

# Threaded Discussion

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## INTRODUCTION

*Threaded discussion* is a kind of *computer-mediated communication (CMC)*. Specifically, it is an online dialog or conversation that takes the form of a series of linked messages organized topically. Threaded discussions are text-based and asynchronous; they develop over time as participants separated in time and space read and reply to existing messages. Messages in a given thread share a common topic and are linked to each other in the order of their creation. Threaded discussions are particularly useful in online venues where multiple discussions develop at the same time. Without them, discussion participants would confront a chaotic, unsorted list of messages on many different topics. By linking responses to messages within a common subject line, threaded discussion makes it easier for participants to focus on one conversation and avoid the distractions of unrelated postings.

Threaded discussions are also significantly different from face-to-face discussions. All students have a voice in threaded discussion and no one can dominate the conversation, not even the instructor. Accordingly, many educators note that students perceive online discussion as more equitable and democratic than traditional classroom discussions (Eastmond, 1995; Harasim, 1990; Levin, Kim & Riel, 1990). In addition, threaded discussion affords participants the opportunity to reflect on their classmates' contributions while creating their own, and on their own writing before posting them, creating a certain mindfulness among students and a culture of reflection in an online course (Garrison, 2003; Hiltz, 1994; Poole, 2000). Finally, despite the fact that it is lacking in visual and verbal cues, most participants find threaded discussion strangely personal (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997); indeed Joe Walther (1994) has called it "hyperpersonal." One way to think about threaded discussion is to conceptualize it within a framework adapted from the work of several seminal theorists of online learning.

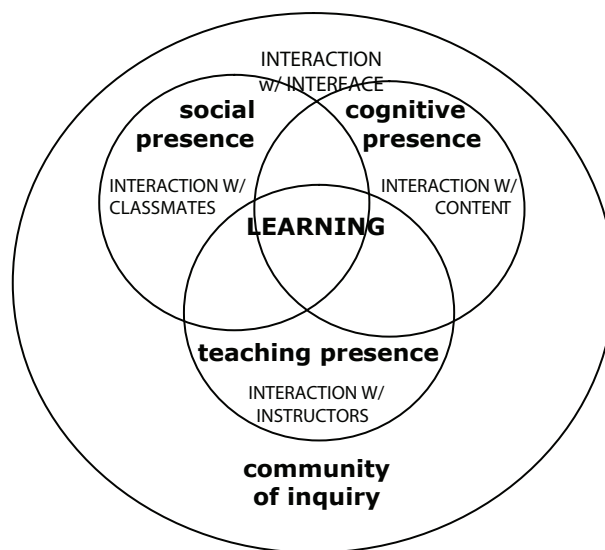
## BACKGROUND

We begin with *Michael Moore* (1989) who identified three kinds of interactions that support online learning -- *interaction with course content, interaction with instructors, and interaction with classmates*. *Interaction with content* refers to learners' interaction with the knowledge, skills and attitudes being studied. *Interaction with instructors* includes the myriad ways instructors teach, guide, correct, and support learners. *Interaction with classmates* refers to interactions among learners, such as through debate, collaboration, discussion, and peer review. In 1994, Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena noted the importance of a fourth type of interaction, *interaction with interface*, which they defined as the interaction that takes place between a student and the technology used to mediate distance education processes.

In 1999, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer developed their *Community of Inquiry Model* which situated learning in threaded discussion at the intersection of three kinds of "presence" manifested within them. *Cognitive presence* is the extent to which participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication. *Teaching presence* includes subject matter expertise, the design and management of learning, and the facilitation of active learning. *Social presence* is the perceived presence of others in mediated communication, which Garrison, et. al. contend, supports both cognitive and teaching presence through its ability to instigate, sustain, and support interaction. What Garrison, et. al.'s model added to *Moore's* conceptualization is a functional approach focusing on the nature of interactions, and the notion of overlapping spheres of influence concerning them.

Putting these all together, we have the model of online learning in general, and learning within threaded discussions in particular, shown in Figure 1. The model builds on the *Community of Inquiry Model* (Garrison, et. al., 1999) to place learning at the interface of *interactions* with course content, instructors, and classmates (Moore, 1989), and the three kinds of *presence* which support

Figure 1. Factors affecting learning online; Swan, 2003



online discussion – *cognitive, teaching, and social*. It further conceives all of these interactions as mediated through the online *interface* (Hillman, et. al., 1994). In the sections which follow, what we know and what we need to know about threaded discussions will be reviewed through the lenses of each of the subcomponents of this model. I will do this in a somewhat reverse order (beginning with social presence and ending with interface issues), because that is the way research in the field has evolved historically.

## MAIN FOCUS: LEARNING WITH THREADED DISCUSSIONS

### Social Presence

*Social presence* can be defined as the perceived salience of others in online discussions. Research on it is directly related to research on immediacy in traditional classrooms which suggests that teacher immediacy behaviors can significantly affect student learning (Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Richmond, 1990; Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996). “Immediacy” refers to behaviors that lessen the “psychological distance between communicators” (Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968, p. 17). Educational researchers have found that teachers’ verbal and non-verbal immediacy behaviors lead to greater learning.

This research has important implications for online learning. *Social Presence Theory* (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976), *Media Richness Theory* (Rice, 1992), and Picard’s (1997) more recent notion of *Affective Channel Capacity* argue that differing media have differing capacities to transmit the non-verbal and vocal cues that produce feelings of immediacy in face-to-face communications, and so have questioned the capacity of some media, threaded discussion in particular, to promote learning.

Researchers experienced with online teaching and learning, however, contest this view. What is important, they contend, is not media capabilities, but rather personal perceptions (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Poole, 2000; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001; Walther, 1994).

Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), for example, developed a survey to explore student perceptions of social presence in computer-mediated conferences associated with a Global Education course. In two separate studies, they found that students rated asynchronous discussion as highly interactive and social. The researchers concluded that course participants created *social presence* by projecting their identities online and building a discourse community among themselves. What was important, they argued, was student perceptions of the presence of others, not the medium’s capacity to capture gestures and intonations. Richardson and Swan’s (2003) research, using a survey adapted from Gunawardena and

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