Community of Inquiry Framework

The CoI framework is a social constructivist model of learning processes utilized in online and blended environments. Garrison and Archer (2000) shared that learning can be greatly enhanced in online learning environments when CoI can be established and developed. The CoI theoretical framework guides ways to offer deep and collaborative online learning experiences through the lens of three interdependent elements – social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. As the focus of this presentation was about social presence, the other two CoI elements (cognitive presence and teaching presence) will not be addressed.

Social Presence

Students engage in learning when they feel connected with others and when they play an active role in their learning process. Therefore, social presence is an important component of effective learning in both face-face and online learning environments. How social presence has been defined hasn’t deviated greatly from the original description offered by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in 1999; “the ability of participants in a CoI to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as real people through the medium of communication being used” (1999, pp. 89). In the CoI model, social presence becomes more than the salience of individuals and their interactions in a mediated environment, or the ‘being real’ and ‘being there’ component. Social presence provides information about group cohesion and cognitive affect as well as the capacity of participants to identify with the community, communicate with purpose in an atmosphere of trust, and grow relationships with one another by projecting their own individual personalities (Garrison, 2009). Kreijns et al. (2014) contend that the term social presence has been used to describe two different concepts: the extent of interpersonal relationships within the community and how real the other individual seems. Furthermore, as defined by Tasir and Al-Dheleai (2019), social presence is the individual’s perception that their presence within a group of people is recognized, valued and respected which boosts the feeling of being connected to other group members. For this presentation, social presence is being referenced as the ability of students to identify with others within the course, to perceive others in an online environment as ‘real’, and to project their own self as a real person when engaging in open communication, affective expression, and group cohesion.

Cognizing that the online learning environment is predominantly dependent upon asynchronous instruction, the use of computer-mediated communication channels for developing
Social presence is important to consider when designing a course. In the online learning environment, computer-mediated communication can be understood as a feeling of social presence. According to Sung and Mayer (2012), social presence refers to “the subjective feeling of being connected and together with others during computer-mediated communication” (p. 1740). Additionally, Oztok and Kehrwald (2017) defined social presence as “the subjective feeling of being with other salient social actors in a technologically mediated space. It is the sense of ‘being there, together’ when ‘being there’ does not involve a physical presence” (p. 9).

Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment. Social presence, or the ‘being there’ and ‘being real’ in the presence of others in an online learning environment, is widely considered to have a positive impact on student motivation and participation, student engagement, actual and perceived learning, course and instructor satisfaction, and retention in online courses (Bowers & Kumar, 2015; Cui et al., 2013; Moallem, 2015; Oh et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2017; Rogers & Price, 2008; Whiteside, 2015). Beyond the ‘being there’ and ‘being real’ social presence components, to include the ability of participants to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of learners can also serve to further personal and purposeful relationships. Referencing how students relate to one another, it is their personal stamp that indicates their willingness to engage, connect, and communicate effectively with other learners in their online community. Additionally, sharing information among their community of learners leads students to engage with the course content more meaningfully (Carlsmith & Cooper, 2002).

Creating an online class environment where the learner is engaged, relaxed, and comfortable when communicating with their classmates should be a primary objective for online pedagogy. In their study involving online higher education students, Don et al. (2022) found as students’ participation in e-Learning class activities increased, their levels of social presence also increased. Noting the students felt more acknowledged by their classmates. Additionally, social presence has been shown to lead to higher levels of cognitive presence in online classes (Garrison et al., 2010; Kozen & Richardson, 2014). Therefore, when there are higher levels of social presence, learners are more likely to engage in higher-order mental processes.

