



Correlating community college students' perceptions of community of inquiry presences with their completion of blended courses



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ABSTRACT

Community colleges enroll more online learners than any other institution in higher education in the United States. While online community college courses expand access to higher education, their high attrition rates negatively impact student success. At writing, no researchers have applied the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to community college students' completion of online courses. This study uses a pre/posttest CoI survey design to explore the nature and development of students' perceptions of the CoI presences in 17 blended courses at Queensborough Community College, one of the seven community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. Students' perceptions of these presences, in addition to demographic and status variables, are then correlated with a measure of their course completion. As no significant differences between course completers and non-completers on any CoI indicators or demographic/status variables are found, new directions for community colleges and the research literature on the CoI framework are proposed.

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1. Introduction

Community colleges enroll more online learners than any other institutional category in higher education in the United States (Allen & Seaman, 2011). In fact, while America's community colleges currently account for more than half of all online enrollments, the rate of growth for these enrollments is higher at community colleges than it is at four-year colleges and universities (Allen & Seaman, 2011, 2007). According to Floyd (2003), online learning is congruent with the egalitarian, access-oriented mission of community colleges, the student-centered pedagogies traditionally employed by community college instructors, and the busy lives of community college students (see also Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007).

Yet, despite this dovetailing, evidence suggests that online learning tends to impede community college students' retention to graduation and their transfer to baccalaureate-granting institutions (Xu & Jaggars, 2011). One reason for this is that community college students are less likely to complete an online course than they are to complete a traditional face-to-face course (Jaggars & Xu, 2010; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). In a recent editorial on this subject, The New York Times Editorial Board (2013) drew on Community College Research Center (CCRC) data to offer three possible explanations for community college students' attrition in online courses: students' low levels of academic preparedness

and confidence; students' feelings of isolation in the online environment; and instructors' poor online course design.

Readers familiar with Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework will note similarities between these explanations and the framework's "presences," i.e., the student and instructor behaviors central to a productive online learning community. Yet, prior to this writing, no researchers have used the CoI framework to investigate community college students' completion of online courses. In this article, we use a pre/posttest CoI survey design to examine the nature and development of students' perceptions of the CoI presences in 17 blended, or partially-online, courses at Queensborough Community College, one of the seven community colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) system. We then correlate students' perceptions of the CoI presences, in addition to relevant demographic and status variables, to their completion of the study courses. We conclude the article with a discussion of what these results might mean for community colleges and the research literature on the CoI framework.

2. The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework

In 2000, drawing on the work of Dewey (1967, 1933), Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) introduced the CoI as a framework for collaborative constructivist transactions in computer-mediated higher-education environments. In doing so, they specified the "interlocking set of factors that cohere in the creation of a community of learners" in online college-level courses (Shea, 2006, p. 38). Garrison et al. (2000) argued that these factors are of three dynamic and interdependent types, which they called "presences:" teaching presence, social

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presence, and cognitive presence. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) have since added a fourth type, learning presence, to the Col framework (Fig. 1).

Teaching presence refers to the online instructor's "design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). There are three indicators of teaching presence: 1) instructional design and organization, "where instructors ... develop curriculum, activities, assignments, and course schedules;" 2) facilitation of discourse, "where instructors set the climate for learning by encouraging and drawing students into online discussion;" and 3) direct instruction, "where instructors present content and focus and direct online discourse" (Ice, Gibson, Boston, & Becher, 2011, p. 48).

Social presence is defined as the online learner's ability to "project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry" (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 52). It also consists of three indicators: 1) affective expression, "where learners share personal expressions of emotion, feelings, beliefs, and values in their online course;" 2) open communication, "where learners build and sustain a sense of group commitment in their online course;" and 3) group cohesion, "where learners interact around common intellectual activities and tasks in their online course" (Ice, Gibson, Boston, & Becher, 2011, p. 47).

Cognitive presence is the "extent to which learners can construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse" (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 161). Four unfolding indicators comprise cognitive presence: 1) a triggering event, "where some issue or problem is identified for further inquiry;" 2) exploration, "where students explore the issue or problem, both individually and corporately through critical reflection and discourse;" 3) integration, "where learners construct meaning from the ideas developed during exploration;" and 4) resolution, "where learners apply this newly gained knowledge to educational contexts or workplace settings" (p. 161).

