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The Pedagogy of Learning Design

INTRODUCTION

The term pedagogy is often loosely defined as the art or science of teaching. Derived from French and Latin adaptations of a Greek term, the word denotes the ancient Greek tradition of having a slave who would lead his master’s child to a place of learning -- literally “leading the learner to learn.”

Leading learners to learn is the art and science we embrace as professionals in the field of e-learning. This white paper reveals the craft that lies at the intersection of that art and science, merging learning theories with applied effective practices in support of quality e-learning experience design -- the craft that enables us to lead our learners to learn.

A TRANSLATION OF PEDAGOGIES

A successful learning journey relies on informed design and practice. Let’s explore how theory and research translate into a designed approach to instruction.

The Journey

When I think about every online experience I have had, the word that comes to mind is “navigation.” Every website I encounter provides me with opportunities to explore – to find my way through the information. The best online experiences I have had involve a clear pathway through that information, and often times a guide to lead me on my journey.

Every learning event is a journey with a starting place, a pathway and a destination. With available technologies it becomes easier and easier to throw content together and label it “training” or “learning.” But will our participants be able to navigate the course and purposefully arrive at their destination without getting lost along the way?

Critical to a successful learning journey is the work that happens in advance, such as the content layout/navigation and the selection of activities for engagement and assessment. In essence, we take a designed approach to instruction and lay out a map for the learner’s journey.
The Translation of Pedagogy

In the realm of education, the word pedagogy is used when talking about this designed approach to instruction and the alignment of learning elements such as objectives, content, activities, and assessments. As an instructional strategist in higher education, I work with my clients to translate their pedagogies into rich teaching and learning environments. I take what they know, explore their engagement strategies, and work with them to define and develop methods and approaches to assessing their learners.

My approach to this “translation of pedagogies” has evolved through the review and application of research in learning theories which focus on three key elements in effective e-learning: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. In this section we will explore each of these presences in-depth, along with effective practices on how to recognize, model, and measure social, teaching, and cognitive presence in our own training and learning events.

A Quick Primer

Social presence focuses on creating a welcoming setting that is open and inviting so that our learners will want to engage with each other, the facilitator, and the learning content. Think about your first moments in any new group environment – a new job, networking event, client meeting, or a professional development workshop. You (and your clients/colleagues) may feel a bit out of place, or unsure about how to start the conversation. Social presence is fostered by activities, methods, or approaches put in place to break the ice, build trust, and facilitate interaction with those around you.

Teaching presence focuses on three major functions that we take on as training and learning professionals: design, facilitation, and direction of the learning experience. We build teaching presence by designing learning events that guide participants through learning materials, reinforce key concepts, foster critical thinking skills, provide opportunities for formative feedback and support, and evaluate progress throughout the learning experience.

When we talk about critical thinking skills, we are touching on cognitive presence. We want our learners to be active learners – to be actively integrating key concepts into their own worlds, exploring related resources, and adding new ideas and new knowledge. Cognitive presence is, in essence, the scaffolding of learning -- as we move from the initial stages of knowledge and comprehension toward the critical learning stages of application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.
**Guiding the Way**

These three presences (social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence) work together in support of training and learning spaces that cultivate engagement, and foster vibrant knowledge communities. They overlap and depend on each other in a cozy Venn diagram. And, more significantly, they can effectively help you map out your own personal pedagogy – your approach to learning design.

I welcome this opportunity to share my approach with you, and explore how social, teaching, and cognitive presence can facilitate the design of effective learning spaces, guide our participants through these spaces, and help them approach and reach the waypoints we have mapped out on their journeys.

**NOTE:**

The three presences (social, teaching and cognitive) are the foundations of the Community of Inquiry framework, which informs methodologies and approaches to learning design and delivery. Based on social constructivist education theory and research, the Community of Inquiry research community continually explores these methodologies and conducts empirical studies to validate associated research. You can read more online at [https://coi.athabascau.ca/](https://coi.athabascau.ca/).
CREATING LEARNING COMMUNITIES WITH SOCIAL PRESENCE

Let’s have a look at how social presence guides the design and development of learning spaces where emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion come into play!

In the first section of this whitepaper I introduced a pedagogical, designed approach to instruction based on three key elements in effective e-learning: social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. This section will focus on social presence – the creation of a welcoming setting that is open and inviting so that our learners will want to engage with each other, the instructor/facilitator, and the learning content.

We have all experienced that awkward moment when we were new to our surroundings, and had to stretch our comfort level in order to reach out to others in group situations. Being welcomed into a new environment helps us to settle in, and to trust our surroundings enough to be comfortable sharing within established communication venues.