Building a Community of Learners. Humans are inherently social creatures. Socialization and connections among students are a natural yet central aspect of the learning process within any learning environment (Jones-Robert, 2018; Laffey et al., 2006). In the online learning environment, it takes intentional course design to incorporate activities that allow for student-to-student interactions and to avoid feeling a lack of social presence. Evidence suggests that a focus on developing a community of learners in online instruction is considered optimal by experts in the field (Baldwin & Trespalacios, 2017; Martin et al., 2019). Having interviewed eight award-winning online faculty about their perspectives of online instruction, Martin et al. (2019) found all of the participants interviewed noted interaction or community as an important component in designing educational activities.

Though building community may seem separate from teaching, the research of Elliott et al. (2016) and Shadiow and Weimer (2015) conclude building a community of learners provides a sense of belonging that promotes class contribution, student engagement, learning, and motivation for learners. A community where students feel valued and heard. A community that fosters a climate of openness, acceptance, and a place to share common interests (Elliott et al., 2016). This type of community of learners will encourage students to share diverse perspectives,
recognize and affirm differences, and ultimately help them connected with course content for greater learning outcomes (Oh et al., 2018; Richardson et al., 2017). In online learning environments, the more interaction taking place between students, the stronger the development of social presence and the greater the levels of knowledge development (Costley, 2019).

A feeling of belonging to a community creates comfort and trust and encourages students to participate by sharing their knowledge, asking questions, and supporting peers (Haythornthwaite et al., 2000; Picciano, 2002). In their study of 71 graduate students from Malaysian public universities, Tasir and Al-Dheleai (2019) found a high sense of safety and trust toward the instructor and other students deepened the relationship among the community of learners. When the students felt a sense of safety and trust in their learning community, they tended to disclose their personal life stories with each other. For students to feel the sense of safety and trust, they need to perceive a social connection to the course as well as with the learners (Dixon et al., 2006). In other words, they need to feel as though they are part of a community of learners who share a common goal.

As students move from the periphery to becoming a central player they begin to build social presence and, in turn, enter into dialogue with others and enhance the community of learners. Learning environments that optimize opportunities for students to interact with their peers, the instructor and the content, such as introduction discussion forums, provide excellent platforms for student engagement (Stephens, 2015). Dixon et al. (2006) conducted research on the effectiveness of introduction discussion forums, identified as an icebreaker activity. They found that “members of a learning community need to work together to produce ideas and share responsibility for advancing the community’s learning, develop relationships that support collaborative work, and specifically take on course assignments and work together on them” (p. 2). A response from a university undergraduate student was “I think that icebreakers in conjunction with other learning community-building tools helps develop the integrity of the learning community” (Dixon et al., 2006, p. 8). Or as shared by another student,

This exercise can certainly introduce people to each other in a more fun way—instead of reading a paragraph or two about someone. … [it] helps people to get a bit closer which could break the barriers to taking risks online faster, thereby enabling participants to start connecting earlier in the course. (p. 9)

Research also suggests that size of the learning community in online instruction plays a role in social presence (Akcaoglu & Lee, 2016; Poquet et al., 2018). As well, educators and researchers have experimented with various methods to create and sustain social presence in the online learning environment, including the use of audio and video technology (Aragon, 2003; Bartlett, 2018; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Jones-Roberts, 2018; Martin et al., 2022).

