

In the Classroom 111

Making Your Classes Better With the Community of Inquiry Framework

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Stan Skrabut: Well, thanks for taking time to listen to this podcast. It certainly means a lot. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me, and I really appreciate it. This week I want to introduce you to an important three-legged stool. Now you can certainly sit on a stool with less than three legs, but it certainly takes a lot more work. The three-legged stool that I'm talking about is called the community of inquiry framework. Researchers and scholars have been exploring the idea of inquiry since John Dewey, but the framework I'm looking at was popularized by Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer.

Back in the early 1990s, while I was aware of that community inquiry for a couple of decades, it's only been the last five or 10 years that I've come to appreciate the importance it has on classrooms, regardless of the modality. Let's take a look at the community of inquiry and strategies you can use to weave it into your classroom. First of all, what is the community of inquiry? When thinking about building online community in a classroom, Randy Garrison's community of inquiry is a place to start. The community inquiry is built on social constructivist models for learning. It works at online, blended even face-to-face learning environments, and it has three primary elements.

The teaching presence, the social presence, and the cognitive presence. As you can imagine dialogue is foundational to meaningful learning. In a well-developed course, students need to have a dialogue with the teacher, fellow students, and even the content. The community of inquiry facilitates this dialogue. We want students to be able to ask questions that interest them about a topic and feel comfortable adding to a conversation. We want students to pull apart topics through personal reflection and review. Most importantly, learning is about dialogue. The key to building connections and a warm learning environment online is simple. You have to make it personal.

Students want to feel that the instructor notices them, cares about them and is there to support them. As Dr. Catlin Tucker notes, classrooms should be spaces where students develop the skills necessary to explore and understand their world. They must practice approaching unfamiliar concepts and situations to make sense of them. It takes these three parts in order to do it, the teaching presence, the social presence, and the cognitive presence. Let's look at each one of those presents. First is the teaching presence. The teaching presence focuses on the instructor's voice in the course, specifically, the design of the course.

The instructor sets the tone for the course and encourages community building by logically arranging the course content in a manner that helps students access it. The instructor also facilitates course activities. It's not so much the instructor is the sage on the stage where they're in front and center as a lecturer. Instead, the instructor introduces different elements and keeps everyone on track and moving in the right direction. Therefore, the instructor must be an active participant in the course in order to do well. Based on all the research students note, when an instructor is absent, they know when an instructor is also present.

They much prefer to have the instructor as someone who is part of the course and instructors who noticeably present in a good online course. An instructor doesn't simply build an online course, turn it on, and walk away. That's a correspondence course. You don't want that. That is what we're talking about this three-legged stool. If you remove the instructor, then the students are trying to sit on two legs. The instructor has to be there. The instructor is basically the orchestra leader, guiding the students through the content that they have pulled together, and this is the teaching presence. We'll talk about strategies for weaving the teaching presence into the classroom.

The next presence is called the social presence. This is the human element. This is where students and the instructor engage in dialogue. Ideally, there should be open communications to develop group cohesion, build trust, and make connections. This is where the greatest amount of dialogue takes place. You do this through a variety of mechanisms, primarily through discussions and group projects. The third element is the cognitive presence. This is where students are building meaning around the content. They're doing it through reflection and dialogue. As I talked about it in getting your students to read, yes, students can have a dialogue with content and they should be able to learn how to do this. They should be able to ask questions, form their questions as they're reading with a hope that they will answer those questions through further reading of a book perhaps.

If not, that opens up a dialogue where they can do further research. There you have it. You have the teaching presence, the social presence, and the cognitive presence. Now let's look at strategies for building community. Using the community of inquiry as a grounding framework, let's explore some strategies for putting the different elements into practice. A lot of these strategies for building community are also found in universal design for learning and other online course design rubrics, such as quality matters and the Oscar quality review. I have put a lot of links into the show notes. I encourage you to go check those out.

Some of those links link back to universal design for learning, quality matters, or I mean Oscar reviews plus many others. Go check those out and take a deeper dive on this topic. Let's talk about weaving teacher present. Teacher presence is about creating the right environment for learning, it's centered on designing the course, as well as facilitating the unfolding of the course. I found a wonderful document from the University of Virginia center for teaching and excellence. I've included it in the show notes, but here, based on that, and a lot of other resources I've found here are some strategies you can use to increase your teacher presence in your online class.

