

Chapter 14

Ensuring Presence in Online Learning Environments

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ABSTRACT

Online learning in higher education has rapidly grown in recent years and has become the norm. However, pedagogical aspects on online learning environments are still developing. This chapter focuses on one foundational aspect of online and blended learning known as presence. First, the concept of presence in online learning is described i.e. teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. Secondly, strategies for ensuring presence are discussed from different angles: course design, course instructors and course facilitators, and course participants. Thirdly, the implications for future research are outlined. This chapter enhances the research on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework a useful guide to the design of learning experiences that support learners' critical reflection and engagement within collaborative online learning environments.

INTRODUCTION

A central theme in research today is social, teaching, and cognitive presence in online and blended learning environments (Aragon, 2003; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Vaughn, 2008; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012; Tu, 2002). Most research, as Swan, Garrison, and Richardson (2009) note, is focused on single presences of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, yet its theoretical strength lies in the dynamics of the whole community.

This chapter will look at the CoI framework wholistically and go beyond theory and jargon description by focusing on practical strategies for ensuring social, teaching, and cognitive presence in online learning environments. It will specifically examine strategies and tools for course design, teaching, and student participation. Tools and strategies will be gleaned from the literature and personal experience as an instructional designer and instructor in online and blended learning environments.

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BACKGROUND

This chapter is based on the CoI framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). A literature review by Halverson et al. (2014) indicates that this model has been widely adapted and shows considerable promise in online learning. The CoI framework encompasses three core, interdependent elements: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. At the core of this model is the socio-constructivist view of learning – “construction of meaning may result from individual critical reflection but ideas are generated and knowledge constructed through collaborative and confirmatory process of sustained dialogue with a critical community of learners” (Garrison & Archer, 2000, p.91).

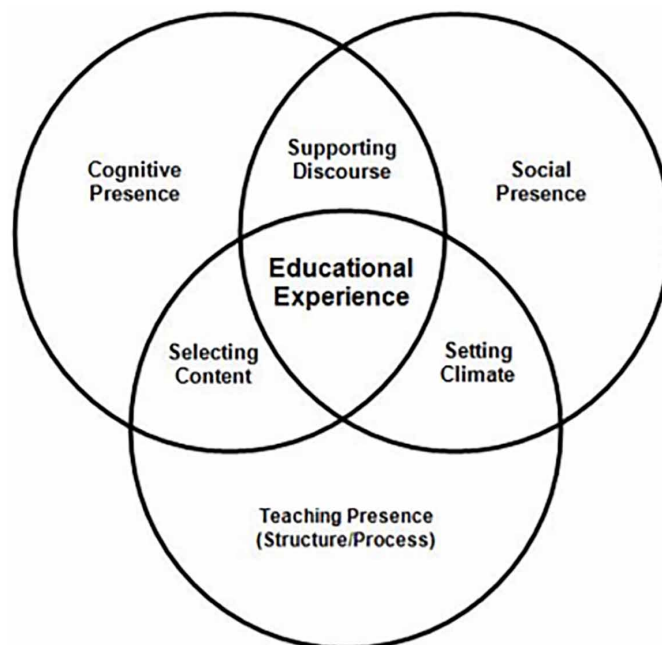
The three main, overlapping elements of the CoI framework are social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence as depicted in Figure 1.

Social presence is associated with how students and instructors interact online. According to the

CoI framework, social presence is the degree to which students in an online learning environment are free to express themselves in a risk-free way. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) define social presence as “the degree to which a person is perceived as ‘real’ in mediated communication” (p. 8). Social presence is conceptualized by open communication, group cohesion, and affective/personal connections (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Tu (2002) defines social presence as “a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment” (p. 131). Social presence has been linked to students’ satisfaction and perceived learning (Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005).

Cognitive presence is the extent to which students are able to construct meaning through sustained communication. Cognitive presence is “grounded in the critical thinking literature and is operationalized by the practical inquiry model” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001, p.2). It is the element in the CoI that is the core to successful higher learning experiences (Kanuka & Harrison,

Figure 1. Community of inquiry model ©2008, Wiley. Used with permission.



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