Online Teaching Presence for Language Learning: Strengthening a Community of Inquiry

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Abstract
This study and presentation investigates the three components of cognitive, social and teaching presence for online language learning. Each serves an essential role and will be defined and its impact addressed as an active learning strategy with multilayered effects. Connecting language learners in an online teaching environment is essential and integration of cognitive, social and instructor presence will support language learning. In the online classroom, critical thinking skills and actively engaged learners are tantamount to student success. The development of essential questions to enhance learning and critical thinking will be discussed along with reflection and activities to increase educator presence.

Keywords: Cognitive, Social, Teaching presence, Virtual classroom

1. Introduction

Information Communication Technology (ICT) serves a significant role in developing online cognitive, social and teaching presence [1]. Through online learning, the incorporation of appropriate communication skills and components can readily take place across nations and continents. Utilization of inquiry and the interaction of cognitive, social and teaching presence focusing on a spectrum of significant themes results in learning [2].

Social presence and collaboration provide avenues for student language learning in a virtual environment. Student interaction including pedagogy on culturally relevant teaching encourages students on their academic journey and plays a critical role connecting students and the curriculum. Collaboration also supports the creation of a strong learning community [3]. Finally, instructor presence is an integral part of online language learning and has strong implications for creating linkages and allowing students to navigate the facets of communication and learning.

This presentation/paper utilizes examples and student samples from actual university online coursework. It provides an overview of the value and implications of ICT in language learning and explores these essential ICT tools and their benefits utilized in the content and outcomes of this study.

2. Cognitive Presence

In the language learning virtual environment, the key focus for online learning is the achievement of course goals and objectives, and mastery of materials. In order to accomplish essential cognitive learning and engage students through effective teaching, cognitive online presence is tantamount to success. This can be accomplished by facilitating interaction and overt instructional practice. Learning presence focusing on theories of self-efficacy, self-regulation and a strong focus on inquiry are essential to reaching these goals [4]. Online communication that emphasizes language learning and teaching has been shown by educators and researchers to positively impact learning and strengthen cognitive presence [5].

In an online Language, Literacy, and Culture course designed for graduate inservice educators seeking an endorsement in Bilingual Education and English as a New Language, principal online components designed to transform cognitive presence include online discourse, discussion opportunities, reflection papers, journaling and responses to readings and video clips. A rubric and assessment framework accompanies each activity including timely feedback and grading.

Initially, the planning and preparation that takes place on the front end of the course including course design, goals and objectives, rigorous and engaging modules provides a clear indication to students regarding instructor commitment and expertise in developing a course for the online learning environment that focuses on cognitive presence, engagement and positive timely feedback. When students have the

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opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge and accomplishment of course objectives, cognitive presence is further strengthened.

Through online discourse and facilitation of discussion, students are able to interact and communicate information and opinions. According to Palloff and Pratt,"Skillful facilitation allows students to interact with one another and the instructor at a higher level" [6]. This ongoing presence by the instructor in the virtual classroom is essential to creating a community of learners and motivating students to high ideals and cognitive accomplishments.

3. Social Presence

The fully online learning environment is potentially challenging when it comes to social interaction and promoting a community of learners. By strengthening social presence, essential avenues for student learning are enhanced. Ongoing research has concluded that student engagement is a key predictor of student success [7]. It is imperative that students engage and interact with each other as well as with the instructor. Prior to the beginning of each course, welcome messages are sent to each student followed up by weekly announcements designed to encourage and inform students. During the first module of each online course that I teach, I design an introductory exercise and ask students to post a photo and share a "My Story" piece with other students.

An emphasis on culturally relevant teaching can be incorporated into the social presence and encouraged within the virtual classroom. This is further promoted by creative discussion forums and questions designed to engender feedback and multiple student responses. Students can also be assigned to review and critique each other's papers interacting through dialog and discussion. When they are encouraged to provide examples from their own classroom experiences, it familiarizes members of the class with each other. There are unique opportunities that can be capitalized upon through instructor design of questions that create critical thinking and spur discussion of course material and initiatives. An active presence of the course instructor in an asynchronous online setting will build a community of learners and strengthen expectations for interaction. This results in a positive impact on students and contributes to successful linkages and achievement.

4. Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is identified by Anderson, Garrison et. al. in terms of instructor overt facilitation and is addressed as a significant instructional theme for online learning. The model of critical thinking and practical inquiry is employed to constitutively define the concept of teaching presence and address it in three categories-design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction [8]. Expert teaching presence has the potential to transform the learning experience from routine to outstanding. In the case of English Language Learners (ELLs), it is crucial to be in an online environment that is orchestrated with a simulated and student-centered teaching presence focusing on active and collaborative learning. Because traditional face-to-face learning incorporates the physical presence of the instructor, asynchronous online teaching requires extra effort to establish a presence and educational relationship with the instructor and among students.

Teaching presence and cognitive presence tend to overlap in various ways. For instance, an overarching theme is apparent in both areas and students initially become aware of teaching presence when they encounter the design of the course materials. Materials that are clear and well-developed indicate an instructor with expertise in establishing an online teaching presence. Persico defines this as "the binding element in cultivating a learning community [9]. This is certainly the case when instructing graduate level teacher educators in the methodology of teaching English to nonnative speakers. In online teaching, the instructor assumes a key role as facilitator encouraging student interaction and collaboration. Throughout the course, students are expected to assume responsibility for their own learning while gaining the knowledge, skills and dispositions required to provide a quality education for ELL students. However, it is essential for the instructor to demonstrate leadership, provide timely feedback and be accessible to demonstrate a strong teaching presence. When teaching graduate courses in Literacy, Language and Culture, some teachers are not familiar with the Blackboard online platform that is utilized. These teachers need reinforcement and confidence to persevere and tackle the technology as well as the course content. Some of the most senior teachers taking the course did not grow up with the computer skills that younger teachers may possess. They need reassurance and assistance to focus on the course modules and

efficiently post their work and access materials. Often a "Help Line" staffed with computer and technology experts can assist them with challenges that may conflict with the ability to accomplish their lessons and efficiently engage in an asynchronous online course.

5. Essential Questions

In order to determine whether educators are meeting the needs of graduate level in service Bilingual/English as a New language teachers in an online environment, the following questions are relevant:

1. Are we encouraging a community of learners rather than individual, independent instruction?
2. Is appropriate time spent in the preparation and planning of the course with development of a syllabus addressing standards that are relevant?
3. Are course goals and objectives tied to the standards and are they measurable?
4. Are course materials current and do the readings and multimedia directly relate to the course content?
5. Is effective teaching and collaboration enhanced by discussion, reflection and ongoing communication?
6. Is direct instruction demonstrated through the development of culturally relevant modules designed to stimulate teaching and learning?
7. Is the instructor accessible and available daily to provide support, feedback, and encourage students?
8. Does the assessment framework provide the information and timely feedback that is beneficial for students?
9. Is there a balance of cognitive, social and teaching presence that is recognized by students?

6. Critical Thinking and Reflection

Critical thinking and reflection play a crucial role in language learning in a virtual environment. Whether this is direct instruction to English language learners or a course for educators who teacher these students, the same strategies still apply. In order to connect student to the course material and to each other as they navigate the facets of communication and learning, students need to be able to reflect on numerous issues and critically analyze outcomes. For example, Boettcher emphasizes the value of interactive brainstorming coupled with clear expectations for communication and sharing discussion. Because of the numerous types of activities available, the possibilities for creation of a variety of learning environments exists. The use of Socratic open-ended questions that offer multiple responses are thought provoking and stimulate discussion which will encourage the development of critical thinking skills. Boettcher further suggests that providing guidelines and specific instructions regarding expectations for responses is helpful [10]. This should be coupled with two-part responses relating to content that resonated with the student or what challenged or made students curious. Learning is further customized through choices and discovery. Strategic planning and well-organized expectations and directions will lead to success and creativity motivating students to pursue high ideals and measurable achievements.

7. Implications and Conclusions

ICT has been at the forefront of innovative language learning and continues expanding in significance. Cognitive, social, and teaching presence are positively impacted through ICT in language learning, and students are able to strengthen their knowledge and skills through virtual online classrooms. The learning modules that educators design containing specific learning goals and objectives can be tailored to the individual needs and expertise of learners, By establishing a strong teaching presence, the online educator is able to facilitate a sense of community, strengthen relationships, and encourage discussion and student engagement leading to acquisition of knowledge and skills. Although students may be working independently and in an asynchronous, online environment, their language learning becomes connected and interactive.

Because traditional face-to-face classroom learning has been the norm in language acquisition for numerous years, creative and innovative steps must be taken to strengthen language learning and promote engagement in an online virtual environment. Well-designed curriculum with weekly modules

emphasizing cognitive, social and teaching presence is key to the success and achievement while establishing a community of inquiry in online language learning.

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