction networks and academic performance was found to be also successful

with students also creating and establishing a platform with regard to advocacy (Colladon 2018; Bandy 2011).

A key recommendation that was shared is that VCO must take on a blended and hybrid approach which includes virtual and face-to-face activities. This is critical as it facilitates a true picture of community-based activities.

You can engage in any form of VCO without a blended or hybrid approach. Let us take for example two group activities – our beach clean-up. We planned it virtually, but we still had to go to the activities . . . And the food we provided for people had to come and drop off, these were all face-to-face activities. (One Life programme, interview 2022).

From the study, the online or blended or hybrid learning approach will most likely be determined through contextual contingencies, such as the ability or the willingness of participants to meet face-to-face. As presented, it was demonstrated in the design, which is as follows: (i) reduces the time needed to develop group cohesion, (ii) promotes reaching higher levels of inquiry by enabling more time for the integration and resolution phases, and (iii) by trying to satisfy more students by providing multiple forms of communication (Akyo et al. 2009).

The Blended Community Outreach Model

According to Bandy (2011), Community engagement pedagogies model, often called “service learning,” can be used to better assist students in their VCO projects. The main goal of the pedagogy is to combine learning goals and community service in ways that can enhance both student growth and the common good. It has been defined as “a teaching and learning strategy that integrates meaningful community service with instruction and reflection to enrich the learning experience, teach civic responsibility, and strengthen communities.” Experiential education further looks at actions and reflections while trying to achieve objectives for the community while understanding oneself. To achieve this, we therefore must try to develop a model that considers The UWI, Mona students, facilitators, and the wider community as we try to establish the activities and determine fruitful retention and throughput for all students.

The study revealed the challenges that The UWI, Mona has as it relates to the online delivery of outreach programmes. These challenges ranged from poor technological infrastructure to a lack of inclusive planning among stakeholders.

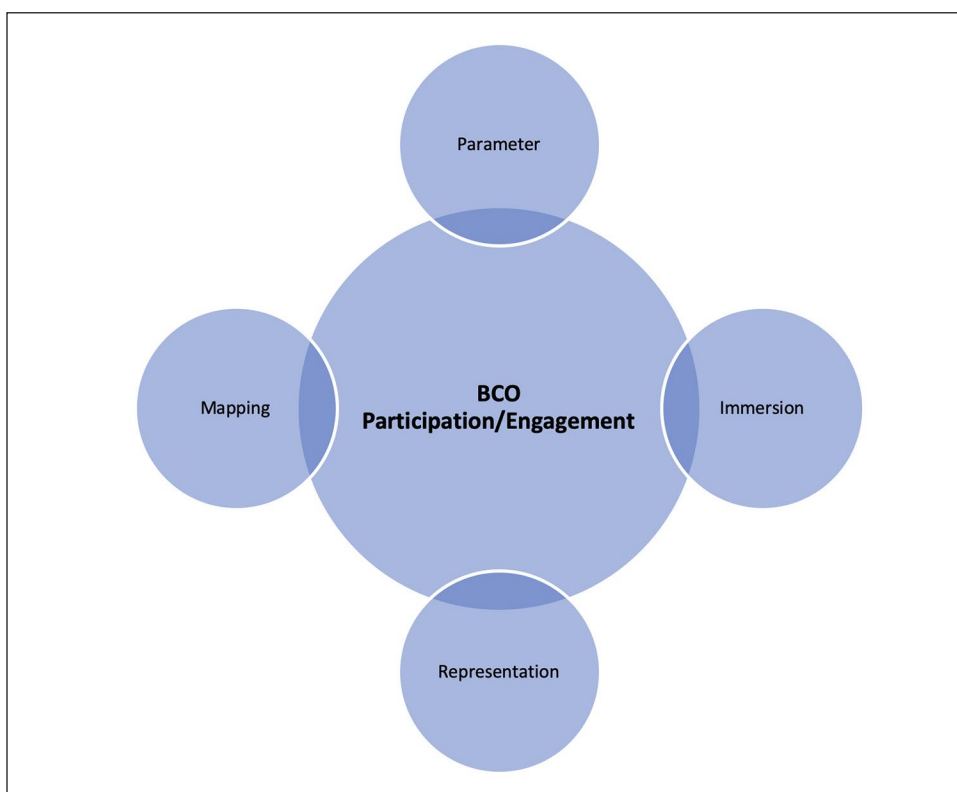


Figure 1. The Blended Community Outreach (BCO) model.

The participants in the study expressed a hope for a blended approach to programmes and outreach in particular, which they believe could benefit from the hybrid model. The participants in their responses offered feedback as to what such a model would entail. The researchers used this and theoretical knowledge to offer a construct dubbed “The Blended Community Outreach Model” (BCO) (figure 1). This model is built on the presence of the virtual connection that exists to encourage the utilisation of some of these benefits while trying to help The UWI and other universities create a workable structure to better help students’ participation and engagement.

Community engagement is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It can sometimes include partnerships and coalitions that help mobilise resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programmes, and practices (CDC 1997, 9). It is therefore essential for **Engagement and Participation** to be the

core values of the model. It is the view of a constructivist theorem that students participate and engage more in an environment where their views matter and where the opportunity presents itself for them to learn and impact the community with their knowledge and perspectives. This kind of engagement in co-curricular activities will have a significant impact on identity development and attachment to programmes in general. There is a spin-off to the extent that as a consequence, students will perform better academically in other areas which could improve retention and throughput (Strange and Banning 2001; Astin 1984; Tinto 1993).

The first element of the model is referred to as the **Parameter**. At this initial stage, there is a focus on defining community. As one can appreciate, there are various kinds of communities, and they all require certain specifications to ensure effective engagement and participation. Community outreach is also multi-dimensional and so parameter allows participants to set boundaries, establish objectives, and articulate a vision for the activity. It allows for the rights of participants to be observed, tolerated, or enshrined in the operationalisation of the activity.

