Communities of Inquiry in Online Learning

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INTRODUCTION

The focus of this chapter is on a framework that has drawn considerable interest in creating collaborative communities of inquiry in online learning environments (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). The goal is to provide an overview and update of the Community of Inquiry Framework with a particular focus on social, cognitive and teaching presence that constitute the framework. Creating and sustaining a community of inquiry requires an understanding of the progressive or developmental nature of each of the presences and how they interact. This chapter will explore what constitutes each of the presences and implications for practice.

COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

A community of inquiry is not a new perspective in higher education. It builds upon existing collaborative-constructivist educational assumptions that have historically been identified with higher education. Moreover, many of the constructs and rationale evolved from the research literature in adult and higher education. At the same time, however, the assumptions of this framework foreshadow a new era of distance education. It reflects much of the work being done in the area of online learning. The concept of a community of inquiry is being used extensively to understand and guide the design and delivery of online learning experiences.

A community of inquiry goes beyond accessing information and focuses on the elements of an educational experience that facilitate the creation of communities of learners actively and collaboratively engaged in exploring, creating meaning, and confirming understanding (i.e., inquiry). Constructing knowledge through discourse and shared understanding requires more than disseminating information either through a study package or lecturing. It requires a commitment to and participation in a community of learners that will support critical reflection and collaborative engagement.

This deep and meaningful approach to learning is core to a community of inquiry and is becoming a practical necessity in an era where the creation of relevant and timely knowledge is of paramount importance.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework recognizes the importance of the environment in shaping the educational experience. A CoI is a collaborative environment founded upon open but purposeful communication. The essential elements in this process are social, cognitive and teaching presence. It is in the overlap of the three presences where the essence of a community of inquiry exists and meaningful collaboration occurs. The elements of the CoI framework can be found in Figure 1.

Social Presence

Of the three presences, social presence has evolved the most from the original conceptualization. The original definition was largely a socio-emotional construct and did not reflect the full complexity of this concept in establishing a purposeful educational community. It did not adequately speak to the overlap with the other two presences or its developmental nature. The definition offered here for social presence is the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities. It has been shown that text-based online communication, lacking in nonverbal communication cues (i.e., body language or physical presence), does not seriously restrict social presence (Rogers & Lea, 2005).

Rogers and Lea (2005) provide evidence that it is shared social identity with the group and not personal identity that is crucial for cohesive group behavior. In fact, interpersonal bonds and conflicting personal goals could undermine the cohesion of the group. For example, strong personal relationships may restrict critical discourse. For this reason, to build social pres-

Figure 1.

ELEMENTS	CATEGORIES	INDICATORS (examples only)
Social Presence	Open Communication Group Cohesion Personal/Affective	Learning climate/risk-free expression Group identity/collaboration Self projection/expressing emotions
Cognitive Presence	Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Appling new ideas
Teaching Presence	Design & Organization Facilitating Discourse Direct Instruction	Setting curriculum & methods Shaping constructive exchange Focusing and resolving issues

ence and community in an educational context, it is important to begin with group identity.

If the intended result of social presence is to confer on the group greater capacity to communicate and collaborate, then the group will work more productively to the extent that group members identify with the group, thus making the group more cohesive. (p. 153)

This perspective is supported by research into online learning communities (Baker, 2003; Conrad, 2005).

Conversely, if collaboration and community are the goals, as they are in most higher educational contexts, then group identity and cohesion are critically important for open communication and collaborative learning activities. The design challenge is to integrate and balance the development of group and personal identity. However, the initial priority will naturally be on group identification. In time, interpersonal relationships will develop and help to sustain a community of inquiry, often beyond the formal limits of the course. In short, social presence develops incrementally that begins by focusing first on open communication and cohesion (group identity) and, over time, personal and affective affiliations (personal identity).

In practical terms, this means that instructors should not over-emphasize socio-emotional or interpersonal identity at the outset. Initial activities should be built around course and group identity issues such as exploring and negotiating expectations and creating a climate for open communication. Students should be given an opportunity to introduce themselves and get to know others through interactions focused on the common goals of the course and group. Developing open communication, cohesion and interpersonal knowledge is best done in small groups. Moreover, consideration should be given to sustaining these subgroups until students gain some comfort.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence goes to the heart of the community of inquiry. It is defined by the inquiry process where learners are tasked with a problem or issue and, through iteration between discourse and reflection (public and private worlds), construct meaning and confirm understanding. The essence of cognitive presence is the practical inquiry cycle derived from the work of John Dewey. Cognitive presence is operationalized through the Practical Inquiry Model that reflects the phases of the educational process (Garrison & Anderson, 2003). The first phase is the recognition and definition of the problem or issue. The second phase is the exploration of the problem or issue through the gathering of relevant information and perspectives through individual searches and discourse. The third phase is making sense of the existing information with the goal to reach resolution through reflection, sharing and critically analyzing the best ideas. The fourth phase is to test the best solution through application either vicariously or

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