Chapter 8
Negotiating Diverse Populations in Online Graduate Courses:
Key Implications

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ABSTRACT

This study uses Garrison et al.'s Community of Inquiry Model to analyze the difficulties that arose in an online English graduate course. Using the three presences (teacher, social, and cognitive) to understand the interactions and engagements between students, instructor, and course material, the chapter illustrates the primary need for strong teacher presence in student-centered learning environments, especially in online courses where traditional verbal and physical cues are not present. Without a strong teacher presence, the effective achievement of social presence and cognitive presence is hindered. Students need instructor modeling and direction in order to achieve the deep learning goals that are at the center of graduate education. The implications of the study are that teachers must carefully and flexibly design the course both at the beginning of the semester and throughout it as the demographics of the student population are illustrated in the online discussions.

INTRODUCTION

Research on Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) model of Community of Inquiry is useful to help understand and structure asynchronous discussion forums in educational settings. The Community of Inquiry model involves examining and creating opportunities for three types of presences: teacher, social, and cognitive. In much of the research, scholars assert that the three presences are equally important in the creation of effective online discussions, i.e., ones that achieve the pedagogical goal of deep learning. Research shows that most instructors work to create an equal balance between the three or end up focusing more on social presence.

Central to effective online discussions in student-centered classrooms is a strong teacher presence that is flexible and responsive to specific student populations. Without that, the other two presences are difficult to build to effective levels. Instructors need to pay attention to the ongoing, changing dynamics of the classroom and adjust their responses to/engagements with the class as it is progresses. Further, while research suggests the student-centered classroom should allow for internal correction (where students "right" the conflictual situation) before the instructor steps in to do external correction, this should not be considered a default position. Even in a student-centered classroom, the teacher is a key force of the classroom. As this study shows, truly student-centered classrooms are not possible when the teacher gives over the majority of authority to the students themselves. Some students may try to take on the teacher role, working to fill the void, but many will feel a lack of guidance and lack of grounding that interferes with their sense of belonging to a community and with their actual learning.

This study examines ENG 652: Writing and Popular Media, an online graduate-level English course which used online discussion forums as the primary learning space. It draws on the Community of Inquiry Model to analyze the ways in which the discussion forums were enacted throughout the semester, emphasizing how students and instructors engaged with the course material and with each other. This study reveals that teacher presence is a more significant factor in the course than cognitive or social presence in determining whether or not course goals are achieved. The study, then, suggests that teacher presence is, in many ways, the determining factor in whether or not deep learning occurs.

BACKGROUND

This study focuses on an analysis of the discussions in ENG 652: Writing and Popular Media, a 16-week online graduate level course taught by an English department professor. It was originally created for graduate students in the English department's Rhetoric and Composition MA and Ph.D. programs but was open to any graduate student in the university. Two students were from that program while the rest were from other areas like Communications and Journalism. Initially, eleven students enrolled in the course. However, five of them dropped the course for a variety of reasons; six graduate students remained registered for the entirety of the course. At the center of the course was a focus on popular media, both the impacts that it has on our culture as well as the ways it can be used to teach writing at the university level. While the syllabus defined popular media in a broad way, the majority of the articles discussed in the course were focused particularly on social media such as Twitter, online fanfiction, and Facebook, along with the pedagogical application of these. The course was largely discussion based, with the majority of the work being done in weekly asynchronous online discussion forums. Thus, analyzing the ways in which the discussion forums progressed effectively illustrates the level of learning that did (and did not) occur throughout the course. The researchers of this study are the professor and one of the Ph.D. students of the course. When student comments are presented in the following discussion, they are represented through pseudonyms. Examples of exchanges in the online discussion board are included in this study to show some of the communication issues and conflicts that occurred throughout the semester.

The existing scholarship suggests that all three elements of the community of inquiry model are equally important. Other studies have argued that there is not a hierarchy among the three presences. However, as this study demonstrates, without strong teacher presence, it is highly difficult to construct and sustain strong social or cognitive presence in online discussion forums. It is clear from this analysis that students in ENG 652 depended more on their own opinions and personal experience instead of

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