Developing Cognitive, Social, and Teaching Presence Online

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Introduction

In the online environment, where there is no face-to-face interaction, it takes greater effort to develop presence between learners and with the instructor. For learners who are moving from the face-to-face environment to the online environment, there is a void because of the lack of physical presence. This can lead to feelings of isolation, which can have a negative impact on motivation and persistence. In addition, the lack of presence can have an impact on the development of higher order thinking skills which requires collaboration. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001), learning occurs within a community of inquiry through the interaction of social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Social presence establishes learners as individuals who are available to engage in learning. Cognitive presence is the ability of learners to construct knowledge through peer-to-peer interactions. Teaching presence is how the instructor facilitates the online learning environment to support social and cognitive presence to help learners meet the outcomes of course activities.

Social Presence

The structure of the online environment to support social presence can help reduce isolation and help establish learners as being present and available for interactions. Kerhrwald (2008) defined social presence as “an individual’s ability to demonstrate his or her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his or her availability for interpersonal transactions” (p. 94). Without the awareness of learners’ presence, it is nearly impossible to develop relationships. To develop social presence, the design of the online environment must include opportunities to engage in social dialogue to provide an opportunity to develop presence and get to know one another. This can be done using discussions that allow learners an opportunity to introduce themselves to one another or a cyber cafe or lounge area that provides learners an opportunity to engage in casual dialogue not associated with the course content. As learners begin to engage socially with the instructor and peers, they can build trust with one another and begin to develop a sense of community which can prepare them for engaging in a community of inquiry as they participate in course activities.

Communication Channels

According to Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) when communication channels are increased, social presence increases among peers and the instructor; whereas, when communication channels are reduced, social presence decreases among peers and the instructor. A variety of communication tools can be used in the online environment to increase presence including email, private journals, discussion forums, instant chat, web conferencing and microblogs. Reaching out to learners individually via email or a private journal can acknowledge the instructor’s awareness of their presence in the course and open lines of communication for the learner to begin a dialogue to share feelings and ask questions. Discussion forums provide an opportunity for learners to engage in dialogue casually or on a specific topic. Instant chat can help signify a learner’s presence when they are online in the course environment and invite dialogue with other learners or the instructor when they are actively engaging online in course activities. Web conferencing can provide opportunities for the instructor to engage with learners as a group to deliver lectures or answer questions or individually to help learners overcome navigation or technical problems that require visual interactions. Microblogs such as Twitter, provide a means for instructors to communicate just-in-time with learners about upcoming due dates or other short messages that are time sensitive. It can also provide a venue for learners to engage in just-in-time communications to the
instructor or other members of the course. Opportunities to minimize the isolation of the online environment and allow learners to develop greater presence can diminish isolation in an online course, which can lead to greater persistence and achievement of course goals.

**Cognitive Presence**

The structure of the online environment to support cognitive presence is also critical. Cognitive presence is developed as learners engage in discourse and share their knowledge, experience, and ideas to construct knowledge. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001), cognitive presence is “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (p.5). This requires the online experience to be designed for “active learning” which places the responsibility of learning and acquiring knowledge on the learner. It requires learners to think critically and reflect on what they know as they actively engage in learning activities to make meaning from the content and construct knowledge. This moves the learner away from being extrinsically motivated and focused on grades to becoming more intrinsically motivated with a focus on learning. It is transformative because it focuses on meaning-making that is relevant to the learner’s life personally and professionally which has a positive impact on persistence.

**Structure of Discussions**

The structure of course activities can support active learning. Discussions should focus on topics that require learners to think critically. The more structured the discussion activities, the greater opportunities learners will have to build critical thinking skills and develop an engaging community of inquiry. Criteria for discussions should focus on the elements of critical thinking as well as the expectations for engaging in discussions in a timely manner and interacting with peers. Course activities should support active learning by providing opportunities for learners to develop an understanding of how to use an active knowledge base by “calling into question the assumptions underlying their customary, habitual ways of thinking and acting and then being ready to think and act differently on the basis of this critical questioning” (Brookfield, 1987, p. 1).

**Elements of Thought**

Elder and Paul’s (2001) “elements of thought” can support critical thinking by helping learners understand how to actively participate in online discussions. During discussion it is important for learners to contribute their point of view to the discussion rather than simply copy information from the resources they review. Learners need to be able to demonstrate that they understand the purpose of the discussion and understand the question they are trying to answer or other questions that may relate to being able to discuss the issue. They should be able to use the concepts being considered and understand the line of reasoning of others, including the assumptions that are being made. In addition, learners should be able to seek information to answer the discussion question and use information to support their position. They must also be able to discuss their interpretations of the issue from their viewpoint and come to reasonable conclusions. Finally, the learner should understand the implications of following their line of reasoning and how it impacts the overall issue being discussed.

By providing guidelines for learners to engage in discussions, you can help them build their critical thinking skills and engage in more meaningful discourse to construct knowledge as a community of inquiry. Consider creating discussion grading guidelines that incorporate Elder and Paul’s (2010) “elements of thought” to communicate expectations for engaging in discussions. This can provide learners an opportunity to gain awareness of the elements of thought they use as they engage in discussion and can improve their ability to think critically as they engage in a community of inquiry.
Transactional Distance

According to Michael Moore (1980), the physical separation in the online environment known as transactional distance, can have an impact on understanding and perceptions, which can affect motivation. Teaching variables associated with transactional distance include dialogue and structure. Dialogue is the interaction between the instructor and learner. Structure relates to the design of the course including the content, navigation, multimedia, and communication tools used to support the online environment.