That welcoming setting embodies social presence. Conversation about the design of our training environments needs to include words like “open,” and “inviting,” so that our participants will want to engage with the facilitator, with the content, and with each other. Interaction is key to establishing a sense of belonging within a vibrant learning community, and every learning event helps build that community.

Social presence examples include allowing risk-free expression, drawing in participants, encouraging collaboration, establishing instructor/facilitator presence, and engaging in supportive contact and interactions.

**Beyond the Ice Breaker**

Establishing social presence begins with the creation of an environment where your learners feel secure enough to share their own stories and fully interact with each other.

As facilitators, we tend to spend much of our time instructing or managing the learning environment, and little time sharing ourselves. If we are delivering learning materials that someone else created, how much of ourselves do we include?
Take time to weave your own narrative into your learning events – not just highlights from your resume. Create an ice breaker activity that enables you to participate along with your learners. Sharing information, such as your hobbies, personal, and professional interests, helps to establish common ground with your participants.

Ice breaker activities are at the core of social presence. Even a quick “let us know where you’re from” in the chat window can make a difference in setting the stage for engaged learning.

**Curb Your Enthusiasm?**

Never! Share your enthusiasm! Your own enthusiasm will spark interest in the learning content and instructional activities. Share the reasons why you are excited about the subject matter, and take pride in your expertise. Sharing your enthusiasm and expertise builds a sense of trust, setting the groundwork for participants to come together as a group of learners and follow your lead throughout the learning experience.

**Room to Breathe**

Too often we design learning events that are rushed and overloaded with densely packed content. Take a moment to recall a moment when you felt rushed yourself, or packed too tightly into a learning event time constraint. Right there you’ll quickly lose that social presence you worked so hard to establish.

Design and structure your time thoughtfully, and leave time for your audience to share. Not just a word or two, but really SHARE. Learning is social, and sharing helps us remember and learn. Sharing can take the form of a quick poll, a quick “yes” or “no” in the chat box, but sharing can also include team breakout rooms with reports back to the main room. Leave enough time for your participants to participate!

**Ask for Feedback**

Think about how you can let your learners know that you want to hear from them by providing opportunities for feedback, creating an open environment where they feel comfortable sharing their learning experiences with you and your team. Consider designing a feedback event as follow up to a learning session. Instead of the same old survey, host a feedback open house where participants can become involved in the review of learning content and activities. Invite them to help you design a better learning journey!

I have done this many times, and it has always proven to be a success. Many organizations want their employees to have more involvement in their own professional development. Providing more than a survey instrument to these employees has been very rewarding, and builds greatly on trust and established social presence!
No One Left Behind

You have welcomed your learners, let them get to know you, to trust your expertise, and to participate in their own learning. You’ve even provided them with an opportunity to make their learning better. Social presence reigns large! Bravo! But, wait ... there’s one more thing to be aware of.

Be sensitive to participants who linger in your virtual learning spaces. Often they are lingering for a reason. It takes some people longer to trust in a virtual learning environment, just like a real world one. You may have learners who have questions that they want to ask, but not in front of the entire room. You may have learners who just don’t understand the material and really need to.

Take a moment to send a note to the lingering crowd to be sure that everyone has what they need before you end your learning event. A hurried “goodbye” sends the wrong message to this group. A thoughtful wrap-up provides closure, and supports social presence.

All Together Now

Creating a community of learners depends on the design of learning events which provide participants with opportunities to get to know each other, to get to know you, to trust your expertise, to participate with each other, to provide feedback, and to have closure.

Social presence concepts guide the personal side of learning, and remind us that we are all human. To me, that’s the most important part!
Let's have a look at what teaching presence is, and how direct instruction and facilitation play a role in crafting optimal e-learning spaces.

Previously in this white paper, we explored methods for establishing and sustaining social presence in the e-learning space, setting the stage for open and engaged learning. Now we will focus on teaching presence - the design, development, management, facilitation, and direction within the learning space. It is what we intentionally do before, during, and after the session to help our learners reach desired outcomes.

Teaching presence is often misinterpreted as instructor presence, when in fact, it would be better labeled as "instructional presence." Effective practices in teaching presence tend to fall under three categories: designing instruction, directing instruction, and building understanding.

