

# Online Learning and Communities of Inquiry (Col)

Collaborative learning involves groups of learners working together to solve a problem, complete a task, or create a product. It is based on the idea that learning is a naturally social act in which the participants talk among themselves. It is through the talk that learning occurs. Such groups form a community of inquiry (<http://communitiesofinquiry.com/introduction>).

## At-a-glance

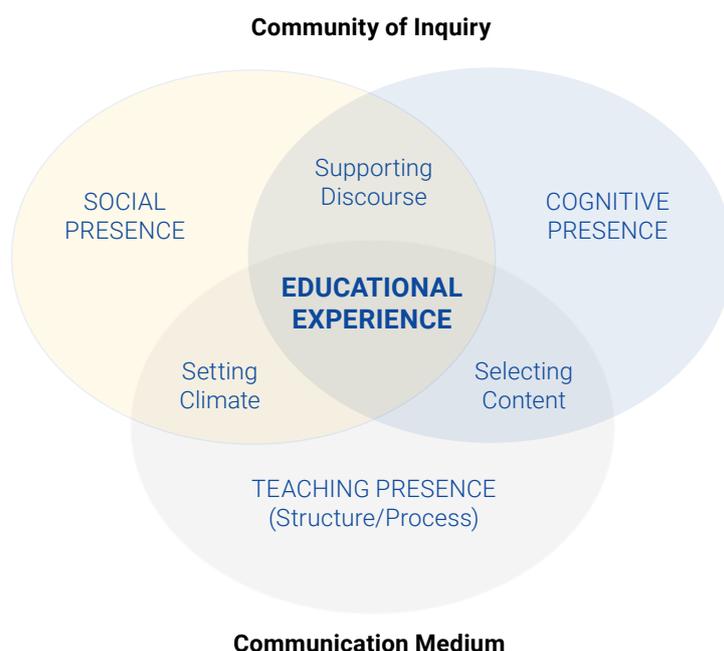
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## The Community of Inquiry Framework

The Community of Inquiry framework is a tool to assist the extending of the concept of collaborative learning to blended and online environments. The framework first emerged over a decade ago in the context of asynchronous, text-based communication in a higher education setting (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). It draws on research from the 1980s and 1990s into computer conferencing, as well as scholarship from the fields of linguistics and communications.

The framework represents three critical and interdependent elements – **social, cognitive and teaching presence** – which work together to create meaningful learning experiences in the online environment. These three presences are co-dependent. Together, they make for an effective online presence.

Each of these elements is illustrated below.



This framework is not new and experienced teachers will recognise that it reflects activities and roles in a well-structured interactive tutorial. The challenge is to plan, enact and maintain a Col in diverse online environment that exist in online forums, wikis, blogs, chat rooms and virtual classrooms.

**The social presence element** in the online environment is characterised by learners' self-disclosure, expressing agreement, referring to individuals by name and/or asking questions. The level of social presence influences the amount of interactivity within a unit. Effective social presence might begin with simple introductions followed the establishment of shared interests, but it must shift over time to focus collectively around the common goal or issue being explored.

**The cognitive presence element** is characterised by a cycle of practical inquiry where learners are moving from understanding and clarifying a problem or issue at hand through to exploration, integration and application to a presented task. This element is partly an outcome of social presence but it primarily depends on the effectiveness of teaching presence. The teacher must design tasks that enable learners' interaction to be purposeful, systematic and focused on learners moving through the important stages of problem-solving if meaningful learning and understanding are to occur.

**The teaching presence element** is responsible for the design and organisation of the learning environment and the facilitation of the discussion. A teacher's direct interventions in the online environment may offer additional sources of information, diagnose misconceptions and interject as required. Teaching presence is focused on supporting effective and efficient learning experiences. It is the most critical element of the Col framework and demands the skills of the teacher with discipline knowledge and the teacher-as-facilitator.

The table below shows examples of social, cognitive and teaching presences in the online environment.

Elements	Meaning	Examples
Social presence	Expression of emotions, use of humour, self-disclosure Continuing a thread, asking questions, showing agreement Addressing individuals by name, referring to their messages or quotes	"Where I work, this is what we do ..." "In your message, you talked about ..." "John, what did you think ...?"
Cognitive presence	Sense of puzzlement Information exchange Connecting ideas, applying new ideas	"I still don't understand how ..." "I will send you an outline of what I did in my analysis of ..." "It suddenly struck me that if we turned around that argument, we could ..."
Teaching presence	Design and organisation Facilitating discussion Direct interventions	"This week we will be discussing..." "Any thoughts on this?" "Oliver says...what do you think?"

An excellent example of the Col in practice is found in the award-winning online role play simulation Mekong e-Sim which focuses on issues faced in the Mekong region of South-East Asia and involves learners in the hypothetical management of some of these conflicts. See <http://www.educause.edu/ir/library/pdf/eli5014.pdf>

## Sources

Communities of Inquiry [Online]. Available from <http://services.eng.uts.edu.au/~robertm/mekong/default.htm>

Garrison, D.R., Anderson, T. & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computing conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education* 2(2-3), 87-105.

Garrison, D. R., & Anderson, T. (2003). *E-learning in the 21st century. A framework for research and practice*. London: RoutledgeFalmer.