Flexible Course Environment

It is important that the structure of the course have a high degree of flexibility to minimize transactional distance (Moore, 1980). Some learners may require more structure to support their dependent learning styles while others may be more self-directed and prefer independent learning experiences (Stavredes, 2011). The critical component of the structure is being able to offer flexibility to meet the individual needs of learners. Dependent learners will require more support to accomplish learning activities. Checklists can help them accomplish weekly tasks in the course and support their planning processes. Templates and worksheets can help dependent learner understand how to accomplish specific tasks and monitor their learning. Reflective exercises can help them evaluate their learning. Additionally, support resources can help them fill gaps in knowledge and skills. The independent learner prefers to work alone. They may find some activities to be boring and repetitive, so providing a degree of flexibility to meet their needs is important. This can include allowing them to choose topics of interest to them personally and developing projects that allow them to have a certain degree of autonomy.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is critical to learner success. According to Moore (1980), increased dialogue between the instructor and learner along with a flexible learning environment leads to low transactional distance. End of course evaluations from learners focus on the interactions learners have with their instructor and complaints generally include comments regarding the lack of instructor presence. Teaching in the online environment requires a move away from the primary teaching role of lecturer to a new role as facilitator of learning to support social and cognitive presence that allows learners to engage in a community of inquiry and actively engage in knowledge construction. The instructor role should include interactions to encourage participation and knowledge construction. The instructor should also monitor learner progress and provide formative feedback and evaluate learner performance through summative feedback. Interactions should also encourage learners to be more self-directed.

Interactions to Encourage Participation

To encourage participation, the instructor should reach out to learners personally to open up communication channels and establish trust. The acknowledgement of the learner personally also may contribute to learner accountability. The instructor should also encourage knowledge construction by keeping discussions interesting, motivating, and focused on the topic. The instructor can use prompts to encourage discussions and ask learners to elaborate on discussion posts when they don’t meet the requirements of the discussion. When a learner has a narrow focus or opinion, the instructor can take on another perspective and challenge the learner’s perspective or ask the learner to take on another perspective to help him look at the issue from a different viewpoint. Instructors can encourage learners to discuss the assumptions of their line of reasoning or the implications of following their line of reasoning. The instructor can also use weaving techniques throughout a discussion to develop an understanding of the diversity of opinions and different lines of reasoning of learners on the issue as well as help re-focus the discussion if it moves off topic. If the instructor participates as an equal in the discussion and contributes their opinions, it can influence the thoughts of learners, so at the end of a discussion, the instructor can provide a summary of the discussion and include his or her personal opinion and experience to provide additional insight on the issue.
Interactions to Monitor Performance and Provide Feedback
It is important that the online instructor monitor learner progress towards goals. Formative feedback allows learners an opportunity to improve performance alone the way. In addition, it is important to point out writing issues to help learners overcome them early in the course before major writing assignments are due. The instructor should also monitor individual learner activity and proactively reach out to inactive learners to re-engage them in the course. It is also important to monitor the course environment for behavior issues and quickly step in to ensure that improper behavior is curtailed and learners see that the instructor is in control of the course environment. Learners want frequent feedback that is timely, specific, and actionable, so it is important to provide feedback throughout the course. Using scoring guides and grading rubrics can provide important information to learners about the expectations of a graded activity and can help the instructor provide consistent feedback to learners that is specific and actionable.

Interactions to Encourage Self-Directedness
It is important to continuously encourage learners to become more self-directed. The online environment is better suited for self-directed learners, so learners should be encouraged to become more self-directed by providing more support early in the course and then gradually remove the support to allow the learner to take on greater responsibility. In addition, strategies should support the development of metacognitive skills to help the learner plan, monitor, and evaluate their learning in the online environment and help them become more self-directed in their learning.

Conclusion
Developing presence in the online environment is critical to learner success. The online course structure should reduce feelings of isolation to improve motivation, which can help learners persist and achieve their educational goals. Presence has an impact on the development of higher order thinking skills which requires collaboration. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2001) community of inquiry model can provide a framework to improve presence in the online environment and provide greater opportunities for learners to interact with their peers and instructor to construct knowledge. Overall, the more deliberate the planning of an online course to increase presence, dialogue, and flexibility, the greater opportunity learners will have to be a part of a transformative online learning experience that encourages critical thinking and the social construction of knowledge through a community of inquiry.

References
About the Presenter

**Tina Stavredes** is chair of the psychology program in the School of Undergraduate Studies at Capella University. In her role she manages over 40 remote faculty. In 2010, she received the Harold Abel Distinguished Faculty Award. Previously, she was Director of Curriculum Development for Capella University. Dr. Stavredes holds a PhD in Educational Psychology with an instructional technology emphasis from the University of Minnesota. She has numerous publications and presentations to her credit. She has recently completed a book with Jossey-Bass titled *Effective Online Teaching: Foundations and Strategies for Student Success* that will be published August 2011.

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