The first strategy is welcome students to your course. You can do this in a variety of ways. You certainly would like to send them an email telling them that the course is open, how excited that you are to have them in the course. You can also create a video. I strongly recommend creating a video. It is a very powerful way to humanize your course. Students can then get a feel for who you are as an individual. In addition to the course welcome video, you should also include a video orientation of your course. This is where you do a walkthrough of your course where you highlight different points and also talk about expectations for your course.

Another strategy is your course objectives and outcomes. Ensure that your course objectives and outcomes are clearly defined, measurable, and aligned to student learning activities and assessments. When you create your course activities, you should ensure that they mentioned the associated learning objective. Each course module should also highlight the learning objectives that the students will be learning in the module. Your course layout needs to have a logical consistent and uncluttered layout. Basically, the course needs to be easy to navigate, use a consistent color scheme and icon layout, organized related content together. The content should scaffold the learning that will occur.

Make sure that you use clear titles and descriptive titles as students can find things. You also want to minimize student frustration as caused when they get lost in the course navigation. Another strategy for teacher presence is introduce each module with a module overview. List your key learning objectives, the key activities, and the due dates. This is a strategy that will help guide your students through your course requirements. Also essential to basically everything is take time to provide well-written instructions for your course activities. Anything that you want students to do, don't leave things to chance. Even if it's a face-to-face course, you should take time to make sure that you write out clear instructions. Experience has shown that if the intent is not clear, it will be misunderstood. I've had this recently and I primarily work with faculty.

I thought I wrote clear instructions, obviously, I was incorrect based on what I received. I had to go back and clarify my instructions. This happens all the time in the classroom. Take time as one of those pinch points and go back and make sure that your instructions are clear for that particular assignment. If you happen to be referencing something as part of an assignment, include a link to those materials. Don't just refer to it as another section of the LMS, if you can link to it, link to it. For example, if you have an online discussion, you may reference your netiquette rules as well as a grading rubric. Link back to these items as you discuss your instruction. Feedback instructions, or feedback expectations, for learning to occur students must receive feedback from the instructor to make course corrections.

It's not only important to provide feedback but to clarify student expectations for receiving feedback. Ensure that you clarify expectations for timely and regular feedback, whether it's answering questions, responding to email, or when you will get the assignments back to them, and please get the assignments back to them. You can raise this a notch through multimedia feedback. Providing textual feedback is always great to let students know where there are, but you may also want to experiment with audio or video feedback. With audio or video feedback you're able to

convey more information that includes other qualities easily shared in text alone. I do this for the program plans that I reviewed during a grad course. I will look at the paper and I will create video feedback. I will walk the students through the paper pointing out different things that I would like them to work on. Clear grading criteria, this is another aspect of setting up the right environment conducive to engagement. You should include your grading criteria and your syllabus, as well as relevant criteria for the assessment of a graded assignment. As appropriate, include rubrics, exemplary work, other supports that will help the students succeed.

A lot of this stuff is pretty basic stuff that you probably already are doing but this is forming that teacher presence. Multimedia, multimedia is not just reserved for providing feedback to your students, you can use multimedia for your learning content. Ideally, and we've talked about this before, the universal design for learning that you should have a text-only path through your content as well as an equivalent multimedia path. This provides students choices and different perspectives for learning your content.

As I said, this sits at the heart of universal design for learning. Having that ability to have choice. Capitalize on your unique identity. There are a lot of folks teaching math basic algebra, there's a lot of folks teaching basic English, Composition courses, ensure that you show off your unique capabilities throughout the class. What makes you unique? Part of that is your research, your family, your personal interests, share these anecdotes with your students. It makes you a human being in front of your students. When your students see this side of you it will increase their connection with you.

Don't try to be perfect when your dog or cat jumps on your lap while you're creating a video, it brings down the artificial wall, it makes you human so be human. Establish and enforce netiquette rules and essential course elements especially when talking about developing community is the inclusion of netiquette rules. This also applies to face-to-face courses. Let the community participants know what is acceptable for online discussions or through further discussions and other community interactions.