Instructor Presence

Although a teacher is not physically sharing the learning space in an online learning environment, it is important for students to feel that they are interacting with a real human being to develop a teacher-student relationship. Putting a face and voice to the instructor helps students feel there is a human teaching their course, which can positively impact students’ willingness to reach out for help and may impact students’ course satisfaction perceptions during instructor and/or course evaluation (Song et al., 2019). Developing a teaching persona is also an authentic means of contributing (Shadiow & Weimer, 2015).
In an online learning environment, instructor self-disclosure is important for building relationships with students. Self-disclosure being broadly defined as an interactive process through which one reveals personal information to others (Green et al., 2006). It is a sharing behavior by which individuals “voluntarily and intentionally reveal about themselves to others, including their thoughts, feelings, and experiences” (Posey et al., 2010, p. 183). In an educational context, instructor self-disclosure is understood as “conscious and deliberate disclosures about oneself, aspects of one’s professional practice, world or personal views, personal history, and responses to ongoing classroom events” (Rasmussen & Mishna, 2008, p. 192). In computer-mediated communications, the role of instructor self-disclosure in relationship building is more powerful than in non-mediated contexts. The reason why self-disclosure affects relationship satisfaction is that students feel a strong social presence of their teacher (Song et al., 2019). In an online learning environment, Song et al. (2016) found that instructor self-disclosure was positively associated with instructor–student relationship satisfaction; where this association appeared to be stronger in an online class than in a face-to-face class. In another study with 262 undergraduate students who had taken at least one online course, Song et al. (2019) found “the association between teacher self-disclosure and teacher–student relationship satisfaction was mediated by social presence” (p. 450). Given that the future and success of online education are dependent upon student satisfaction, instructors in online classes are strongly encouraged to interact actively with their students by disclosing their personal information (Song et al., 2019).

Conducted a crowdsourcing methodology to determine online educators’ recommendations for teaching online, Dunlap and Lowenthal (2018) found the highest number of recommendations shared centered around the instructor presence theme. Including the importance of connecting with students, helping students connect with each other, and helping students feel they are members of a supportive learning community. Their recommendations in support of instructor presence included putting a face to a name; being accessible and kind; showing your character and personality; having a sense of humor; using video to introduce yourself and to model what you want from students; making connections early in the course to ensure all students feel comfortable communicating with you and each other; and creating opportunities for students to build community (pp. 83-85).

**Introduction Forums**

There is a strong need for investigating how to promote relationship building in online courses. Understanding that relationship building starts from knowing each other, utilizing introduction forums is a way to offer instructors and students a platform for coming to know each other. Being mindful that when starting a class, the students are all strangers. Using a non-risky introduction prompt allows students to creatively find avenues for sharing common interests or experiences. By offering students creative outlets for expressing themselves, instructors are also empowering students to share with their classmates. Introduction forums help students create connections and build a sense of camaraderie in the class (Ice-Breaker Activities, n.d.). Almodiel (2021) showed that there is also a high level of access to self-introduction forums, suggesting that students are interested in discovering information about their co-learners. Introduction forums can also help educators get to know their students and build better relationships with them (Fernandes et al., 2020).

Introduction strategies used to welcome students to the online course environment can also influence students’ levels of engagement in the class. Having a dedicated discussion for
student introductions helps build a sense of community, where learners begin to identify with the group, build trust and develop personal relationships (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). When including divergent questions that may require them to review the course syllabus, students begin to share their expectations about course outcomes, assess students’ prior content knowledge, develop an awareness of their own learning styles and those of their classmates, and ensure that diversity and privacy perimeters are protected (Stephens, 2015). Developing introduction forums topics that respect the importance of student autonomy and support the anytime, anyplace aspect of online participation “serve to move learners towards an authentic learning community with a clear understanding of the interests, needs, and work habits of their virtual colleagues” (Dixon et al., 2006, p. 3). Ultimately, there should be a fun aspect to the introduction discussions.

While an introduction discussion assignment has been regarded as a best practice in online courses (Plante & Asselin, 2014), for many learners, the very nature of posting to an online space of their thoughts to be read by unknown peers is threatening, and impersonal (Peacock & Cowan, 2016). Despite the familiarity of this classic assignment, some students may feel participation anxiety (Bond, 2017), an uncomfortableness or uncertainty introducing themselves for the first time. Others may not be engaged due to monotony. The key is to get students interacting with each other, having conversations and making connections in a safe and effective way. The best introduction activities help students create connections and build a sense of camaraderie in the online learning environment while also allowing instructors to get to know their students and build better relationships. The student's responses to the introduction forum prompt can also provide the instructor with specific learner characteristics that may later be used in the formation of online learning communities; determine the composition of small groups, sub-groups or peer teams within the course; or to differentiate learning activities in upcoming course activities and assignments.

