



Reconceptualizing the community of inquiry framework: An exploratory analysis



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ABSTRACT

Constructs requiring additional conceptualization within the Community of Inquiry framework for online learning include the self- and co-regulatory processes students bring to online learning. This paper extends previous efforts to advance the framework by addressing this gap. Quantitative content analysis and social network analysis were used with online discussions in a doctoral course to identify qualities of the discourse. The analysis focused on the three original presences of the framework (social, teaching, and cognitive presences) and learning presence, a recently proposed addition to the framework. First, frequencies of all four presences were calculated to report patterns in the discussions. Next, correlations were computed to investigate which presences correspond with the modes of critical thinking described in cognitive presence. Finally, students' positions of influence and prestige were analyzed in relation to their expressions of the four forms of presence. Findings raise questions about the framework's scope and point toward its reconceptualization.

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1. Introduction

Many college students enroll in online courses without a good understanding of how this type of learning is different from that found in traditional classroom settings. As evidenced by research on online learning (e.g., Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Valaitis, Sword, Jones, & Hedges, 2005), some students are unprepared for student-centered learning, others struggle with using their time efficiently, some are slow to grasp how to participate effectively in collaborative learning activities, and many lack understanding of why they are expected to develop a certain level of autonomy. What is it that separates students who are successful in adapting to this new form of learning from those who are not?

Recent research has identified self-regulation, the processes of goal setting, planning, self-monitoring, and reflecting (Pintrich, 2000; Zimmerman, 2000, 2008, 2011), as a precondition for student success in online learning environments. For example, a survey study by Sun and Rueda (2012) conducted with graduate students enrolled in online

classes found a strong correlation between higher levels of self-regulation and higher levels of engagement. The results of the study suggested that students who highly self-regulate their online learning activities engage in the learning process behaviorally, emotionally, and cognitively and thus perform well. Similarly, Cho and Shen (2013) showed self-regulation to be positively associated with undergraduate students' successful online learning experiences and found that students with strong self-regulation tended to persist with learning in challenging tasks and put more effort into achieving desired outcomes compared to students with poor self-regulation. Artino and Stephens (2009a) likewise reported much greater success for online students with adaptive and self-regulatory skills than their less-adaptive counterparts. Additionally, Shen, Lee, and Tsai's (2007) study that compared the performance of students who did and did not receive instruction in self-regulation revealed that the group that was given self-regulation instruction performed better in their online learning than the corresponding group that did not receive such instruction.

The common thread running through the above-mentioned and related work (e.g., Artino & Stephens, 2009b; Bol & Garner, 2011) is that due to the relatively autonomous and student-centered nature of online learning, careful deployment of self-regulation is crucial for student success. In a comprehensive review of the most rigorous evidence available, Means, Toyoma, Murphy, Bakia, and Jones (2009) concluded: "Overall, the available research evidence suggests that promoting self-

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reflection, self-regulation and self-monitoring leads to more positive online learning outcomes” (p. 45).

While the construct of self-regulation has increasingly been found essential to online learning, it has not been well integrated into the currently available theoretical frameworks that seek to explain successful online education. In the following, the authors present one of the most widely referenced theoretical models for effective conduct of online learning, the community of inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000) and draw attention to its gaps with regard to self- and co-regulation of learning. In so doing, the goal is to extend previous efforts to expand and enhance the framework – a good example of these efforts is the 2014 special issue of *E-Learning and Digital Media* devoted to discussing how the framework “might be further developed and re-thought in the light of more than 10 years of application and research” (Remesal & Friesen, 2014, p. 1). The current study contributes to this emerging trend to advance the framework by suggesting the addition of a new construct to the framework to account for learner agency, control and co-regulation of learning online. Accounting for learner agency and self-regulation without reference to interactive and social processes inherent in collaborative models of learning is insufficient to the goal of enhancing the CoI framework. Therefore, this study sought to better articulate the social processes that support learning in collaborative online environments.