It's also important that you model this behavior and enforce these guidelines. When you craft your response such as your introduction, you should model the behavior you would like to say always show your human side and yes, absolutely, just make sure that you're going out and establishing that standard. If you do not maintain the standard, you have a new standard.

Make sure that you pick out the right collaboration platform, it's important that you find the right platform for interacting with your students.

While all learning management systems have areas for interacting, they may not be suited for your purposes. Just because you're assigned a learning management platform doesn't mean you have to use it. If you find Slack is a better place to communicate, then you should go to Slack. Understand that campuses try to standardize the toolset they're using this helps the students, this helps the faculty, this helps providing support so don't go crazy here.

Be available to your students. It's essential you are available to your students, they need to find a way to contact you if they're stuck. More importantly, you need to respond to them in a timely manner. In your syllabus, in your course, let him know when you're going to hold office hours even if it's virtual. For your class, show up early for your class so you can communicate with your students, they want to talk to you and speaking of virtual office hours or office hours, even though you're conducting, you may be conducting an online course or even a face to face course you may want to consider setting up virtual office hours for your students.

The research has shown that simply offering virtual office hours helps earn positive feedback from students. When you're holding normal face-to-face office hours, turn on Zoom to accommodate students who cannot physically check-in. Not everyone can physically meet during the office hours you have set up. They can't meet you all the time in your classroom, but they may be able to meet you virtually. This is also a strategy that you may want to consider when you're grading. When I am grading, I turn on my virtual office hours so students have an opportunity to check-in, think of other opportunities.

Also, use announcements, keep students on track. Those are all strategies for teacher presence. Let's move on to social presence. Social presence is where you're going to observe the most community engagement. While teacher presence builds the stage and the cognitive presence is the focus of the discussion, the social presence is where the primary action takes place. We're going to talk about strategies for building community using social presence.

The first place to start is welcome, getting started content. While having a welcoming Getting Started content is primarily associated with the teacher presence, getting students to actively participate from the beginning in the welcome and introductions will start them to be engaged in the course. Ensure that students know where to find your content, know how to properly participate in the course will go a long way to help them completing the course.

Have little small assignments so you know that they know how to do the basic functions, especially an online course. Set expectations, let students know what the expectations are for participation, there may be a need for extrinsic motivation to get things going, you probably have to throw grade at it but also set terms of engagement, let students know what success acceptable, what's not acceptable and have a netiquette guide as part of your course.

This is really geared to online courses, but student avatars, early in your course, have your students update their avatar. Now an avatar is that image that represents them primarily in online discussions. They don't necessarily have to have a picture of themselves, but you want them to have a picture that differentiates them from other similar images or what's known as eggheads. That's because the original image looks at an egg. Updating this avatar helps with the mental mapping of who's involved in the discussion.

If everyone has the same icon for their avatar, the same pixel representation, you're going to get confused on who says what. Having that differentiation, having those

different images definitely helps. Opportunities to get to know the instructor, it's really important for students to get to know their instructor as a person, they should be able to know what you like, what you dislike. Anytime you're communicating with your students, weave in just a little glimpse of yourself, share your personality through all the different tools that you're using.

Another strategy for social presence is activities to build community. Part of your course should have activities that build a sense of class community that supports open communications, establishes trust, you want to create a place where the class community can get to know each other. At a minimum, you should have introductions, discussion, an icebreaker, something where students can get to know each other. Try to weave these type of icebreakers or type of get to know each other throughout your course, different discussions that you have, different, whether it's face to face to just posing a question, a poll, something of that nature.

You should also create a student lounge in your course. This is a place where students can go build their community, ask questions among themselves share ideas. Some instructors prefer to have two forums. In one, the instructor communicates to the conversation and can answer questions, a Q&A type discussion. Then another one is just for the students where they can talk about group projects or other initiatives. It's pretty much an instructor-free zone.