Designing Introduction Forums

Crafting the introduction forum is as much a course design effort as it is providing a tool for sustained communication with each other throughout the course. If social presence and a feeling of community are important for learning to advance, course designers and educators must develop ways to create a community of learners early and help to nurture it throughout a course. Research supports the use of introduction forums and community building exercises help to build social presence and minimize the sense of transactional distance (i.e., the space felt between learners and instructors; Dixon et al., 2006; Fiock, 2020; Richardson et al., 2009). Introduction activities would allow learners working at a distance to make connections, learn about each other, and encourage the development of trusting relationships. These relationships would then support collaborative learning and constructivist, supportive, learning environments (Dixon et al., 2016). In creating introduction forums, it is important that they are fun, simple, not time consuming, are inclusive and sensitive to cultural differences, do not require advanced technology skills, maintains the asynchronous anywhere anytime participation, and are mindful of online learners right to maintain their anonymity (Dixon et al., 2016). Students having previous online course experience and some degree of technology proficiency are important to consider as is the design of the introduction activity (Bond, 2017).

This author has found having a specific introduction activity prompt and writing clear instructions for how the student is to respond to be effective in helping students structure their self-introduction. In addition to the written instructions, including an instructor created video
where the instructor models the expectation or converses about what the students are to do removes uncertainty what is expected in the student’s self-introduction. Instructor engagement in the introduction discussion forum not only conveys a message of care and concern for their students, but avails themselves to being the conduit for connecting learners with each other, with ourselves, and with the content being discussed. Thus, the instructor is instrumental in the introduction forums to both model response expectations as well as showing students that their contributions, thoughts, and opinions are valued. I, as the instructor, typically post my own self-introduction first where I share something personal. It’s my ‘here's what I want you to know about me’ response, similar to the fashion that I ask the students to share something about themselves.

Video Introduction Discussions

While text-based discussion boards are standard in online learning, video discussion boards offer a new and exciting opportunity for students to engage with one another and to discuss their interests and backgrounds. Online students often work asynchronously and feel they are alone in the course. Video discussion forums show participants they are not alone and that there are others moving through the course with them. When compared directly with text-based discussions, asynchronous student-to-student video discussions have been shown to have significantly higher self-reported perceptions of social presence (Clark et al., 2015). Social cues in videos like humor, self-disclosure, emotions, and interjecting allusions of physical presence are noticed and preferred by students (Paquette, 2016). Using the video style discussion forum helps students get to know each other as well as increases communication efficiency by showing body language, facial expressions, and tone of voice. In her study using Flipgrid to increase students’ connectedness in an online university course, Bartlett (2018) found 92% of the students reported the use of Flipgrid increased their connectedness to the course, peers, instructor, program, and overall sense of community while 8% reported being unsure. One student shared after one week of engagement in an introduction Flipgrid forum that they felt more connected to their peers in the class, including when working on group projects. Borup et al. (2012) found when instructors offered their own video introductions that it helped students to develop an emotional connection with their instructor and to perceive them as a real person. Additionally, by utilizing video introduction activities, social presence is developed among students by providing an example of how students can communicate and use social cues in an online course.

Implementing asynchronous introduction video discussions can be done in several ways, including using FlipGrid, Google+ Group, Google Hangouts, Voicethread, or embedded LMS audio/video recording tools. YouTube videos could also be created as well as use of video authoring tools, such as Kaltura or Brightcove, and then upload the recordings within a LMS’s discussion board interface. When using video or audio recorded introductions, instructors will want to provide students with clear instructions on how to use the technology suggested, how to access the video forum suggested, and communicate clearly what the student is expected to cover during their video or audio introduction. Instructors should be mindful of video length limitations that either they establish or is a part of the recording technology chosen to be used. The shorter the video limit, the more the students will have to prepare in order to ensure their content fits within the time allowed (Bartlett, 2018). However, if an instructor gives more time, the overall time students spend watching their peers' initial posts and peers' response posts will exponentially increase. Instructors may also use introduction posts as a graded assignment to
encourage students to meet each other. The grading of discussion posts has been seen as a motivator on whether students participate in them or not (Dodson, 2021). If possible, instructors should also provide learners with a brief reasoning behind the video or audio introduction activities including some references to literature discussing the importance of community building and collaboration.

