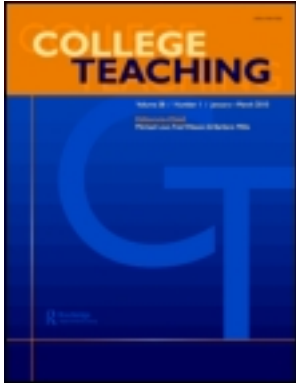


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### Managing Online Discussion Forums: Building Community by Avoiding the Drama Triangle

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# Managing Online Discussion Forums: Building Community by Avoiding the Drama Triangle

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The authors critically analyze how the concept of the drama triangle—part of the game theory associated with transactional analysis—can be used by post secondary instructors teaching online to build a sense of community and decrease students' dependence on instructors in discussion forums. The article begins with an overview of sense of community, followed by a detailed discussion on the drama triangle and its applicability to online instruction and discussion forum management. Observational data as an online instructor are presented in order to illustrate how drama triangle interactions in the online environment can stall sense of community formation. In addition, the authors provide online instructors with specific strategies for recognizing and avoiding instructor–student interactions that promote the rescuing, victim, and persecutor behaviors that detract from sense of community formation.

**Keywords:** drama triangle, online learning, online sense of community, teaching strategies, transactional analysis

The purpose of this article is to help online instructors establish sense of community within discussion forums without fostering overdependence. We address how online instructors seeking to establish and nourish students' sense of community can do so by avoiding instructor–student interactions that promote rescuing-, victim-, or persecutor-type transactions.

To provide a context for the topics in this article, the popularity of online learning is established, followed by a brief introduction to sense of community within a virtual world. Thereafter, a detailed discussion on the drama triangle and its applicability to online instruction is introduced. Personal narrative is used in order to clarify how instructors can avoid drama triangle interactions, and how doing so benefits the growth of the online learning community.

## The Nature of Online Learning

The need for quality online instruction appears to be on the rise as online learning continues to grow in popularity. In the United States, Allen and Seaman's (2011) nationwide study, which surveyed 4,523 institutions, reported the percentage of

students taking at least one online university course increased from 9.6% in 2002 to 31.3% in 2010. These researchers also noted the growth rate for online enrollment continued to exceed the overall growth of higher education enrollment, and 65% of higher education institutions consider online learning to be a crucial factor in their long-term plans.

One of the most significant attractions to online learning is the inherent flexibility of using an asynchronous learning network. An asynchronous learning network provides an online space where students can access coursework and interact with instructors and peers, all in the student's own time frame (Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter 2002). Students appear to value the access and convenience of online learning, often citing the advantages of the removal of the geographical and time barriers face-to-face learning may pose (Braun 2008; Edmonds 2010). The flexibility of online learning also allows students to maintain their lifestyle choices, such as working full time or staying at home with their children, while accomplishing academic goals (Yukselturk and Bulut 2007). In spite of the benefits flexibility provides online learners, isolation appears to be a potential concern associated with online learning.

Within the literature, the autonomous nature of the online learning environment and its contribution to student isolation has been addressed (Fisher and Baird 2005; Rovai 2002a). One way online learning researchers have conceptualized student isolation in online learning has been to apply Moore's

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transactional distance theory (Benson and Samarawickrema 2009). This theory postulated that the physical separation between learner and instructor can contribute to psychological and communication gaps and that this type of space creates the potential for miscommunication, called *transactional distance*. Based on this observation, Moore (1991) theorized that high levels of structure combined with low levels of dialogue led to greater transactional distance. For example, a module-based online course would provide a student with a high level of structure, but if the student encountered challenges (e.g., comprehension or technical difficulties) with completing the module, the lack of instructor and peer presence could contribute to transactional distance, as the student would not be able to gain immediate clarification. Under such circumstances, a student may decide that the cost of isolation in online learning outweighs the benefit of flexibility and may drop the online course.

The problem of student isolation is addressed in the literature, as student attrition rates remain markedly higher in online programs than face-to-face learning environments (Patterson and McFadden 2009). Tirrell and Quick (2012, 581) noted that “the student attrition problem is not a function of online courses but, rather, the education paradigm driving these courses” and asserted that student retention could be improved by implementing collaborative learning and community building. Since retention and satisfaction rates have been shown to improve when online learners have a sense of community (Ali and Leeds 2009; Lee et al. 2011), fostering sense of community appears to be an effective method for buffering student isolation in asynchronous learning.

