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Community of Inquiry Framework for Advanced Practice Nursing Students

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ABSTRACT

Distance education programs are increasingly common in nursing education, and educators are challenged with creating online courses that provide students with quality learning experiences. For advanced practice nursing (APN) students, online courses need to engage students in learning while meeting their unique needs. The Community of Inquiry (COI) framework is grounded in theories of learning and teaching and is relevant for use in developing online courses for APN students. The purpose of this article is to describe the development of an online clinical practice management course for APN students using the COI framework.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry, distance education, graduate nursing education, nurse practitioners, online advanced practice education

INTRODUCTION

The delivery of higher education has changed dramatically in recent years due to the shift toward online learning. The movement away from the traditional classroom has substantially altered the delivery of course content, teaching methods, and the role of teachers and learners. Educators are challenged with providing innovative methods that can stimulate critical thinking and encourage student engagement within the online environment. Streaming media, interactive textbooks, and other communication technologies are instrumental in enhancing students' engagement. In nursing, it is critical for educators to focus on knowledge construction through evidence-based practice activities and community-building to ensure collaborative learning and ensure optimal learning outcomes. Although online education has increased in recent years,[1,2] there is a paucity of literature on theoretical frameworks used for online nursing education.

The Community of Inquiry (COI) model provides a promising, innovative approach to collaborative learning through the integration of 3 elements, the cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence.[3] Collectively, the 3 presences enable students to engage in critical thinking and collaborative activities. Multiple studies across disciplines have suggested that the COI framework is

an effective method of teaching and learning that promotes student engagement, community and a spirit of inquiry.[2,4] This article describes the development of a hybrid practice management course for advanced practice nursing (APN) students using the COI as a framework to guide the design and development of the course.

BACKGROUND

The availability and popularity of online higher education has increased substantially in the past 10 years. For example, current reports of public institutions suggest that almost 40% of graduate students and 73% of undergraduate students across disciplines engage in online education.[5] Online education offers individuals seeking to advance their careers a broad selection of opportunities regardless of geography and allows flexibility with scheduling. Online education offers minimal face-to-face meetings between student and teacher.[6] Hybrid courses, also known as blended courses, are those that incorporate online content with face-to-face teaching and course activities. A substantial portion (69.1%) of academic leaders recently reported that online education is critical to their schools' long-term strategies.[6] In addition, academic leaders appraise online learning outcomes to be the same or better than classroom courses.[6]

Changes in education, including online education, has shifted, requiring students and educators to

JNP

redirect their traditional roles from teacher–centered (*sage on the stage*) to student centered (*guide on the side*).[7] Therefore, students must become self-directed learners and assume a high level of responsibility for their own experiences. Furthermore, educators are challenged with developing innovative strategies that foster a sense of community and presence while building knowledge.

COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY MODEL

The COI provides a theoretical framework that gives order to the complexity of online learning.[8] In their seminal work, Garrison and colleagues[9] noted how the COI model assumes learning takes place within the "community" through the interaction of 3 core elements, the cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence, with cognitive presence being the most basic to success in higher education. The COI model was originally developed in an attempt to address graduate online learning in a course where a discussion board/forum was the central means of communication.[9] In their analysis, Garrison and colleagues identified indicators and the relationship of those indicators, with the 3 core elements as displayed in Table 1.

Cognitive presence is the deliberate cyclic movement through a 4-phase process—from understanding an issue or problem to triggering events, exploration, integration, and resolution. In cognitive presence, learners can form meaning through self–reflection and communication with others. One of the foci of the COI within the cognitive presence is the idea of "deep and meaningful" learning, learning that requires significant consideration and true comprehension of the material. This type of learning, as opposed to "surface" learning, allows for higher order processing and retention of material.[10] Some studies have suggested that the quality of interaction and engagement between participants within in a course promoted deep learning.[11] Deep learning is essential for health care professional trainees as they seek to understand how to connect research and facts to clinical practice.

Social presence is perhaps the most difficult to replicate and understand in an online environment. Social presence is the ability of learners to project themselves emotionally and socially. Social presence requires emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion, which are all important attributes in building relationship with faculty and among students. Social presence is how learners see themselves as "real people" within an online environment.[12] Additionally, "co-efforts" are required among all members in the community (faculty and students) to bring about meaningful learning experiences.[13]

Teaching presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for learners to achieve meaningful learning outcomes.[9] It includes course design and organization, facilitating discourse, and instruction of students.[14] Some studies suggest that teaching presence is highly correlated to cognitive presence, perceived learning, and student satisfaction.[8] Teaching presence also seems to be key to creating and sustaining social and cognitive presence.[14] For example, a recent study noted that although teacher's presence and action influenced social presence, the pedagogical approach (design, delivery, and facilitation) greatly influenced learners' cognitive presence.[4] The COI model has gained wider popularity and has been adapted by educators worldwide.[15] The COI model is consistent with the constructivist approach in which knowledge acquisition and progression come from collaborative activities, community building, and knowledge

Table 1. Community of Inquiry Essential Elements

Elements	Categories	Examples of Indicators
Cognitive presence	Triggering event Exploration Integration Resolution	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas Apply new ideas
Social presence	Emotional expression Open communication Group cohesion	Emotions Risk-free expression Encouraging collaboration
Teaching presence	Instructional management Building understanding Direct instruction	Defining and initiating discussion topics Sharing personal meaning Focusing discussion

From "Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: computer conferencing in higher education," by D.R. Garrison, T. Anderson, & W. Archer, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2010;2(2-3):87-85.