**Examples of Introduction Forums**

What follows are examples of introduction forums used by this author and/or founded in research to be effective means of building a community of learners, developing social presence within the online learning environment, and offering an enjoyable start to the online course of any discipline. An assortment of introduction forums helps to “meet a variety of needs and contribute to improved student participation, increased student persistence, and ultimately enhanced student learning” (Chlup & Collins, 2010, p. 35). The introduction forum prompts are included and may be adapted to each instructor or course content. Developed with instructor flexibility in mind, it is important each instructor participates in these introduction activities to showcase their own unique style(s) for getting to know their class.

**Going the Distance**

For this introduction activity (also referred to as *World Series or Map Quest*), students choose a part of the world that holds significance for them. Postings may highlight cities that students have visited in their travels, a part of the world they currently reside in, or maybe a country their families might have emigrated from. Identifying the parts of the world that are of significance to participants can aid in expressing any cultural differences present throughout the class. A benefit of this strategy is that students share information about past, present, and/or future experiences to create connections. It provides students with an opportunity to discuss their geographic background which lends to a more humanizing educational experience (Dixon et al., 2006). It can also provide a way for students to learn who is near them which is especially nice for international students or students providing military service. In this author’s own experience, when asking students to share where they currently reside, I have created a virtual map, tagged with the geographic locations that students provided.

**Hollywood Stars/A Picture Says It All**

Dixon et al. (2016) ask students to describe themselves by posting the name of an actor and/or a character in a movie that they identify with and/or perhaps look like. Classmates then try to guess why the individual relates to the movie character. Responding to classmates whose character/movie is not familiar generates communication between participants. A benefit of this approach is that students who do not wish to share a genuine picture of themself likely would not object to providing the name of an actor that they identify with; therefore, a sense of anonymity will be maintained. In a similar manner, this author has used the *A Picture Says It All* introduction forum. This is simple, quick and safe topic that asks the students to upload a picture or an image that they feel represents themselves and to share how they feel the image best represents them at this point in their life journey.
**Good Things Come in Three’s**

Students are asked to share their three favorite ____. This author has filled in the blank with their three favorite websites, or their three favorite hobbies or interests, or their three favorite television or Netflix shows. The flexibility of this topic offers the instructor easy variety in its use. This is also a non-risky introduction forum that builds create comradery among the class in their responses, both in agreement as well as other websites or shows to watch of a similar genre. When asked to share hobbies or interests, students again find commonality or their own interest is sparked in the classmate replies.

**My Slogan**

An equally non-risky introduction forum is My Slogan. For this topic, students are asked to develop a personal slogan. This author includes they are welcome to use a company’s existing slogan and to share how that relates to themselves. I provide the examples of “I’m Lovin’ it” based on the McDonald’s slogan or “Just Do It” based on the Nike slogan.

**CSI: Class Session Introductions**

Stephens (2015) used this introduction assignment to establish a foundation for student success in other course activities. By incorporating the CSI activity among the initial assignments, the online students were better prepared for future course activities that required interaction between them and their peers, the instructor and the content. Student are asked to respond to four prompt questions:

1. Which of the course’s learning outcomes are of most interest to you and why?
2. What preparation have you had as a foundation for this course?
3. What influence do you believe this course will have on your future?
4. Complete and reflect upon a web-based assessment (links provided to free, online assessments) regarding their dominate learning modality and/or intelligence.

