The Community of Inquiry: Delving Into the Past, Demystifying the Future

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There is extensive conversation related to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) here at APUS, most often review and analysis of CoI scores based on end-of-course survey data. Much more than survey data in support of validating student satisfaction, the CoI serves as a framework for teaching and learning at APUS, informing methodologies and approaches to course design and delivery.

Based on social constructivist education theory and research, the CoI framework identifies and measures three principle elements critical to a successful online learning environment – social, cognitive, and teaching presence. The methods we use in the design and delivery of our online courses support these presences, and make for engaging, dynamic learning experiences for our students.

To get a better understanding of the CoI framework, and how it applies to teaching and learning at APUS, let’s take a step back in time ...

The One Room Schoolhouse

Imagine the year is 1910, and you’re the teacher in a one room schoolhouse in the Blue Ridge mountains of West Virginia. It’s a cold November morning, and as you open the door to the schoolhouse, you feel the damp chill of the classroom. Immediately, you set to lighting up the big potbellied stove in the middle of the room – making a warm, safe, comfortable environment for your students to learn in.

As you’re writing the day’s lesson on the board, you think about the activities that you’ll introduce into the classroom today. You know you’ll need to find a way to keep the fidgety students attentive, and the high achievers interested -- perhaps a walk outside to identify winter berries, or animal tracks, then a follow up talk upon your return to the schoolhouse.

The door opens and the children begin filing into the schoolhouse. The older ones act as mentors, and sit with the younger ones who may need more help. They talk a bit amongst themselves and then they settle down. The day begins.

At times, so far away from other colleagues, you feel alone. Today, you remember that a teacher friend of yours, who works in a big city, had sent you a package of treats for your class, and in your bag is an exciting new classroom tool – colored chalk. You take the chalk out of your bag and show it to your students, expecting them to ask to use the colorful chalk to create pictures on the board. Instead, they ask you how someone could make the chalk blue, red, green, yellow. You turn this moment into a teaching moment, and discuss how dyes can be found in nature. You take the class outside to look for berries, twigs and leaves that might have made the chalk so colorful.

Back inside, as the children work at their desks, you notice that a student who has been out for several days is still not in class. You make a mental note to check in with your neighbor who knows the child’s parents, so that you can be sure that everyone is well, and that the student will be returning to school soon.
As the day winds down, several students come up to your desk and give you handfuls of apples from their family farms. You know right away that you’re not going to take them home and eat them, but rather take them home and make apple pie, and share that pie with the entire class. You may even add the new nutmeg spice that your teacher friend from the big city sent you as well, and in the back of your mind, you imagine teaching the students about the commerce and culture of the spice industry.

As you leave the room, you take the time to carefully put out the fire in the potbellied stove, and set the kindling so that it will be even easier to light the fire the next day. Your day is done.

The one room schoolhouse metaphor relates directly to an applied CoI methodology, and we can begin to explore social, cognitive, and teaching presence as they relate to this scenario.

Social Presence

Lighting the fire in the potbellied stove illustrates social presence, the steps and care you need to take in order to establish a supportive learning environment where the students can express their identities and establish social relationships. Setting a welcoming environment where students will want to learn and share. We model social presence in the APUS classroom through carefully crafted welcome messages, announcements, facilitated discussions, directed group projects and social networking opportunities.

Cognitive Presence

Introducing the colored chalk to the classroom illustrates cognitive presence, enabling students to question, challenge, and confirm meaning through reflection and dialogue. Perhaps the nutmeg in the apple pie will inspire the students to ask questions related to commerce and culture! A triggering event inspires the students to engage in critical thinking, and leads you to validate their understanding. We model cognitive presence in the APUS classroom by engaging students in activities that scaffold learning, moving students from the initial learning stages of knowledge and comprehension toward the critical learning stages of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Teaching Presence

Taking home the apples and making apple pie illustrates teaching presence, as does the design and facilitation of every activity aimed at keep students engaged in the learning process. Teaching presence includes mentoring the more advanced students to help others learn, and following up on missing students in the classroom. We model teaching presence in the APUS classroom in the many ways we give back to our students -- providing formative feedback and support in a timely manner, and evaluating student progress throughout the learning experience.

Past, Present and Future

The year is now 2012. Our electronic schoolhouses are distributed around the world. Yet our roles as facilitators of social, cognitive, and teaching presence have not changed very much since the teacher lit the fire in that potbellied stove in the one room schoolhouse. We need to create virtual learning spaces that foster vibrant learning communities, find ways to cultivate higher order thinking, and provide substantive guidance and feedback to our students.
Exploring the applied CoI framework is an integral part of our strategic plan in support of teaching excellence and curriculum quality. We invite you to share your thoughts in the Faculty Lounge, and engage your colleagues in critical discourse related to social, cognitive, and teaching presence within the framework of our very own community of inquiry here at APUS.

For further exploration, you can access the article that inspired the associated one room schoolhouse reflection at http://auspace.athabascau.ca/bitstream/2149/725/1/assessing_teaching_presence.pdf

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