### What is Sense of Community?

Sense of community is developed when people share a common environment or interest (Dawson 2006). Applying research on the concept of community to the virtual learning community, Rovai (2002a, 4) proposed that “classroom community can be constitutively defined in terms of spirit, trust, interaction, and commonality of expectation and goals.” *Spirit* was described as the feelings of connectedness within the group. For example, an online student experiencing spirit may feel as though she knows her peers in spite of never meeting face to face. *Trust* was referred to as a combination of the credibility and benevolence students offer one another (Rovai 2002b). For example, a student may gain credibility with online community members by sharing new information that benefits the group or may inspire benevolence by encouraging group members with affirming statements. Rovai (2002a) asserted that these elements create an open environment in which the learning process can occur in safety. *Interaction* was presented as communication between learners (Rovai 2002a). Since interaction within the asynchronous learning network is written, interaction within the online community appears to be influenced by the frequency of students’ writing and their ability to effectively present the intended

quality and tone. Finally, *commonality of expectations and goals* referred to the shared goal of the learning group to meet educational needs through participation (Rovai 2002a). For example, an online learner could invest in the collective learning process by promoting peer support to build group safety, offering knowledge to promote group discovery, and providing evaluation to promote group motivation.

Research on sense of community seems to suggest that both instructor and student behaviors influence online community communication dynamics (Arbaugh and Hwang 2006; Kehrwald 2010; Shea, Li, Swan and Pickett 2005; Yildiz 2009). Given that asynchronous dialogue appears to be prone to misinterpretation (Stodel, Thompson, and MacDonald 2006), interpersonal and intrapersonal conflict seems inevitable. Taking a transactional analysis approach may help online instructors minimize the communication barriers that interrupt sense of community formation.

Transactional analysis is a theory based on communication and analyzing interactions between people (Berne 1961). Transactional analysis has an extensive history of being applied to education or schools, business, and counselling (Barrow 2007; Stewart and Joines 1987). Transactional analysis appears to align well with online learning instruction because the asynchronous nature of online interactions provides opportunities for instructors to analyze online communication before responding, and transactional analysis provides tools for analyzing communication. One such tool is the drama triangle (Karpman 1968).

## THE DRAMA TRIANGLE

Steve Karpman (1968) introduced the drama triangle to explain how people cycle, sometimes unconsciously, through the roles of persecutor, victim, and rescuer when encountering interpersonal or intrapersonal conflict, or when they are inauthentic in communicating their thoughts, feelings, or needs. Karpman postulated that drama requires a victim, and that drama is perpetuated when players switch roles or bring in other players to fulfill roles.

The remainder of this article illustrates how drama triangle interactions may pose instructional barriers for developing sense of community online. In the following sections, the three drama triangle roles are presented by providing a description of each role, how to extricate oneself from the drama triangle when in each role, and how to avoid becoming part of the drama triangle when encountering each role. Following the drama triangle role sections, examples based on the first author’s experiences as an online instructor are included in order to clarify how instructors can avoid drama triangle interactions, and how doing so benefits the growth of the online learning community.

### Victim

Based on Burgess’s (2005) description of her own enactment of drama triangle roles as a parent, the victim role is

often characterized by helplessness. An individual acting as a victim may discount personal responsibility by blaming others for problems and by disengaging from problem-solving behavior (Burgess 2005; McKimm and Forrest 2010). The victim may feel a false sense of worthlessness, discounting personal strengths that could be used to problem solve (Burgess 2005; McKimm and Forrest 2010). For example, a student may pessimistically conclude that failure is inevitable and that there is no use in exerting more effort toward success (McKimm and Forrest 2010). Quite often, a victim will look to a rescuer to fix the problem (McKimm and Forrest 2010).

