



## An investigation into the community of inquiry of blended classrooms by a Faculty Learning Community



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### ARTICLE INFO

#### Article history:

Accepted 19 December 2014

Available online 27 December 2014

#### Keywords:

Faculty Learning Community

Blended learning

Online learning

Community of Inquiry

### ABSTRACT

A Faculty Learning Community (FLC) comprised of six professors representing different disciplines came together to study, develop, and teach blended learning courses. As an FLC, the researchers sought to evaluate student perceptions of the blended learning courses, measured using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) survey, and how these differed across the courses taught. In addition to this objective, a secondary objective of how the experience of learning to design blended learning courses in an FLC differed across the faculty was also explored. This exploratory case study found evidence to suggest that student perceptions of a blended course, as measured by the CoI framework, can be used to determine differences in students' blended learning experiences. The results of the study also suggest that perceived differences in blended learning experiences varied by discipline, highlighting an important area for future research experiments. An additional research outcome was that an FLC may be a useful form of faculty development when correctly implemented. For example, participating faculty benefited from participation in an FLC when they received helpful advice on promising practices and encouragement when experiencing instructional or technical challenges.

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### 1. Introduction

The growth of blended and online learning is well documented in the literature. An annual survey (Allen & Seaman, 2014) reported that 7.1 million college students took at least one online course during the fall of 2013, a dramatic increase from the 1.5 million students in 2002. Faculty respondents to a 2006 survey (Kim & Bonk, 2006) expected a vast majority of university courses to be offered in a blended format by 2013. However, many faculty seem unsupportive or unprepared to make this transition, with one-third of chief academic officers reporting that their faculty perceive online learning outcomes as inferior to those facilitated by face-to-face instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Despite reservations by both faculty and administrators in developing and implementing such courses, reasons for growth in blended learning popularity are numerous and include decreased dropout rates and higher grades when compared to face-to-face student data from a previous year (Lopez-Perez, Perez-Lopez, & Rodriguez-Ariza, 2011). Given such benefits, faculty support may increase if they have pedagogical strategies that work within blended course as well as support for professional development in order to succeed in creating blended courses.

For example, Kim and Bonk (2006) found that faculty members were more concerned with understanding online pedagogy than understanding the technology required to teach online, a change from an earlier survey. While this finding is encouraging, it presents a new challenge as most distance learning theories focus on structural issues rather than teaching and learning (Garrison, 2000). One exception is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). This framework has been used in instructional design to enhance learning outcomes in both online and blended courses. CoI provides a framework for facilitating meaningful online learning through three interdependent elements: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2001). As such, CoI provides a framework from which to educate faculty on issues relevant to teaching and facilitating blended courses, as well as providing a framework within which faculty can create blended courses.

In addition to having a rational framework for course development, if blended courses are to increase in number and to be effective, thoughtful professional development is needed to effectively teach faculty how to improve their blended pedagogy. For example, workshops and informal mentoring are common training formats (Allen & Seaman, 2011), but may not be adequate for understanding complex online pedagogy. Faculty Learning Communities (FLC) may be more effective in providing faculty with a deep understanding of online pedagogy topics (Cox, 2004; Vaughan & Garrison, 2006). FLCs are

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designated groups of interdisciplinary faculty with similar levels of expertise in the area that work together on a yearlong collaborative project around a specific topic related to teaching and learning (Cox, 2004). This format provides opportunities for sustained investigation of topics, community building among members, and opportunities for junior and senior faculty to collaborate on scholarly activities (Cox, 2004).

### 1.1. Blended learning

Although the term “blended learning” was rarely mentioned in print prior to 2000 (Bluic, Goodyear, & Ellis, 2007), the concept is not a new one for teaching and learning. A form of blended learning occurred in the United States in the 1920s when some students, especially those living in rural communities, completed high school, prepared for trades, and took university courses by participating in both correspondence and face-to-face instruction (Rose & Ray, 2011). Recently, however, blended learning formats involving online learning have become increasingly popular in higher education. From 2002 to 2008 numbers of university students taking online coursework increased from 9% to 22% of enrolled students (Carter, 2008). During the fall term of 2013, 33.5% of college students took an online course (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Blended learning can be defined as “the integrated combination of traditional learning with Web-based online approaches” (Motteram & Sharma, 2009, p. 90). Blended learning is characterized by three features: 1) personal contact with an instructor, 2) the use of electronically delivered learning objects, and 3) the blending of these two in order to meet learning targets (Hoffman & Miner, 2008). More specifically, the Sloan Consortium defines a blended course as a combination of face-to-face and online delivery, with 30% to 79% of the content delivered online, resulting in fewer face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