That Q&A discussion area that's absolutely pretty critical, especially in online courses. You can also put it there for face-to-face discussions. If you're using a learning management system to support your course, definitely weave it in there and really encourage students to ask questions here first in this public area, because more often than not more than one student has the same question. With your answers, not only can you help more than one student, but the students also can go and help themselves that they can contribute to this community-building if students have the answers. I've seen this many times in the online classes that I've taught. Naturally, if the question is personal in nature, have the students contact you directly.

Another strategy that you can use that is tied to social presence is each week you should create a video or announcement that recaps the course. This recap can review the week's content, focusing on key points as well as preview the course content for the upcoming week. It's also a great time to highlight exceptional performance as well as provide suggestions for improvement. Another strategy is get to know your learners. At the start of the course, start taking notes about each of the students and then when relevant, integrate these notes back into comments that you make. Doesn't take a lot of effort and it makes the student feel like an individual who is valued and respected and will encourage them to connect more and be more motivated in the class discussions.

One way of doing this is to take out a survey or have the students fill out a survey at the beginning of the course. You should also take notes while reviewing those introductions that students are making and capture any insights that you have while reviewing discussion posts and so that way you can craft more personal responses and really key to this is to get to know the students' name. Every time you address a student in the discussions, use their first name, don't overuse it, it becomes a little

fake and artificial. Individuals appreciate hearing their names and like to be recognized for their contribution. Tied to that is make sure that you include everyone, make it an effort to respond to students whose posts have not had any replies, make sure that they're included. I do a discussion called the IRA post. With that Primary Post, I respond to every single one of them, but for the rest of the discussions, I only respond where appropriate. I don't respond to everything everyone says, it then becomes really about the instructor, and also it's exhausting. You have hundreds and hundreds of posts and it can just wipe you out. You're part of the discussion, but not-- the discussion is not centered on you. Just like normal discussion pop in every once in a while.

Part of this is also encouraging students to share experiences, create opportunities for them to share anecdotes, experiences, belief. This is really tied to this idea of andragogy, that you want to tap into individual experiences. The more you do that, the stronger the link is to the content material, if they're able to tie it to the personal experiences, stronger learning will take place. You need to get students to share what they're thinking, how it relates to them, and how they can apply what they're learning. That's really central to this IRA Discussion I use, insights, research and application. It just really key to that, but really the application piece central to this. Then also when you are creating activities, try to control the group size. In a discussion, try to keep it down to 10 to 15 students for each discussion. This may require you to split discussions up for group projects down to four to six people at the most. You don't want to get too many in there.

If not, the discussions can become very boring because everyone says the same thing, but in a smaller group, those are unique ideas and it'll be unique to each set of students. Those are some strategies for the social presence, which now leaves us with a cognitive presence. The cognitive presence focuses on the content and getting students to reflect on it. You want students to have a discussion about the material to develop meaning and construct their knowledge. Here are some strategies for improving cognitive presence. First of all, is provide multiple representations. One of the key principles of universal design for learning is providing choice. When you create or curate content for your course, try develop two tracks, a TextTrack, and a Multimedia Track. This is not something you have to do immediately, but each time you visit your course, try to expand upon those options.

Providing choice gives students an option of which track they want to follow, or they can jump back and forth. Multimedia helps to bring the course to life. When we talk about multimedia, we're talking about video, audio, using images, animation, simulations, et cetera. Also encouraged students to represent what they're sharing with diverse methods. Not only do you provide content multimedia ways, but also have your students do it. Another effective strategy for cognitive presence is explaining why, if you want students to engage with your content, you have to explain why you're using this material and how it fits into the bigger picture. When they know the reasoning behind it, what they need to complete, they will in turn be more engaged. Folks just want to know why. Why are we doing it this way? My teacher over here did it this way, why are you different? Explain those things. Make it clear why you're doing it. Do this ahead of time. Include or show engaging resources. Your primary goal is to share resources that increase the student's knowledge and

skill regarding a specific topic. The content must be aligned with the course outcomes and objectives. However, you should be looking for content that facilitates communication and collaboration create activities that have students work with the content, learners benefit more from activities than simple presentations. Try to get their hands dirty as quick as possible and get them engaged in those resources, get them using those particular resources, provide activities for developing higher order thinking and problem-solving skills.