McKimm and Forrest (2010) explained that an individual could leave the victim role by de-personalizing the problem (i.e., moving from “I am a problem” to “I have a problem”) and by re-engaging in the problem-solving process. Stepping out of the victim role requires personal action to solve the problem and the avoidance of interactions that perpetuate victim behavior (e.g., seeking a rescuer to solve the problem). For example, an online learning student who feels overwhelmed by the amount of required reading outlined in the course syllabus could create a time management plan rather than email the instructor to lament over the amount of work that is required for the course.

When encountering a victim, one can avoid the drama triangle by acknowledging the problem, providing encouragement and helpful information, and believing that the person immersed in the victim role is capable of solving the problem (McKimm and Forrest 2010). For example, an online instructor can demonstrate a nurturing attitude toward a student who feels overwhelmed by acknowledging that the academic writing process can be grueling and by reminding the student of past academic success and problem-solving capabilities. McKimm and Forrest (2010) asserted that perpetuating victim-rescuer encounters could reinforce the victim’s feelings of helplessness, and an attempt to rescue a victim will often result in a switch of roles in which the victim persecutes the rescuer for not solving the problem properly (McKimm and Forrest 2010). The role of persecutor is explained next.

### Persecutor

Burgess’s (2005) description of herself in a persecutor role was characterized by criticism. An individual acting as a persecutor will tend to discount the abilities of others and inflate his or her own personal positive contributions to a situation (Barrow 2007; McKimm and Forrest 2010). Burgess (2005) explained that the persecutor role involves feelings of resentment for having to solve a problem, as well as blame toward the victim for not being capable of solving a problem. For example, a student may share in a public forum that the instructor is not providing enough assistance and that the people who do not know how to post properly are slowing down the conversations making it boring to post. The communication style of a persecutor tends to express superiority and may be aggressive, judgmental, or self-entitled (Burgess 2005; McKimm and Forrest 2010).

When in the persecutor role, an individual could leave the drama triangle by identifying feelings such as hurt, injustice, frustration, or anger, and finding ways to express these feelings without discounting and abusing others (Burgess 2005). For example, an online instructor who is feeling overwhelmed by the amount of emails students are sending asking for help or seeking clarification could acknowledge the lack of professional boundaries that have been set and plan to exercise more balance. Stepping out of the persecutor role requires the ability to recognize the effects negative feelings have on oneself and others and a willingness to exercise compassion for the experiences of others (McKimm and Forrest 2010).

An individual encountering persecution can avoid a drama triangle interaction by stopping the conversation (McKimm and Forrest 2010). For example, if a student emailed an instructor launching complaints about the amount of work required in the course, the instructor could acknowledge the student’s frustration and state the fact that the work will still need to be accomplished in order to gain credit for the class. Building on this same example, another way to disengage from a drama triangle interaction with a persecutor is to use compassion in order to seek clarity (McKimm and Forrest 2010). Instead of stating what a student will need to do in order to gain credit for the course, the instructor could probe for more information about why the student is feeling so overwhelmed with the intention of supporting the student to solve the problem instead of criticizing him or her. Under these circumstances, the instructor may benefit from recognizing the difference between supporting and rescuing; the role of rescuer is explained next.

### Rescuer

Rescuers tend to overextend themselves out of pity for others (Burgess 2005). An individual acting as a rescuer tends to discount the strengths and abilities of others by assuming responsibility for the problems of others (Burgess 2005; McKimm and Forrest 2010). For example, if a student posted false information in the discussion forum, an instructor might rescue the student by posting correct information, instead of inviting the student to review the post for accuracy. McKimm and Forrest (2010) described the communication style of a rescuer as controlling (i.e., advice giving) or expectant (i.e., “I know what is best”), and Burgess (2005) noted that the rescuer is prone to shift to the role of victim when overextended (i.e., expressing feelings of being taken advantage of). Building on the discussion forum posting example above, a perpetual pattern of fixing problems instead of encouraging students to make necessary corrections may result in students’ overdependence on the instructor. This, in turn, could cause the online instructor to feel overwhelmed by the students’ demands for support, which may move the instructor from rescuer into victim position and the student from victim into persecutor. As Karpman (1968) noted, role switching

perpetuates drama, whereas leaving the drama triangle interrupts the cycle of drama.