A growing recognition exists within the community of scholars who have used the Col framework that the Col needs to encompass more than it has in the past. More recent work suggests that either metacognition (Aykol & Garrison, 2011; Garrison & Aykol, 2013) or other dimensions reflecting approaches learners apply to their learning is missing from the description of teaching, social, and cognitive presences as described in earlier works (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). We believe that self-regulated learning is a more comprehensive construct than meta-cognition and that this missing dimension is reflected in the work of Shea and his colleagues in "learning presence" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, 2012; Shea et al., 2012, 2013).

Learning presence is described as "the proactive stance adopted by students who marshal thoughts, emotions, motivation, behaviors, and

strategies in the service of successful online learning" (Shea et al., 2012, p. 90). The three indicators of learning presence are often associated with self-regulated learning: 1) forethought and planning, where students plan, coordinate, and delegate online tasks to themselves or others; 2) monitoring, where students check with online classmates for understanding, note their completion of tasks, and evaluate and monitor their performance on online activities; and 3) strategy use, where students seek, offer, or provide help to complete an online activity, and where students articulate gaps in their knowledge (Shea et al., 2012).

While the Col framework provides practitioners with a model for online community development, it also provides researchers with a methodology through which "to assess students' perceptions of ... their online learning experiences" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, p. 1725). Using versions of or scales from the Col survey instrument, the vast majority of these assessments have focused on: the interdependence of students' perceptions of the Col presences (Gorsky & Blau, 2009; Shea & Bidjerano, 2008, 2009); the ways in which students' demographic and status characteristics – like gender and employment status – mediate their perceptions of the Col presences (Gibson, Ice, Mitchell, & Kupczynski, 2012; Shea, 2006; Shea, Li, Swan, & Pickett, 2005); and the positive relationship between students' perceptions of the Col presences and their sense of community in online courses (Shea, 2006; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Shea, Li, Swan, & Pickett, 2005).

Building on what is known about the nature of students' perceptions of the Col presences, innovative research has also examined the development of students' perceptions of those presences. For example, drawing on data from course websites, student interviews, and end-of-semester Col surveys, research indicates that students' perceptions of teaching and social presence tend to increase over the course of the semester (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Akyol & Garrison, 2008). Additionally, studies reveal that these increases tend to be more pronounced for students enrolled in blended courses than they are for students enrolled in fully-online courses (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Shea & Bidjerano, 2011).

While "exploratory and descriptive," these studies reveal the empirical and potentially predictive potential of the Col framework (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007, p. 166). For this reason, and because the central objective of the Col framework is the "(creation of) an effective learning community that enhances and supports deep approaches to learning," researchers have begun to correlate students' perceptions of the Col presences to different learning measures (Akyol et al., 2009). For example, Shea, Li, and Pickett (2006) indicate that students' perceptions of teaching presence are positively correlated with their perceived learning, while Shea et al. (2012) reveal that students' perceptions of learning presence are positively correlated with a more objective measure of their learning, final course grades.

Additionally, given that online community development is considered central to student satisfaction and persistence in online courses (Rovai, 2002), researchers have begun to examine the relationship between the Col framework and student attrition at the course and college levels. Taking cues from studies that connect a myriad of demographic, psychological, technological, and social factors to student persistence in online courses and programs of study (for a concise review of these factors, see Liu, Gomez, Khan, & Yen, 2007), Ice et al. (2011) found that students' perceptions of teaching and cognitive presences work through course satisfaction to positively affect course completion and Boston et al. (2009) found that students' perceptions of social presence are positively correlated with college retention.

3. Purpose and research questions

In this study we apply the Col framework to the subject of community college students' course completion by asking four interrelated questions. The first two questions are grounded in the aforementioned research on the variable development of the Col presences over time:

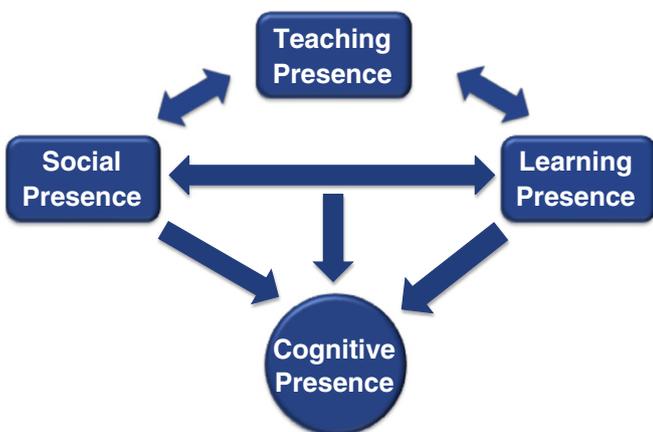


Fig. 1. Revised Community of Inquiry model. Source: Shea and Biderjano (2010).

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