

Chapter 16

Planning a Three-Year Research Based on the Community of Inquiry Theory: An Approach to Monitor the Learning of English as a Second Language in the EU Academic Environments

Salvatore Nizzolino

 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3008-2890>

Sapienza University of Rome, Italy

ABSTRACT

This research project aims to take advantage of five annual English as a Second Language (ESL) courses, in two faculties of Sapienza University of Rome, during a three-year period. These courses, embedded in the timeline of the regular academic semesters, are the teaching/learning environments in which the researcher himself works as a language teacher and tutor. Therefore, they will be the ground for this blended education plan complemented by e-learning through CIT ecosystems. The research plan takes shape within the community of inquiry framework (CoI), and this theory encompasses the conceptual boundaries.

INTRODUCTION - THEORETICAL FRAME / HYPOTHESIS: THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY

The CoI concept is rooted in theories by the pragmatist philosophers C.S. Peirce (Librizzi, 2017) and John Dewey (1902/1991), who speculated about the process of community-based knowledge formation and the scientific inquiry involved. Since then, the approach has also been used to study the dynamics of learning communities, and more recently, it has been adopted to study digital communities of learners (Garrison, 2011). In addition, the CoI principles are attracting the interest of the educational community

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in recent years because of the implications that apply to the design, implementation, and evaluation of distance education courses.

More specifically, *“the Community of Inquiry framework is a collaborative-constructivist process model that describes the essential elements of a successful online higher education learning experience”* (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020, p. 557). An even detailed explanation, according to the most influential author on the CoI theories, Garrison R. D., is as follows:

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 (...) It requires a commitment to and participation in a community of learners that will support critical reflection and collaborative engagement (D. R. Garrison, 2011, p. 352).

The CoI framework includes three elements named ‘presences’—Cognitive Presence, Social Presence, and Teaching Presence—which are essential to an educational transaction (Garrison, 2011). Consequently, this framework defines cognitive intersections that go beyond simple access to information or focus on an educational experience. A collective space defined as CoI generally articulates within a hierarchical framework and stimulates the formation of communities of learners who actively and cooperatively extend their own learning experience. The co-construction of knowledge through shared understanding requires much more than the dissemination of information through traditional and standardized patterns of knowledge transmission. This process requires a high level of engagement and participation in a community of learners that keep up with critical awareness, reflection, sharing, and continuous collaboration (Garrison, 2011). The three presences of a CoI can be resumed as follows.

- Cognitive Presence: *“...is a vital element in critical thinking, a process and outcome that is frequently presented as the ostensible goal of all higher education”* (Garrison et al., 2002, p. 89).
- Social Presence: *“the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community”* (Garrison et al., 2002, p. 89).
- Teaching Presence: This dimension can be summarized as the *“responsibility to design, facilitate, and direct learning online”* (Anderson et al., 2001).

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