ABSTRACT

This chapter presents a theoretical model of online learning, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which is grounded in John Dewey’s progressive understanding of education. The CoI framework is a process model of online learning which views the online educational experience as arising from the interaction of three presences – social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Each of these three elements in the CoI framework are described and related to Dewey’s work, and research findings and issues concerning them reviewed. The development of a common CoI survey measure that promises to address some of these issues is described and discussed. The chapter concludes with emerging findings from new studies which use the CoI survey, directions for future research, and practical uses of the CoI framework.
INTRODUCTION

Inquiry and community were at the core of John Dewey’s educational philosophy and practice. Dewey (1959) believed that an educational experience must fuse the interests of the individual and society, that individual development was dependent upon community. He believed the essence of community was the organic fusion of the public and our private worlds. He also believed that the process of inquiry went to the heart of the educational experience. For Dewey, inquiry involved the generalization of the scientific method to practical problem solving and worthwhile learning. It defined the relationship between thought and action. For Dewey, inquiry was also an essentially social activity. Dewey believed that through collaboration that respected the individual, students would assume responsibility to actively construct and confirm meaning. It is this collaborative constructivist approach that is worthy of further exploration in online learning.

Online learning has evolved from early computer conferencing experiences where the big question was whether we could create and sustain a learning community in a largely asynchronous text based environment. Naturally, much attention in these early days was directed toward the question of whether we could establish the social presence essential to a viable online community of learners. As we shall see subsequently, considerable research established that it was possible to develop both social presence and online learning communities. Once this was established, the focus began to shift to the purposeful nature of a community of learners collaboratively constructing meaning.

Higher education has traditionally emphasized constructivist approaches to learning in the sense of individual students taking responsibility for making sense of their educational experiences. What is less common is the collaborative construction of knowledge in a community of learners. This social construction of knowledge must be reasserted considering the fact that the traditional ideal in higher education has been discourse and reflection in a collaborative community of scholars. It is argued here that constructivist approaches and community are necessary for creating and confirming meaning and are essential for achieving effective critical thinking. Therefore, constructivist approaches and community must be necessary parts of higher education. In online higher education, building community is particularly important because it cannot be taken for granted, nor, for that matter, can inquiry. As Garrison and Archer (2000) note “construction of meaning may result from individual critical reflection but ideas are generated and knowledge constructed through the collaborative and confirmatory process of sustained dialogue within a critical community of learners” (p. 91).

This chapter will present and discuss the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), a process model of online learning, the core of which is a collaborative constructivist approach. Each of the three elements of the CoI framework -- cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence -- will be described and related to Dewey’s work, and research findings concerning them reviewed. Issues emerging from CoI research and the development of a common CoI survey measure that promises to address at least some of these issues will then be discussed. Emerging findings from new studies which use the CoI survey will also be reported. The chapter will conclude with a summary and several directions for future research.

BACKGROUND:
THE COMMUNITY OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

The CoI framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000) is a process model of online learning. It assumes that effective online learning, especially higher order learning, requires the development
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