When in the rescuer role, an individual can leave the drama triangle by recognizing that people are capable of solving their own problems, by separating personal self-worth from helping others, and by setting personal boundaries (McKimm and Forrest 2010). Burgess (2005) suggested that stepping out of the rescuer role requires awareness that people cannot be changed but can only change themselves, as well as a shift from rescuing behavior to nurturing behavior (i.e., acknowledging a person's struggle without giving advice). From an online instructional standpoint, avoiding the role of rescuer provides an opportunity for students to recognize their own potential to succeed and solve problems. Instead of correcting a student's inaccurate post, an online learning instructor could post a question to encourage reflective thinking, such as, "I noticed that you and John have a difference of opinion on that point; how did you each come to your conclusions? Please cite research to support your answers." Although posting reflective questions requires more creative effort on the online learning instructor's part, it has the advantage of establishing a learning environment that encourages personal growth rather than overdependence. Support for this empowering stance aligns well with Barrow's (2007) assertion that taking on drama triangle roles compromises both the learner's and teacher's potential for creativity and vulnerability.

This section introduced how drama triangle interactions could impair interpersonal communication, with a focus on the online learning environment. Next a discussion on how avoiding drama triangle interactions could help online instructors foster sense of community is presented.

## DRAMA TRIANGLE ENCOUNTERS

As online instructors, we have stepped into all three of the drama triangle roles, and found that drama triangle interactions tended to impede our community-building efforts. However, avoiding the drama triangle helped us to maintain sense of community and even to foster it. To illustrate this position, the first author shall use a personal narrative to present her drama triangle encounters and the strategies she used to avoid them. The examples provided are based on real events; details have been changed to protect student privacy.

### Rescuer

As an online instructor, I found it challenging to effectively support students without fostering overdependence on me. At the beginning of the online course, I recognized the need for increased support because the students did not know one another and the online learning environment lacked the immediacy a face-to-face classroom could provide. As such, I observed that students were hesitant to interact with one another and would email me with their questions rather than post them in the open Question and Answer forum. Some ex-

amples of the problems students emailed me included technical difficulties, questions about learning activities, and questions about timelines. I recognized that some students were likely to feel anxiety given the unfamiliarity of the learning venue and may have felt less distress contacting me by email than making their questions public in an open forum.

When students were emailing structure-type questions (e.g., technical issues, course syllabus issues, timelines), I avoided perpetuating a rescuer-victim interaction and did not provide the student with the answer; instead, I explained where the answer could be found within the asynchronous learning network system, so the next time the student had a question he or she would be more prepared to seek answers independently. During the second week of instruction, students typically became more familiar navigating the asynchronous learning network. To decrease their dependence on me and to help empower their problem-solving capabilities, I started directing students to seek answers on their own. My scaffolding-type action (Artino 2008) aligned with McKimm and Forrest's (2010) assertion that spotting the potential for drama triangle interactions could help people avoid engaging in them. By avoiding the role of the rescuer, I was able to make effective use of teaching presence by being available, encouraging, and empowering, rather than being perceived as a "fixer."

The above example also demonstrated how teaching presence includes offering intense course structuring. I organized information within the asynchronous learning network in a consistent manner and provided clear course guidelines (i.e., course syllabus, timeline, lesson plans, and rubrics). This may have fostered students' self-efficacy by providing them with an opportunity to gain confidence in navigating the asynchronous learning network. Providing this information also contributed to Rovai's (2002a) dimension of community—the commonality of goals and expectations—by encouraging a group expectation of problem-solving behavior.

While avoiding rescuing fostered self-efficacy and sense of community, it was not always received well by students. As I did not provide the rescuing behavior some students hoped for, I encountered persecution.

### Persecutor

Students can become discouraged with instructor feedback that encourages them to engage in some reflective thought to improve their performance. For example, when students express criticism in the forums about my instructional feedback or question my assessment methods, my emotional response propels me to step into the victim role by feeling personally attacked, or to step into the persecutor role by reprimanding the student for questioning my decisions. To avoid responding from my initial emotional impulses that often align with the persecutor position, I remind myself to focus on the facts, such as the course expectations outlined in the course

syllabus, and to acknowledge the students' primary feelings, such as frustration with a low grade. For example, in response to a student's complaint about a lower-than-desired grade he or she received, I will reply to the student's email acknowledging the student's disappointment with the grade and will direct the student to review the posted grading rubric. Of relevance, I find when persecutor-like attacks are communicated to me via e-mail, it offers me an additional way to avoid responding from a persecutor perspective. That is, the asynchronous communication provides me with time to pause and reflect on the situation, thereby, giving me a choice to respond without drama. To take an advantage of a time delay response, if a student publically accuses me (e.g., unfair grading practices) within a discussion forum, I will ask this person to describe the concern in an email.