**Designing Instruction**

Learning design involves making informed decisions about content, context, structure, flow, and timing, as well as the infrastructure needed to support our designs. It involves mapping out the journey before we even get started. And just like preparing for any journey, we most likely have a few questions as we're packing for our trip! For instance:

- Where are we starting from? We need to assess our learners early on to know where they are in reference to where they want (or need) to be.
- Where are we going? Measurable goals and objectives are key to successful learning events. As designers, we need to know our final destination in order to craft the best route to get there. As facilitators, we need to know where we are going so that we can steer our learners on the right heading.
- How will we get there? The delivery method needs to be factored into the design at every stage, along with a backup plan in case something breaks down (or we run out of fuel) along the way.
- How will we know when we get there? Continuous assessment helps us determine if our learners are actually learning, and not just ambling along aimlessly. Just as important as "getting there" is knowing where we are along the way.
The answers to each of these questions unfold the pedagogy of learning design, by helping us draw up our instructional design road maps, and support teaching presence in e-learning environments.

**Directing Instruction**

Providing direction in any learning environment is important. In an e-learning environment, it is critical. Establishing teaching presence involves direct instruction - providing learners with guidance related to key concepts and recognizing (and responding to) misconceptions. Keeping learners on track requires regular intervention and direction in the form of clear instructions and feedback through an open channel of communication.

Let your learners know what they should be doing and what you expect them to have accomplished from beginning to end - at regular intervals along the way! Some learners will find their way through the content and learning activities on their own. Others will need (and want) your help. If you are designing the instructional path, be sure to place a variety of signposts along the way. If you are directing the learners, be sure to help them as they progress.

Signposts can range from a simple "help" icon to instructional guidance callouts placed throughout the learning experience. A separate chat instance opened during a break provides you with the opportunity to reach out to folks who may have fallen behind and need to catch up to the rest of the pack.

I am a big fan of evaluation rubrics in support of direct instruction, as they provide me and my learners with a road map for success. Set clear standards by taking the time to expand on learning activity instructions and rubrics and consider providing a FAQ reference guide for each activity to help guide your learners toward meeting those standards. These resources will not only guide your learners but will make it much easier for you to compose quality feedback on learning activities.

In support of learning, feedback should be constructive, timely, and meaningful. Constructive feedback highlights the strengths and weaknesses of learner work and provides pathways for improvement. Timely feedback gives learners the opportunity to learn from their mistakes before they move on - while the concepts they have just covered are still fresh in their minds. Meaningful feedback addresses individual needs and is directly tied to learning activity guidelines and evaluation rubrics.

Differentiate feedback from praise. Extend your feedback beyond comments like, "nice job!" When providing feedback, you need to let your learners know what skills they need to develop, how close they are to mastering those skills, and what they need to do next. Make recommendations for improvement, if necessary, and provide examples of exemplary work along with your comments.

Finally, direct them to appropriate learning materials for further review. Remember, feedback needs to be provided to learners on a regular basis in order to keep them on
track, to confirm understanding, and to reflect on where - and how - they need to make improvements in order to progress on their learning journey.

**Building Understanding**

My favorite part of delivering instruction is when learners have that "aha!" moment - when they know they have reached a new level of understanding or mastery, and can pass their learning on if need be. This is when teaching presence is in full bloom! As learning designers, developers, and facilitators, it is our core responsibility to bring our learners to these moments.

How can we build understanding into every step along our learning pathways?

- Provide an annotated learning agenda/course outline to serve as a road map to success for your learners, and distribute it in advance of your learning event. Annotation means adding context to your outline - detailing objectives and introducing key concepts.
- Encourage your learners to set aside time to review and reflect on their learning. If you know in advance that they have limited time, build review and reflection into your learning activities. Reflection is a key component of understanding, and it is how we, as humans, make learning "stick!"
- Ask questions and encourage your learners to do the same. With the usual limited time for instruction and applied learning, losing time because someone is lost or confused could throw off everyone's progress entirely.
- Take advantage of additional resources, social networks, and professional organizations to enable your learners to explore what interests them most. Often these resources are the catalyst we need to reach those "aha!" moments.

**Aha!**

Teaching presence depends on the design of learning environments, the facilitation of productive discourse, and the provision of direction throughout the learning experience. It is how we lead our learners to their "aha!" moments!

Within this pedagogical framework, we still need to investigate the intricacies of how our learners get to that "aha!" moment through the critical inquiry process - better known as cognitive presence. In the next section, we will build on what we know about social and teaching presence, and explore how we foster critical thinking skills and cognitive presence through the design, development, and delivery of e-learning events.
FOSTERING CRITICAL THINKING SKILLS WITH COGNITIVE PRESENCE

In the previous section, we explored teaching presence - the design, development, management, facilitation, and direction within the learning space. Now we will focus on cognitive presence and a practical inquiry approach to helping our learners acquire knowledge and confirm understanding.

