Chapter 3
Establishing a Learning Presence:
Cooperative Learning, Blended Learning, and Self-Directed Learning

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ABSTRACT

Despite the overwhelming interest in the community of inquiry (CoI) framework, there is a lack of research regarding the role of students’ self-directed learning (SDL) skills in a blended learning environment. This student self-regulation, therefore, serves as a basis for a new form of presence within the community of inquiry framework, described as “learning presence.” Although reports have been made on guidelines for the establishment of the initial presences in the community of inquiry framework, there is still a gap in the literature regarding the establishment of a learning presence. The purpose of this chapter is to report on what a learning presence is, and the authors propose a model as a guide to establish a learning presence. The findings of this qualitative study confirm that students can work self-directedly, and therefore, the combined blended learning design model can be used as a design tool to establish a learning presence.

INTRODUCTION

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is useful for describing, explaining and improving online education (Garrison, 2009). Given the self-directed nature of online learning, it is imperative for students to have self-regulation skills. However, not one of the presences currently associated with the CoI framework (social, cognitive and teaching) focuses specifically on the self-directed learning (SDL) skills of students. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) therefore believe that student self-regulation should serve as the
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basis for an additional form of presence within the CoI framework. Self-regulation, as a characteristic of SDL, requires the facilitator to create a transformative environment, where critical and complex learning skills can be developed (Bosch, 2016; Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Tredoux, 2012). Therefore, a learning presence, reframed as an integral part of the CoI framework, essentially focuses on the SDL skills of students in the online or blended environment. Although a number of studies now acknowledge the existence of this additional presence (Pool, 2015; Pool et al., 2017; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009; Shea et al., 2012), not many studies focus on explicit guidelines on how to establish a learning presence as part of the CoI, especially in a cooperative blended learning environment.

BACKGROUND

The concept of blended learning (BL) is rooted in the idea that learning is a continuous process and not just a one-time event (Niemi, 2009). While BL is appealing to many because it enables one to take advantage of the “best of both worlds” (Gliner, Morgan, & Harmon, 2002) approach, BL environments could also mix the least effective elements of both face-to-face and technology-mediated worlds, if not designed well (Lindsay, 2004). One cannot simply transfer activities from traditional learning environments into a technology-mediated environment without taking the effect of technology on the course content into consideration (Ross, 2012). The BL model should be designed based on insights regarding the understanding of the character and the nature of the students, and the preparation of content.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a useful and well-known model for describing, explaining and improving online and blended education (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009). The CoI focuses on three presences – social, teaching and cognitive. Social presence is “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2009). Teaching presence is the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Cognitive presence, in turn, is the extent to which the learners or students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse (Anderson et al., 2001).

Past factor analytic research on the CoI framework indicates that the framework represents a coherent conceptual structure (Ice, Arbaugh, Diaz, Garrison, Richardson, & Shea 2007; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009), the components of which correlate with student satisfaction and learning (Shea et al., 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005). However, in additional work on the CoI framework, Shea et al. (2010) suggest that the past research methods may have resulted in a systematic under-representation of the instructional effort involved in online education. By using quantitative content analysis, these authors examined course documents which resulted in the identification of learner discourse that did not fit within the framework i.e. that could not be reliably coded as indicators of teaching, social or cognitive presence (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Shea, Vickers, & Uzuner, 2010). Two of the aspects identified by Shea and Bidjerano (2010) were self-regulation and self-efficacy. They suggest that an additional presence, namely a learning presence, represents elements such as self-efficacy and other cognitive, behavioural and motivational constructs, supportive of online learner self-regulation. Self-regulation and self-efficacy are characteristics central to SDL and therefore it postulated that students’ SDL skills will determine their learning presence in an online environment.