**8 Nouns**

For their initial response, students are asked to only write 8 nouns that best describe them. For the classmate responses, students are told to share why their 8 nouns are representative of their personalities or backgrounds. What this author finds intriguing in using this introduction forum is to see how many students follow the direction of including only 8 nouns, as well, the student’s creativity in how to list just 8 nouns.

**When I Grow Up**

The description of this introduction discussion is to share what the student envisioned themselves being when they grew up and whether that is the career they are in or are pursuing now. This author has used this topic with multiple introductory course introduction forums. As students are just entering their higher education journey, many are also still contemplating what discipline or career they are pursuing. Likewise, Dixon et al. (2016) has used the What Do You Do? introduction discussion forum as a means for students to become acquainted with each
other. For this activity, students are asked post three hyperlinks that provide clues regarding their profession or area of personal interest. Students are encouraged to be as creative and imaginative as they would like in providing their clues for their profession or interest. Student responses are to pose questions to each other in an effort to identify the professions or interests of their virtual classmates. Ultimately this activity provides insight into each other’s backgrounds and interests and gives a context to the group’s experiences and expertise.

This or That

The introduction prompt simply offers opposing responses to a statement and students are asked to choose one of the positions and share why they chose that perspective. Some neutral, safe, examples are:

- Which breakfast food is better: Pancakes or Waffles?
- Would you rather read a book or watch a movie?
- Would you rather live in the country or live in the city?
- Would you rather be indoors or outdoors?
- Would you rather travel every single day or never leave home?

Gonzalez (2015) found this introduction forum builds student confidence, it helps students quickly find kindred spirits, and it’s also just a lot of fun.

3 P's

This author has found the 3 P's introduction topic most useful with the learners have previously been together. For this introduction forum, the students are asked to share three facts about themselves. One fact is something Personal, one fact is something Professional, and one fact is something Peculiar, such as a hobby or habit. An additional statement about respect for each person’s privacy is included in the topic description as the sharing of something personal or peculiar could seem risky to some students.

3 Truths and A Lie

The hunt for truth is a good way to generate a lot of discussion and community building amongst contributors (Dixon et al., 2006). This exercise (also referred to as Liar Liar) gives everyone the opportunity to take part in some creative story telling. For their initial introduction response, students are asked to provide four statements about themselves. Three of the statements are true and one statement is false or made up. Classmates then respond to each other with a guess and an explanation to why their guess of what is false was chosen. In a larger cohort that has worked together previously, this introduction exercise can offer continued team building (Fiock, 2022).
Conclusion

Ultimately, there is no singular strategy to increase social presence in the online learning environment. The use of creative, purposefully designed introduction discussion forums has been found to foster student-to-student and instructor-to-student connectivity in a personal yet safe manner. The author has provided both research-based and personal experiences with multiple introduction discussion prompts that align with the CoI and social presence concepts discussed. Regardless of how it is achieved, successful acquisition of social presence can lead to more motivated students, successful student engagement, and effective online instruction.
References


Bond, J. (2017, November 15). Observations from (nearly) 100 student self-introductions & advice for better results [Conference session]. *Online Learning Consortium Accelerate, Orlando, FL.*


https://doi.org/10.19173/irrodl.v20i5.3985


https://www.cultofpedagogy.com/classroom-icebreakers/


http://www.ascusc.org/jcmc/vol16/issue1/haythornthwaite.html

Ice-Breaker Activities to use in Your First-Year Student Induction. (n.d.).

https://www4.ntu.ac.uk/adq/document_uploads/running_a_course/193397.pdf


https://doi.org/10.1016/j.iheduc.2013.10.007


Richardson, J. C., Ice, P., & Swan, K. (2009, August 11-13). *Tips and techniques for integrating social, teaching, & cognitive presence into your courses* [Poster presentation]. Conference on Distance Teaching & Learning, Madison, WI.