Practical Inquiry Model

The practical inquiry model reflects four phases of critical thinking and cognitive presence: (a) the initiation phase with a triggering event that begins the dialogue about a particular issue; (b) the exploration phase in which learners move between private reflection and social exploration, exchanging information about the issue at hand; (c) the integration phase in which participants begin to "construct meanings" or solutions to the issue from the ideas explored in the previous phase; and (d) the resolution phase in which the proposed solution is "vicariously tested" (Garrison et al., 2001, p. 11).

References:

When we talk about critical thinking skills, we are touching on cognitive presence. Perhaps the most difficult of the three presences to grasp, cognitive presence relates to how we move through the learning process - approaching problems, seeking out new knowledge, gaining new levels of understanding, and sharing that understanding with the learning community. The goal is to have our learners integrate key concepts into their own worlds, explore associated resources, and bring new knowledge and new ideas into the learning process.
Climbing the Learning Ladder

Cognitive presence supports scaffolded learning – the sequential progress of learning through content review and activities, leading to an understanding of content and context. The scaffolding process includes instructor and peer support leading up the so-called “learning ladder” until learners can apply new skills and concepts independently.

Think about a time when you were learning a new skill or concept. The sense of puzzlement, followed by inquiry – questions you needed to ask in order to grasp that new skill or concept. You asked questions, received responses, had a dialogue, and perhaps even asked more questions. You engaged with concepts in order to synthesize their meaning, so that you could shape new meaning and apply those new skills or concepts. Cognitive presence supports learner engagement with new skills and concepts, and helps them to progress through the scaffolded learning process.

Establishing cognitive presence means focusing on knowledge acquisition, synthesis, and application. Here are some strategies in support of cognitive presence, following a practical inquiry model.

Assessing Prior Knowledge

Past experience and prior knowledge play a key role in the critical thinking process. As designers, instructors and facilitators, we work to enable our learners to reach established learning goals, and to support their acquisition of new knowledge and ideas. Knowing where our learners are starting from is integral to designing pathways to learner success.

Creating Triggering Events

Triggering events are the problems and challenges that you suggest throughout the learning experience, such as assignments and questions integrated into communication and interaction exercises. This is the first phase in a practical inquiry process, which relies on a structured activity focusing the learners on seeking a solution to a problem. As a learning facilitator, integrating standard terms such as “analyze,” “evaluate,” and “synthesize” in your own dialogue will assist learners with expressing and defending their points of view in the forums.

Guiding Contextual Exploration

When learners are faced with a problem to address, they should also be provided with a means to explore possible solutions. Associated readings and related resources provide context and meaning within our learning environments, and provide the framework for inquiry and exploration. If you provide associated resources, give learners a list of key questions to keep in mind when they are reviewing content. That will guide their exploration, and provide the "stem" for them to branch out on with divergent ideas.
Feedback also plays a role in the practical inquiry process, especially when additional direction is provided to learners along with remedial assessment. If someone is having trouble understanding a concept – and you can usually deduce this from simple interactions – do more than simply direct them to the reading material. Provide avenues for them to explore concepts further, along with instructions on why these concepts matter in the learning and work that they’re doing.

**Integrating Concepts**

Integrating concepts is the process by which the learners reflect individually on learning activities, communicate their thoughts with others in the group, collectively connect ideas, and establish relationships between existing knowledge and new information.

**Supporting Resolution**

Success in learning comes when we come to resolution, and can defend that resolution with the application of new ideas. Keeping a careful watch on learner progress is important here – from an individual and group perspective. As instructors and facilitators, we need to stay involved as learning events progress, guide the subject and substance of conversation so that learners are able to make sense of complex information, and provide input to help them represent their resolutions.

**Wrapping Things Up**

At the end of each learning event, provide guidance as to what resolution should look like with a wrap-up related to the content, context, and learning activities. This allows learners to assess what they have accomplished, and understand why they were tasked to accomplish it. Wrapping up closes the practical inquiry loop, and provides that closure we need to settle our brains before we jump back into a new practical inquiry cycle.

**Aha! (Again)**

The work we all do in support of e-learning events allows us to journey alongside our learners through the critical inquiry process, all in support of cognitive presence leading to repeated “aha!” moments. We design, develop, and deliver environments where our learners can grow, evolve, connect, and share -- integrating key concepts from learning events into their own worlds, and returning to the discourse with new ideas and new knowledge.
AT THE INTERSECTION OF SOCIAL, TEACHING AND COGNITIVE PRESENCE

Throughout this whitepaper we have explored social, teaching, and cognitive presence - the key elements within the Community of Inquiry framework. This last section explores the intersection of these three presences and approaches to measuring the effectiveness of the work we do in the design, development, and delivery of e-learning.