In recent years, the strengths of blended learning have been heavily documented. For example, blended learning reduces face-to-face time, has been shown to be preferred by faculty members, creates the possibility for more student collaboration and self-directed learning, offers opportunities for instructors to observe situated learning in environments similar to the job market, and offers more control of learning to students (Rose & Ray, 2011). Although promising, the aforementioned strengths seem to be influenced by several factors. For example, blended learning has the potential to increase student participation in college course work (Jones & Sze Lau, 2010) if students are self-directed learners with the ability to troubleshoot technical and comprehension challenges (Rose & Ray, 2011). Similarly, although blended learning has a positive effect in reducing dropout rates in higher education and improving grades (Lopez-Perez et al., 2011), this has been shown to be dependent on students’ age, background, and class attendance as well as blended learning activities.

Successful blended learning is a synergy between in-class and online learning (Cottle & Glover, 2012). The technology used in blended courses affords flexibility and a-synchronicity that serves the learning styles of diverse learners (Albion & Redmond, 2006). For example, online learning within a blended format creates space for instructors to devote in-class time to creating engaging learning environments and explicit instruction. The online environment can provide a means by which to more efficiently increase or review student’s knowledge of course content prior to class. The social spaces provided in online communities have demonstrated that metacognition, where students construct meaning and confirm knowledge in the presence of peers, has the potential to increase during online student discussions (Akyol & Garrison, 2011a,b). However, as noted previously, research shows that some students struggle with the increased responsibilities of online learning formats, especially if they are new learning environments for those students (Albion & Redmond, 2006). In other words, if students and institutions are to benefit from developing and implementing blended courses, these courses should be developed with the use of rigorous pedagogical structures by a well-informed faculty.

### 1.2. Community of Inquiry

It has become clear in recent years that technology is expanding pedagogy (Dede, 2009), however sound teaching pedagogy means that technology must support pedagogy. The Community of Inquiry framework encompasses three facets of learning in order to capture the major factors that affect critical thinking and meaningful student learning in online environments. In doing so, it provides a useful context for evaluating a blended course which is, by definition, incorporating online elements to enhance learning and serve a greater variety of learning needs.

The Community of Inquiry encompasses three elements that are essential for successful learning: teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010). First, teaching presence means that the course instructor is attentive to students’ needs. More specifically, the instructor must develop curriculum, facilitate learning activities, and deliver content through direct instructional methods as needed. In an optimal learning environment, according to the CoI framework, students are given opportunities for collaboration and to reflect on their learning. Second, cognitive presence can be defined as “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical Community of Inquiry” (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 11). Operationally, cognitive presence can be defined through the practical inquiry model, whereby students are able to define a task or problem, explore information to address the task or problem, make sense of the task or problem by integrating points of view addressing the task or problem, and test plausible solutions (Garrison, 2011). Finally, social presence can be used to help establish a community of learners by minimizing feelings of isolation students may feel when learning online. Strong social presence can help students feel safe to share ideas and collaborate with others on course content.

The impacts of the three elements of CoI have been widely studied in recent years in online and blended learning environments. For example, high levels of cognitive presence, as indicated by higher order learning, can be observed in blended learning classes (Akyol & Garrison, 2011b). Cognitive presence is highly correlated with social presence in learner-led synchronous contexts (Wanstreet & Stein, 2011). Social presence indicators strongly inform student perception of learning success and persistence in online programs as well (Boston et al., 2009). Both social presence and cognitive presence are influenced by teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2010). The role of different disciplines in this structure and the potential effectiveness of a blended course format on these outcomes across disciplines have been explored little, however.

Most of the current research on CoI outcomes in blended learning uses case study design, survey instruments for single courses, or comparative studies of online and face-to-face learning contexts within the same discipline (Bluic et al., 2007). This exploratory case study encompasses six disciplines in order to compare social, teaching, and cognitive presence across disciplines and explore how students perceive community in a blended learning environment. By studying blended learning within a group of faculty of varying disciplines, researchers are able to look at the outcomes of a blended classroom through the perspectives of multiple disciplines and levels of courses. Studying blended learning using mixed-methodology and with an interdisciplinary approach as done in this study is largely new terrain.

Within the Faculty Learning Community (FLC), six disciplines were represented: Engineering, Psychology, Curriculum and Instruction, Nursing, Economics, and Instructional Technology. Each member independently designed the blended learning strategies for their respective courses, resulting in a wide spectrum of pedagogical applications reflective of the various disciplines of participants. According to Akyol et al. (2009), the shape of disciplinary knowledge, whether constructivist or objectivist in nature, also affects student perceptions in a CoI. In previous research, the CoI framework best adapted itself to applied disciplines where the course content was more constructivist in nature

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