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Theories of Distance Education**

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Introduction

This paper will describe theory and distance education. The selected theory is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Kumar, Dawson, Black, Cavanaugh, & Sessums, 2011; Swan, 2010). The theory and related guiding principles are described in the first section of this paper. This first section provides an overview of the CoI theory and then describes the three main components of this theory, cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011; Swan, 2010). The applications of the CoI theory within distance education practice will be discussed in the second section (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011). The second section discusses how CoI theory is used to develop online synchronous and asynchronous learning as well as design an education doctorate program. The third section will discuss the most important ideas of the CoI theory and the rationale for selecting this theory for discussion. By exploring the CoI theory as well as application in practice we can see that it builds critical thinking and collaboration skills, and this is important because of the need for these very skills in the 21st century workplace.

**Guiding Principles**

The CoI theory and related guiding principles are described in this section. This section first provides an overview of the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The three main components of this theory are subsequently described. These component are cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011; Swan, 2010).

**CoI Overview**

There are three main components known as presences of the CoI theory. Each intersection between these three presences each encompass one of four total activities.

… The CoI framework represents the online learning experience as a function of the relationship between three presences: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence…The CoI framework suggests that online learning is located at the intersection of these three presences; that is, all three presences are necessary for learning in an educational context to take place. (Swan, 2010, p. 123)

Educational experience is found at the intersection of the three presences and is the first, central activity described in the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The three remaining activities are supporting discourse, setting climate, and content selection (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). Supporting discourse is at the intersection of social presence and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). Setting climate is at the intersection of social presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). Finally, content selection is at the intersection of cognitive presence and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010).

**Cognitive Presence**

The Cognitive presence described in the CoI theory allows participants to find meaning in the course through dialog and is the most important presence for success in higher education (Garrison et al., 2000). Cognitive presence is defined as the ability of participants to construct meaning through sustained communication (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar, 2011; Swan, 2010). Cognitive presence in the CoI model encompasses purposeful thinking and acting that are “essential to the educational process” (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 98). Cognitive presence is a vital element in critical thinking, a process and outcome that can be said to be a goal of higher education (Garrison et al., 2000).

Cognitive presence is built through four phases. The first phase is a triggering event that causes puzzlement for the student (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The second phase is exploration for an answer through exchanging information (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The third phase is integration which is the connection of new ideas (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The fourth phase is resolution when new ideas are applied in practice (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010).

**Social Presence**

Social presence in the CoI theory allows participants to share their true personality with the class, supports cognitive presence and can also ensures educational success (Garrison et al., 2000). Garrison et al. (2000) define social presence as the ability of participants to “project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (p. 89). The primary role of social presence is to support cognitive presence by creating enjoyable group interactions as well as promoting personal fulfillment which contributes to student retention (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011; Swan, 2010). If emotional objectives are related to a course or program then social presence directly impacts the educational success of the course and or program (Garrison et al., 2000).

There are three different types of social interactions described in the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The first type of social interaction is emotional expression (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The second type of social interaction is open communication which is characterized by risk free expression (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The third type of social interaction is group cohesion which encourages collaboration (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010).

**Teaching Presence**

Garrison et al. (2000) define teaching presence in the CoI theory by the two functions this presence provides. The first function that relates to teaching presence is in creating the educational experience through selection, organization and presentation of content (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011; Swan, 2010). This first function uses the activities just described to build understanding for the learner through instruction and instructional management (Garrison et al., 2000). The second function is facilitation which acknowledges student contributions and provides guidance (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). The first function is filled by an actual teacher but the second function can be filled by either a teacher or another student (Garrison et al., 2000).

**Application of Theory in Distance Education**

This section will describe how the CoI theory is applied in distance education. The first application to be discussed is the use of CoI to develop both synchronous and asynchronous learning events in a distance education engagement (Vaughn, 2010). The second application to be discussed is how CoI is used to design an education doctorate program (Kumar, 2011).

**Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning**

Vaughn (2010) uses the CoI theory to discuss how online synchronous and asynchronous learning can be developed in a distance education environment. Cognitive presence is developed through all four phases of through a series of synchronous sessions as well as through the use of Web 2.0 tools (Vaughn, 2010). Online discussion forums using social network sites enable social presence to be developed (Vaughn, 2010). Teaching presence is expressed through the course design, assessment surveys, and facilitation during synchronous learning events (Vaughn, 2010).

**Education Doctorate Program**

Kumar et al. (2011) use the CoI theory to design an entire education doctorate (EdD) distance education program at the University of Florida. Components of their program include online courses, a summer campus experience, inquiry groups, synchronous sessions as well as asynchronous experiences (Kumar et al., 2011). Each program component is designed to include teaching, social as well as cognitive presence with the one exception (Kumar et al., 2011). The single exception is inquiry groups which are designed without a teaching presence (Kumar et al., 2011). Each inquiry group consists of five or six students who share common interests to support social and cognitive bonds in the first semester of study (Kumar et al., 2011). Cognitive presence in the inquiry groups is triggered by the use of questions which students must respond to in order to explore new knowledge (Kumar et al., 2011).

The first year of the program, online courses are used to allow the students to explore cognitive information related to research and doctoral study (Kumar et al., 2011). The summer campus experience further integrates the cognitive learning from the first year of the program as well as provides an opportunity for students to deepen the social relationships that were started with the online inquiry groups (Kumar et al., 2011). Teaching presence plays a more overt role in the monthly synchronous sessions where faculty encourages and models a critical approach through facilitation (Kumar et al., 2011). Finally, asynchronous experience through the use of a Google group encourages students to communicate to further build their social bonds as well as deepen their understanding of the course work through interaction with a resource repository (Kumar et al., 2011). End of term surveys supply evidence that the knowledge gained in this program was applied by students in their real world practice (Kumar et al., 2011).

**Most Important Ideas and Selection Rationale**

The two most important ideas from the CoI theory are related to critical thinking and collaboration. Critical thinking is a process and outcome of higher education and is developed through cognitive presence in the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2000). According to Wagner (2008), critical thinking skills are the top needed skills for workers in the 21st century. The social presence of group cohesion encourages collaboration (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010). Collaboration is the second most needed skill for workers in the 21st century (Wagner, 2008).

**Conclusion**

It appears that the CoI theory provides a viable framework for developing education to fulfill the needs of 21st century workers who need to employ critical thinking skills as well as master the ability to work collaboratively (Garrison et al., 2000; Wagner, 2008). The CoI theory can be applied to develop either component parts of a distance education program (Vaughn, 2010) or an entire distance education program (Kumar et al., 2011). The CoI theory describes three presences: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000; Kumar et al., 2011; Swan, 2010). Educational experience is found at the intersection of the three presences and is the first, central activity described in the CoI theory (Garrison et al., 2000; Swan, 2010).

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