Cognitive presence relies on critical thinking and active learning, as well as helping learners connect existing ideas and creating new knowledge. This can be achieved by contextualizing course content to help learners better understand key concepts, bringing in diverse resources to help learners guiding learners from low-order to high-order thinking exercises, and aligning course activities and assignments to measure learning objectives. You're going to scaffold this learning. This is where Bloom's taxonomy comes in to play. With measurable objectives, guiding the pathway to higher order learning skills, Bloom's taxonomy can provide a framework for exploring different levels of learning and associated skills and competencies to help the development of appropriate learning activities.

Blooms is a framework that classifies the level of learning. I've talked about this in a previous episode, we're talking about knowledge, comprehension, application analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Each level highlights different categories of the human thought process. Moving from low-order to high-order thinking skills. With this framework, consider activities that allow learners to reflect individually and as a group about what they're learning and how they know they're learning and what is helping and hindering their learning. Create activities that provide opportunities for learners to be puzzled. You want to put a challenge in front of them, give them an opportunity to recognize problems and construct knowledge through collaborative in interaction, make it messy.

You have to get that foundational knowledge built, but you also need to move into these areas where they're applying it and trying to make sense of what they have supposedly learned in this bigger context. Also in the cognitive presence, you want to provide opportunities for student to student interaction and collaboration. Collaboration in an online course facilitates constructive learning by enabling learners to be active participants, taking initiative, thinking critically, engaging others with dialogue. We talked about dialogue a couple of times. By requiring learners to engage with each other, the design of of activities requires into assume more responsibility for their own learning, and because of this, when they are responsible for learning leads to deeper levels of engagement.

You as an instructor need to get off the stage, become more of a facilitator where you're monitoring and evaluating the quality and quantity of interaction between learners and facilitating them. Get them involved in group and peer review assignments. Group and peer review assignments can support social teaching and cognitive presence in the online space. The more instructors promote interaction through collaboration, feedback, group activities, and peer scaffolding, the more likely that learners will persist and complete their online studies. Students are not a

fan of group assignments, but they can be built in a way that do work for students. It's difficult, it's messy, but they are powerful learning tools.

Providing opportunities for learners to learn from each other as an integral part of constructive collaboration. Collaborative exercises can enable more advanced learners to help less experienced learners to maximize their ability and construct new knowledge together. This is something that was pointed out by Vygotsky. The new knowledge can then be shared and infused back into the course learning materials to scaffold other learners to construct new meaning. Another strategy is provide frequent opportunities for testing and feedback.

Start at the end and work your way back. At the end of the course, what do you want them to know? Once again, this goes back to backward design, your building, your goals and objectives. You building your assessments, then the activities, then the content, but you want to build activities that require them to get to that end point. In online courses, self-assessments provide learners with opportunities to check-in, to see how they're progressing and offer opportunities for learners to explore more materials if they still need to master a concept, so having a layered approach.

Then finally for cognitive presence is really the focus on real world assignments. Create assignments that are tied to the real world, where they scratch an itch. They help a student do something that's meaningful and long-lasting to their personal selves. Basically, get rid of throwaway assignments. Let students make a difference in their lives, in their communities, in their world. You will be creating assignments that they're going to want to get engaged in, especially if it's solving one of their problems. Well, there you have it. A lot of strategies, but we talked about strategies for the teaching presence, the social presence and the cognitive presence. If you have those three pieces, you're going to have a pretty stable stool that they can reach new heights with. They can step on it and move to a higher level.

If you remove any of those presents, if you just focus on content and here you're the teacher doing this, but you don't have a social component to it, you really have a correspondence course. No one's a fan of a correspondence course. You want to introduce the human element and we've talked about that in previous episodes. The more I keep diving into cognitive inquiry, the more I am a fan. I think it helps to frame make sure that your course is balanced in three different ways. What you are doing as a teacher to organize and facilitate the course, the material that you're bringing to the course, and then how the students are getting interact among themselves with you and the content, all powerful stuff. I'm confident that will help you build better courses. Well, with that, I'm going to let you go, but before I do, here's a quick plug for my book.