I will also send follow-up emails to those that have complained to me about something associated with the course (e.g., lower than desired mark was obtained). In these types of emails, to continue to stay away from the persecutor role, I will affirm my belief in the student to gain mastery. As well, I will warmly invite the student to ask me specific questions, at anytime time, related to how the student could improve future submissions. I find sending a follow up email reduces my tendency to avoid the student out of fear or dread (which are feelings that could place me on the drama triangle). I believe I am sending a message to the disgruntled student that I care about the student, and at the same time will assertively uphold the standards outlined in the course syllabus.

When I avoid the drama triangle I aim to foster Rovai's (2002a) community dimensions of spirit and trust. In these examples, had I taken on the role of a persecutor I may have ruptured the student-instructor relationship, posing a barrier to fostering spirit. By exercising compassion, I was able to foster benevolent interaction (i.e., trust and hope). Despite these efforts, I can still fall into the victim role when I teach.

### Victim

In my first year of teaching online, I found online instruction to be challenging for several reasons. First, I was unprepared for the amount of student emails I received at the start of the course. Since students could email at any time of the day, I found myself answering an overwhelming amount of emails, often repeating the same information to a variety of students. I also spent countless hours online facilitating discussions and tracking posts because the anxiety from the online students seemed so high I felt I had to take immediate action to reduce their distress. In response to these aspects of online instruction it was easy to step into the role of the victim by attributing my feelings to the nature of the online learning environment, complaining to others about the intensity of my job, and accepting that the time demands of online instruction could not be managed. However, since I was aware of the drama triangle and its dangers (Karpman 1968), I recognized I could leave the drama triangle by acknowledging

that I was feeling overwhelmed by the time demands and by exercising problem-solving skills. I took immediate action to reduce the high volume of emails I received by asking students, in a friendly manner, to post questions in the relevant Question and Answer forum. As a result, my inbox became more manageable, and questions could be answered on a group basis (once) rather than individually (multiple times). Furthermore, using the forum increased peer interaction as students began to answer one another's questions when possible. The benefits were twofold: my workload decreased, and students were able to build sense of community through collaborative problem solving.

I further avoided the victim role by creating a time management plan that limited the time I spent online, and I made time for self-care activities. I used this insight to further foster sense of community by addressing time management in course announcements forum. I created a forum topic called "Time Management and Self-Care," made the first post on the importance of setting personal limits and engaging in self-care, and encouraged students to make a time management plan. I then invited students to share ideas and strategies. Most of the students posted appreciation for addressing the challenges of managing time, and several shared tips for saving time and engaging in self-care.

The actions I took to avoid the victim role fostered sense of community in several ways. Using the asynchronous learning network more efficiently fostered Rovai's (2002a) community dimensions of spirit, trust, and interaction as collaborative problem solving provided students with a shared experience, an opportunity to build credibility through knowledge sharing, and a chance to increase their frequency of interaction. By engaging in problem solving, I was equipped with an insight that benefitted students. Acknowledging the challenges of time management and self-care demonstrated supportive teaching presence and encouraged self-disclosure. Self-disclosure provided students with an opportunity to relate on an emotional level, promoting social bonding and sense of community.

While the strategies for avoiding rescuer, persecutor, and victim behaviors provide snapshots of how online instructors can manage unhealthy interactions in asynchronous communication, there remains the reality that fluid communication often involves a switch of drama triangle roles. As such, I often encountered more than one drama triangle role within online dialogue.

### Navigating Roles

Online instructors may notice that the content of online communication involving drama triangle interactions often includes a combination of roles. For example, an overwhelmed student may combine persecutor and victim roles by beginning an email with a persecutor-like complaint such as, "There is far too much to read within the discussion forums and it is ridiculous you want us to post so often!" followed

by a victim-like complaint such as, "There is no way I can keep up with the reading and posting." The online instructor, knowing the value in not becoming defensive, may still end up in the persecutor role by identifying with the students' assessment that online learning is challenging such as responding, "You're right, this system is terrible but it's all we have to work with right now despite me telling the Dean we need to find a better online system."

