Chapter 6
Effective Teaching Practices to Foster Vibrant Communities of Inquiry in Synchronous Online Learning

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ABSTRACT
For the past decade, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework has been validated and applied to asynchronous online learning. This chapter proposes to explore its innovative application to synchronous online learning which has to date received little attention in the literature. This chapter reports on effective ways to engage graduate students attending virtual seminars in real time, based on the findings of a qualitative doctoral study that took place in five Francophone and Anglophone North American universities. The crucial role of the faculty member as the facilitator of a rich and ongoing dialogue in the classroom has yet to be identified with, and embraced by faculty, but students are generally satisfied with their virtual graduate seminars.

INTRODUCTION
Research has confirmed the link between the establishment of a sense of community and perceived learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Rovai & Jordan, 2004; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). This study aims at examining effective teaching practices in a synchronous online learning environment through the exploration of the virtual graduate seminar. While common in academia, the graduate seminar has not received much attention in the literature in recent years. Therein lays the interest of studying it from a social perspective more aligned to emerging pedagogical considerations derived from recent research. This is the first study examining current educational practices within a virtual graduate seminar.

It is also the first academic study to look into a concrete application of blended online learning design (BOLD) (Power, 2008). This emerging
form of online design combines synchronous and asynchronous online learning within a course to leverage the benefits of both modes (see Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). All virtual graduate seminars in this study use this particular approach.

While design considerations are very important in online learning, they need to be supported by strong online learning models. One such model that has received considerable attention over the last decade is the Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). With a focus on critical thinking and collaboration, it “provides a well-structured model and set of guidelines to create effective learning communities in an online learning environment” (Akyol, Vaughan, & Garrison, 2011, p. 232). Consequently, the creation of communities of inquiry in synchronous online environments and effective teaching practices to foster these communities are the focus of this study.

According to Schullo (2005), successful synchronous online teaching strategies include:

- Mini lectures with interactive exercises
- Structured group work and collaborative exercises
- Case study discussions
- Polling and quizzing and student interaction
- Dissemination of electronic content for immediate discussion, feedback, or problem solving
- Reinforcement of ideas, concepts and knowledge
- Question and answer sessions (p. 242)

This study especially highlights the importance of strategies 2, 3 and 6. It also confirmed the results of an earlier study (Stewart, 2008) which for the first time established the link between building social presence and the promotion of learning-centered dialogue in real time.

**BACKGROUND**

Recent research suggests that sustaining a learning community is a recommended online educational practice (Larramendy-Joerns & Leinhardt, 2006) and that constructivist teaching practices are more appropriate for guiding the design and delivery of online courses in higher education (Bangert, 2010). However, institutions face a number of challenges in implementing an efficient and sustainable online learning experience: student’s feeling of isolation (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Rovai 2002; Sikora & Carroll, 2002; Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2006), high drop-out rates (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Berge & Huang, 2004; Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007), faculty dissatisfaction and resistance (Bedford, 2009; Blin & Munro, 2008; Sammons & Ruth, 2007; Shea, Pickett, & Li, 2005), high front-end design costs (Power & Gould-Morven, 2011), and overall administrative issues in relation to the production of quality learning material (Thompson, 2004; Tallent-Runnels, Thomas, Lan, Cooper, Ahern, Shaw, & Liu, 2006).

Faculty members involved in asynchronous online teaching and learning also find it extremely time-consuming (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009; Cavanaugh, 2005; Lefoe & Hedberg, 2006; Pachnowski & Jurczyk, 2003; Sammons & Ruth, 2007; Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2004; Shea, Pickett, & Li, 2005; Teng & Taveras, 2004; Thompson, 2004; Thompson & MacDonald 2005; and Visser, 2000). This translates into feelings of dissatisfaction and frustration on their part, especially when they have been subjected to institutional pressures (Betts, 1998). Notwithstanding the time factor, faculty members teaching asynchronously also express a sense of disconnection from their students (Osborn, 2009); that connection often being one of the primary reasons why they wanted to teach in the first place.

Yet the biggest challenge in online teaching and learning remains the application of recent research findings based on the promotion of
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