At the Core of the Community of Inquiry Framework

The Community of Inquiry framework is often depicted with the accompanying Venn diagram which illustrates the three presences (social, teaching, and cognitive), along with their intersections. At the core of the framework and the Venn diagram is the educational experience with the intersections listed as selecting content, setting the climate, and supporting discourse. Using these intersections as a starting point, we can explore how we can intentionally design to support this framework and measure our results.

A Framework for Instructional Design

What is happening at the intersection of cognitive and teaching presence? With a design approach based in the Community of Inquiry framework, the learning event design process relies on aligning content with learning objectives, and structuring a pathway that will engage your learners with learning material, instructional activities, applied scenarios, and interactive opportunities with the instructor/facilitator.

A Framework for Building Community

What is happening at the intersection of teaching and social presence? In support of learner success, we need to understand that continuous interaction and engagement between instructors/facilitators and learners are at the core of setting the climate for learning. The Community of Inquiry approach to e-learning delivery encourages an open exchange of ideas with respect for diverse opinions and interpretations of meaning. Facilitation of dialogue and instructor/facilitator presence is, as we all know, crucial to participant engagement and retention.
A Framework for Instructional Delivery

What is happening at the intersection of social and cognitive presence? As e-learning professionals, we exemplify Community of Inquiry effective practices by guiding our participants through learning materials, reinforcing key concepts, fostering critical thinking skills, providing formative feedback and support in a timely manner, and continuously evaluating progress throughout the learning experience.

Learning event facilitation and contributions to dialogue foster a safe, open learning community, where learners are willing to post new questions and share their ideas. And, as subject matter experts, we bring valuable insight to our learning spaces and provide the guidance needed by our participants in order to evolve and grow as learners.

A Framework for Informed Review

The Community of Inquiry framework has long been accompanied by a nationally recognized survey instrument that assesses student satisfaction. Many higher education institutions use this survey instrument as an end-of-course survey in online courses, providing data used to assess and inform changes in course and program design, faculty professional development needs, and initiatives in support of student satisfaction and retention.

This assessment data provides the ability - at both the course and program level - to review student impressions of the social, teaching, and cognitive presences in the courses that they take, informing recommendations for guided enhancements in order to improve student satisfaction and outcomes.

How can this survey inform the work we do as e-learning professionals outside of higher education? Earlier in this whitepaper we explored the notion of providing opportunities for feedback - possibly even hosting a feedback open house, empowering your learners to help you design a better learning journey. I highly encourage you to review the Community of Inquiry survey instrument, and play with the notion of bringing elements from the survey into your own measurement tools, or hosting a feedback open house highlighting a few questions related to each presence.

Many of our e-learning event evaluations focus more on how the learners feel about their learning journeys as opposed to how much they actually learned, and how much of that new knowledge they will be applying to their work that they do. The Community of Inquiry survey instrument questions probe both areas, and at the same time inform the successful (or not) design and delivery aspects of the online learning space.

I highly recommend that you review the survey questions available online (click here), and think about ways that you can integrate the questions posed there into your e-learning design and delivery strategies.
For many of us, we rarely get the opportunity to see how our e-learning efforts have impacted the bottom line of our learners. The Community of Inquiry survey questions probe into the impact of our learning journey by asking if our learners can describe ways to test, apply knowledge, develop solutions to problems that can be applied in practice, and apply new knowledge to their work.

**CONCLUSION**

I hope that you have found value in this whitepaper exploring the pedagogy of learning design, and that you found at least one solution to a problem that can be applied in your own e-learning practice. I encourage you to continue your learning journey and to seek out new and exciting pedagogical principles to integrated into your e-learning strategies.

**About The Author – Phylise Banner**

Phylise Banner is the Director of Online Teaching and Learning at Union Graduate College, where she is working to expand online offerings through a mindful institution-wide approach to program, course, and faculty development in alignment with teaching and learning effective practices.

She has over 20 years of experience planning, designing, developing, and delivering online courses, programs, and faculty development initiatives. As an online learning evangelist, she actively seeks out opportunities to experiment with emerging technologies in order to best serve faculty and students, and to create communities of lifelong learners.

She is featured regularly at regional, national and international conferences, speaking on the topics of online teaching and learning, faculty development, instructional strategy, experience design, social media, information visualization and GIS technologies. She also teaches Digital Storytelling online for SUNY Institute of Technology, and in person for the Academy for Lifelong Learning at Empire State College.

She is an Adobe Education Leader, STC Fellow, performance storyteller, avid angler, aviation enthusiast, and currently training to be a private pilot. She is also the proud owner of a 1967 Amphicar.