1.1. The community of inquiry (CoI) framework

Garrison et al.’s CoI framework provides a conceptual model that summarizes the instructional, social, and cognitive processes central to online learning. The underlying assumption of the framework is that a worthwhile online educational experience takes place through interactions among members of a community of inquiry composed of instructors and students. The framework assumes that in order for significant learning to occur in this community, there is a need for three forms of presences. These presences are: social presence (SP), characterized by a supportive collegial online setting; teaching presence (TP), defined by instructional orchestration appropriate to the online environments; and cognitive presence (CP), which is the extent to which learners can construct knowledge through critical thinking and reflection. The framework posits that these three forms of presence together create a meaningful, collaborative and constructivist discourse that is necessary for high-level learning (Garrison & Akyol, 2013; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Swan, Scott, Bogle, & Matthews, 2014). In other words, the group cohesion and open communication created by SP and the structure, organization, and leadership associated with TP lay the foundation to create the environment where CP, which is considered to be the most important element associated with higher-order learning, can flourish (Layne & Ice, 2014). It is important to note, however, that these three constructs (SP, TP, and CP) do not fully explain the attitudes, abilities, and behaviors that active and engaged students bring to their individual and collaborative online activities. To account for these missing elements, the authors have recently proposed a new construct to be included in the CoI framework called learning presence (LP). This construct was developed as a result of several empirical studies (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Shea et al., 2012, 2013). At this point, the LP construct has not been fully accepted into the CoI framework, but it is beginning to gain momentum in the literature in online learning.

Grounded in the works of Bandura (1986) and Zimmerman (2000, 2008), LP is defined by the phases of forethought, performance, and reflection associated with self regulated learning, but with emphasis on the goals and activities of online learners specifically. The forethought phase includes planning, coordinating, and delegating or assigning online tasks to self and others in the early stages of an online course, learning module, or specific activity. The performance phase is about monitoring and strategy use. The monitoring component of this phase includes: checking with online classmates for understanding; identifying problems or issues; noting completion of tasks for self and

others; evaluating quality; monitoring during performance of the online activity and taking corrective action if necessary. The monitoring component of performance also includes appraising personal and group interest or engagement in the online learning activity. The strategy use component of the performance phase includes: advocating effort or focus; seeking, offering or providing help to complete the online activity; articulating gaps in knowledge; reviewing and noting outcome expectations; and seeking or offering additional information to online classmates. Finally, the reflective component involves articulation of changes in thinking and causal attribution of results to individual or group performance in the online activity. It should be clear from this description that the entire LP construct is simultaneously self- and co-regulatory in nature as it is predicted on not only individual efforts, but also group dynamics within collaborative learning activities.

LP is thus distinct from the instructional design, facilitation of discourse and direct instruction associated with TP as well as the explicitly affective and cohesive dimensions of SP in the CoI framework. It also differs from each of the phases of CP (i.e. triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution). Additional details and examples of LP are included in the Appendix A.

In a recent article, Garrison and Akyol (2013) problematized these efforts to extend the CoI framework with the addition of the LP construct. They argued that this “proposed “enhancement” is without commensurate theoretical considerations of the CoI framework (violates fundamental assumptions of the CoI framework)” (p. 85). Their argument is that the concept of learner self- and co-regulation is inherent in the original conceptualization of the CoI framework. They therefore suggest that rather than creating a new construct, one needs to look at the roles and responsibilities manifested within the original three presences, TP, SP, and CP, to seek evidence for students’ self- and co-regulation of learning. The authors argue that Garrison and Akyol’s contention that self- and co-regulation of learning is assumed within the CoI framework obscures as much as it illuminates. It is thus one of the goals of this paper to more fully articulate the elements of online self- and co-regulation of learning, to argue that these critical roles are more closely aligned with learners than with instructors, and to make the case that these roles warrant an additional dimension within the CoI framework.

While agreeing that all participants in a community of inquiry can and do engage in both teaching and learning, it is crucial to delineate roles and responsibilities that are key to students’ success in credit-bearing online higher education environments. Learners participate in higher education for a variety of reasons, one of which is to accumulate credits toward valuable college credentials. To be successful in these pursuits, learners must participate in online environments in ways that vary definitively from those of instructors.

Garrison and Akyol (2013) wrote, “A key feature of the CoI framework is the integration of personal and shared cognitive and teaching presences. Regulation is central to both cognitive and teaching presences. All participants are both learners and teachers” (p.85). Regulation is central to the various forms of presence. However, as will be documented here, it may be more important for the regulation of social and cognitive presence for students and may need to be conceived as a set of dispositions and behaviors supported by the instructor’s teaching presence role. The regulatory functions under investigation are better understood through the varying roles played by instructors and students. The above referenced conceptualization unnecessarily conflates the roles of teachers and students. To claim that teachers are students and students are teachers may reflect an ideal, yet it does not match with reality in actual college settings.

A reminder of two examples of the distinction between roles should suffice. First, instructors design courses in advance of student participation in them; students do not pre-design courses for instructors. Thus, it is clear that the instructor plays a unique role related to the instructional design element of the TP dimension of the CoI framework. Second, for good or for ill, instructors are professionally obligated to assess the

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