Chapter 14

Synchronous Online Learning: The Experiences of Graduate Students in an Educational Technology Program

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores graduate students’ experiences with synchronous online learning at a private liberal arts university in the U.S. With the increasing popularity of online learning in higher education in the last decade, in-depth studies focusing on teaching and learning in a synchronous environment are needed. The author seeks to develop an understanding of synchronous learning from the perspective of students using the community of inquiry model to frame students’ experiences. The students surveyed for this chapter were practicing K-12 teachers enrolled in a graduate program in educational technology. Because of students’ practical knowledge of teaching, learning, and best practices for instruction, their experiences in online courses provide valuable information about the impact of synchronous online learning. This chapter sheds light on the learning needs of graduate students in a synchronous environment. This chapter also provides recommendations for how synchronous tools can be leveraged for maximum positive influence on student learning within a community of inquiry.

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INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, as technologies have allowed for improved interaction between teachers and students, online learning has become increasingly popular in higher education (Martin, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Budhrani, 2017). There has also been an influx of fully online programs and courses, particularly for graduate studies (Wagner, Enders, Pirie, & Thomas, 2016). The most recent data from the National Center for Education Statistics shows that in 2016, more than one third of students enrolled in graduate programs at degree-granting postsecondary institutions had taken at least one fully-online course during their programs of study (NCES, 2018). Over 75% of these students were enrolled in programs taught exclusively online. There is also a growing number of courses being taught in a hybrid format, also known as a blended learning environment. In these courses, learning takes place in the traditional face-to-face classroom and within an online learning environment, typically hosted on a learning management system (LMS) such as Blackboard or Moodle (Maxwell, 2016).

Considering the recent growth in terms of the quantity and variety of online graduate program offerings, it is essential that the higher education community focuses on the quality of blended and online courses. Preparing to teach in an online setting requires more than the basic transfer of content delivery from a face-to-face format to an online format using video or audio recorded lectures and uploaded slides. A helpful model to use in the development of online courses is Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2001) seminal work introducing their Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. This framework focuses on the development of three areas in an online learning environment: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. These three elements work together to create a successful online learning experience, as illustrated in Figure 1 (Garrison et al., 2001). A brief overview of the three elements of Community of Inquiry (CoI) will provide a foundation for this chapter.

Teaching presence is defined as the design of the learning experience - such as the selection of content, learning activities, and assessments for a course - and the facilitation of the learning experience (Garrison et al., 2001). Teaching presence is often the first element instructors consider during the development of an online course or when planning online activities. As subject matter experts and experienced educators in higher education, teaching presence may seem like second nature. While this is certainly the central element of any learning experience, it works effectively in an online environment when cognitive presence and social presence are deliberately planned and executed. Cognitive presence is the extent to which the participants in a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication and reflection (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). The specific goal of cognitive presence is to encourage higher order thinking skills. A
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