The next element in the sequence is **Media Mapping** which entails community identification, media selection, and content development. Community identification helps to characterise groups or people of a particular location, time, space, etc. One must recognise and appreciate community diversity. Awareness of the various cultures of a community and other factors of diversity is vital in creating and executing community engagement approaches (CDC 1997).

Once the community profile is developed, then the media is contemplated. The media used is related to the values of the community, the nature of the engagement, and group demography. The UWI reality was not able to capture a large swathe of rural students who did not have internet access, and when they did gain access the content was not appealing to their reality. Once these areas are resolved then the model's next progression is content development. Media mapping and content development have a symbiotic relationship as the identity and value system of the community will serve as both guide and information packaging. Student participation and engagement are determined based on the overarching narrative in the environment and its overall impact on lives.

The element following media mapping is **Digital Immersion**. This element of the model speaks to the experiential aspect of participation and engagement. Based on the preceding elements, once there is a strong concept base, students will interact with their peers and others as well as the necessary systems in the space. Additionally, this element also includes immersion; this is where participants

give of themselves fully in the process. This includes both giving and receiving knowledge and in so doing interrogating belief systems and unearthing new ideas and identities. Immersion in the model provides a simulated activity that supports the idea of “participant centredness” which transforms community outreach from duty to passion.

The next and final element in particular feeds into the heart of the research process and is called **Representation**. A model must have an effective measurement mechanism. Traditionally, qualitative methodology would be used to capture participation and engagement, but in the era of hybrid learning paradigms one must elevate the discourse to capture both virtual and physical data sets. It is difficult to measure online engagement as these take the form of texts as well as objects and other concepts, but with the use of blended netnography, a wider representation can be ascertained with a mixture of techniques. This kind of measurement will enable rich data to be extrapolated from unconventional sources of information. This has potential to capture latent information as participants’ output is examined without the pretext of intrusion. The absence of intrusion coupled with the trust and popularity of the virtual space will more likely enhance responsiveness.

Conclusion

Student involvement in and engagement with the virtual community is increasing based on the global realities. The virtual community is a space where students can establish a connection and feel valued while giving back in substantive ways. The online platform provided them with the opportunity to step out of themselves and advocate for issues that are important to them.

Despite the huge potential that the virtual community presented there were also significant challenges posed by COVID-19 that impacted students negatively as reflected in figure 2. The isolation and lack of connection offline was a major challenge for students. The distance and isolation also hampered friendships which became hard to maintain. The VCO, therefore, presented an opportunity for most respondents to get involved and contribute.

The VCO provided a sense of community during the pandemic that allowed students to retain normalcy enough to excel socially and academically. The portal also helped reduce stress and anxiety levels in some students, which had an impact on their mental outlook. Additionally, the students got the opportunity to

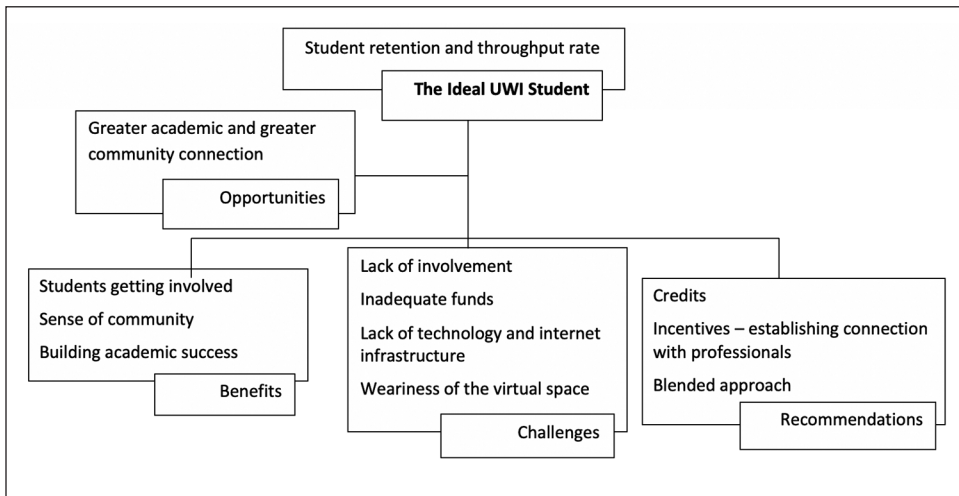


Figure 2. Reflection of the VCO programme at The UWI, Mona.

sharpen their soft skills based on the interactive nature of online platforms. Soft skills development is an important additive in any student’s life as it will inspire acts such as social responsibility and community engagement.

Students felt a win-win approach should be employed for them to participate and be engaged. They felt a need for greater collaboration between faculty and social support services. The issue of “incentivisation” for co-curricular activities such as the VCO was suggested, which ranged from the presentation of certificates to credit allotments. Additionally, they also expressed an interest in both face-to-face and online engagements such that the suggestion was to employ a hybrid or blended model as highlighted in figure 2. Based on literature and feedback, a model was created called the Blended Community Outreach (BCO) model as presented in figure 1. The BCO utilises five elements steeped in a blended net-nographic approach catering to core issues such as community identity, media mapping, and effective reporting.

In closing, COVID-19 has had an impact on both the classroom and out-of-classroom learning experiences. However, the pivot to an online format has had tangible impacts, especially in the out-of-classroom realm where students were able to leverage their soft skills to connect and develop relevant coping skills that will improve their service-learning skills. This kind of intimacy online led to an emergent model for virtual participation and engagement which will add to the body of literature and provide a benchmark for programme delivery that is greatly needed in the higher education sector.

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