While the aforementioned instructor's statement acknowledges the students' feelings, it perpetuates drama by communicating persecution for the discussion forum system (placing the online instructor in the persecutor role) and by encouraging the adoption of the victim role in the statement, "it's all we have to work with right now." Alternatively, offering a response such as, "it sounds like you're feeling overwhelmed. You've been doing a great job in the discussion forum so far. What did you do last week that helped you balance your time a bit better?" acknowledges the student's feelings and offers support without engaging in drama triangle transactions.

Another context in which online instructors may encounter multiple drama triangle roles is when debriefing their teaching experiences with other instructors. For example, while discussing the challenges of online instruction with my supervisor, I was often tempted to complain about the stressful events from a victim's perspective in hopes of being rescued, or to describe a stressful situation with persecution. When I approached debriefing from drama triangle perspectives I felt a small sense of momentary satisfaction, but was left with the same problems I had been complaining about. In order to avoid the persecutor and victim roles, I engaged in reflection prior to debriefing sessions. Using the strategy of self-reflection prior to debriefing helped me apply a solution-focused attitude during conversations with my supervisor. As a result, debriefing sessions provided opportunities to explore student perspectives, brainstorm problem-solving ideas, and gain insight into the importance of self-care.

## CONCLUSION

The transactional analysis concept of the drama triangle has been introduced as a viable model for explaining the complex instructor-student interactions that pose barriers for establishing and maintaining online learning students' sense of community within asynchronous learning. While the anecdotal observations presented in this article have been critically analyzed within the context of transactional analysis theory, a significant limitation to the article is the scarce amount of empirical research linking drama triangle interactions with decreased sense of community. Thus, the hypothesis that equipping online learning instructors with drama triangle knowledge could foster sense of community is based on critical thinking and personal experience and needs further study.

Future research could focus on measuring how drama triangle interactions influence students' sense of community. For example, researchers could collect discussion forum transcripts and email interactions, code the content for

themes relating to drama triangle roles, and analyze the content against sense of community themes in order to gain a sense of the impact drama triangle interactions have on sense of community development in the online community. In addition, future research could measure how the frequency and severity of drama triangle interactions change in the discussion forums between the students and the instructor when the instructor purposely avoids any invitation to join the drama (via adopting a rescuer, victim or persecutor role). Perhaps, if the instructor does not engage in a drama role, there may also be a measured decrease in drama triangle behaviors between the students themselves. Furthermore, since no studies have examined what variables, such as self-esteem, may make students or instructors more or less susceptible to adopting one or more of the roles on the drama triangle, this would be another area worthy of further investigation. From an instructional training standpoint, it may also be useful to know if equipping instructors with drama triangle knowledge improves their ability to foster sense of community online. Comparing levels of sense of community in online learning courses in which instructors have drama triangle knowledge to those in which online learning instructors are unfamiliar with the drama triangle could help clarify the usefulness of applying this knowledge in online learning instruction, thereby informing the training and practice of online learning instruction.

From the transactional analysis theory perspective, introducing the concept of the drama triangle to online instruction and providing instructional strategies for avoiding it may encourage future research into how transactional analysis can benefit online education. Further, sharing this knowledge within the education system may also encourage further interest in the practical applications of transactional analysis to online instruction.

Overall, applying drama triangle knowledge to online instruction is a new idea that requires much more exploration in order to gain credibility as an effective approach for fostering sense of community online. While the drama triangle can be applied in a variety of settings, it is difficult to determine the long-term relevance of applying strategies for avoiding drama triangle interactions within an online discussion forum format, as the ever-changing influx of new technology and social networking options will undoubtedly impact online learning venues and how drama triangle roles will manifest within these settings. Nonetheless, the current relevancy of considering how drama triangle interactions impact online community building may provide a fresh perspective on the instructional benefit of asynchronous dialogue, as it allows instructors to pause and analyze interactions before stepping into the drama triangle.

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