

# Creating Community in EdD Programs during COVID-19: Challenges, Strategies, and Opportunities

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## ABSTRACT

Building community in online EdD programs can be a challenge, and the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of doing so. In this essay, we will situate community building within the larger Community of Inquiry framework and focus on the element of social presence. By understanding more about the various aspects of social presence, faculty who design and deliver online programs can build stronger learning communities with and for their EdD students.

## KEYWORDS

*community, online learning, social presence*

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic demanded a shift in how we live and work, and the education world instantly turned to technological solutions to keep our professional lives and programs running with some semblance of normalcy. What we hoped was a temporary change has evolved into something more long-term and uncertain. Reacting out of necessity, we responded as best we knew how in the moment, but our proactive responses now and in the future could have a lasting, positive impact on the field of education and, particularly, professional practice doctoral programs; students who are full-time professional educators; and faculty whose teaching, research, and service connects to a doctorate in education (EdD) program. The seemingly endless COVID-19 pandemic has unequivocally shaped and continues to inform how we approach many aspects of our work in EdD programs – creating and sustaining community, in particular.

The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) is an organization of over 117 institutional members focused on refining and reclaiming the EdD (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019a). The values of collaboration and community are woven throughout the CPED Framework's guiding principles for program (re)design and program design concepts. In particular, mentoring and advising in EdD programs are guided by "dynamic learning that provides open communication, critical friendships, and peer-to-peer support with reciprocal interactions and responsibilities that form a community of learners inclusive of adviser, mentor, and peer relationships" (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019b). Achieving open communication, critical friendships, peer-to-peer support, and reciprocal interactions should extend beyond mentor/mentee and advisor/advisee relationships, and systematically and intentionally build and sustain a community of learners. Doing so in an online space in the midst of an ongoing health pandemic

requires much more, including creative thinking; risk-taking; and a suspension of skepticism regarding technology resources, online teaching and learning opportunities, and individual and collective community-building capacity.

Currently, approximately 20% of CPED-influenced EdD programs are fully online while the other 80% are an equal distribution of hybrid and face-to-face (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2019c). As part of the 80%, we recognize how hybrid and face-to-face programs traditionally build and sustain community through a variety of in-person experiences that, as of now, are not possible given the realities of precautionary safety measures regarding social distancing, large gatherings, air travel, and more. Like us, many hybrid CPED-influenced programs likely relied on in-person events to foster connections among faculty, students, and the program itself. And, like us, many programs have undoubtedly learned from successes and challenges in the recent past.

To share and reflect on our learnings, we center community building by first presenting a theoretical framework developed through online learning environments in higher education, the Communities of Inquiry (CoI) framework (Garrison et al., 2000). We then discuss both the challenges faced and subsequent strategies employed in building and sustaining community in our enforced online worlds. Finally, we reflect on the ways we have navigated social presence during the COVID-19 pandemic and, though often hesitantly, have opened our eyes to unexpected opportunities for sustainable program improvement.



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## COMMUNITIES OF INQUIRY FRAMEWORK

The Communities of Inquiry (CoI) framework is based on research on collaborative, constructivist online learning environments in higher education (Garrison et al., 2000). The main premise is that, contrary to popular belief during the latter part of the 20th century, computer-based environments could include a great deal of learner/instructor interactions resulting in powerful learning. The CoI framework, illustrated in Figure 1, is helpful in mapping out the various ways online course and program design and delivery can intentionally include structures to support a community of learners through a variety of connections. Researchers identified three types of interaction or “presence”: *social presence*, *cognitive presence*, and *teaching presence*.

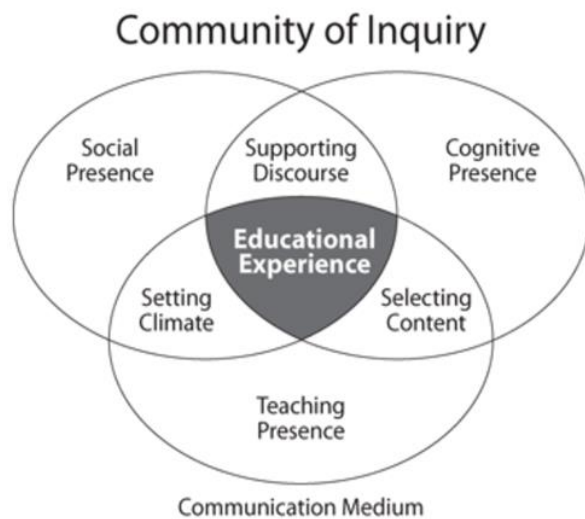


Figure 1: Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison et al., n.d.)

These three interrelated elements overlap to convey the complexity of creating a collaborative, constructivist community of learners. *Social presence* allows learners to feel that they are recognized in the community for their whole personalities, cultural experiences, and backgrounds. Rourke et al. (2001) illustrate affective, interactive, and cohesive features of social presence, including expression of emotions, use of humor, asking questions, expressing agreement, and referencing a group using inclusive pronouns. *Cognitive presence* focuses on the construction of knowledge through discourse and reflection and centers critical thinking and practical inquiry processes and outcomes (Castellanos-Reyes, 2020; Garrison et al., 2001). Defined by Anderson et al. (2001) as the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes” (p. 5), *teaching presence* relates to the actions of the instructor to construct and implement an interactive, engaging, well-facilitated learning environment. Although scholarship centering the social, cognitive, and teaching dimensions of a CoI framework has been available for 20 years, the prevalence of online learning (not to mention its necessity in times of a pandemic) has brought a new wave of faculty to the complexities and joys of these three interrelated concepts in online learning environments.

## CHALLENGES TO BUILDING AND SUSTAINING COMMUNITY ONLINE

As we now live and work primarily in online communities of inquiry, one of the most obvious challenges is the lack of non-verbal cues we rely on in interpersonal communication (Arasaratnam-Smith & Northcote, 2017). While video-based conferencing can somewhat alleviate this constraint, there are some non-verbals that cannot be communicated by webcam: spatial proximity, body language/posture, and eye contact, to name a few. Technology, itself, adds challenges to building community when you consider frustration with technology problems (malfunctioning computers, unreliable WiFi), lack of technical skills and experiences (limited knowledge of specific Web 2.0 tools or computer programs), or technophobia (disliking or avoiding situations involving the use of technology).

We are also facing new challenges that became ubiquitous in 2020: When COVID-19 sent working adults and students home, Zoom, one of the most popular, free online video-conferencing tools, gave us a new visceral reaction known as “Zoom Fatigue.” This phenomenon may be related to the hyper-attention on facial expressions brought on by the ability to see everyone (including yourself) in boxes on the computer screen, as well as the pressure to maintain a constant gaze to signify you are paying attention (Fosslien & Duffy, 2020).

While some of these challenges are real (malfunctions, for example), others are simply perceived and can be overcome. But they must be overcome intentionally, something that might have been neglected when COVID-19 caused a rush to emergency remote instruction. Researchers at Indiana University’s Pervasive Technology Institute (PTI; 2020) recently surveyed students and instructors to examine and respond to remote instruction that took place in Spring 2020 due to COVID-19. Surveys of over 6000 students and 1500 faculty in teacher roles indicated 74% of students and 67% of instructors felt disconnected and lost their sense of community during this remote instruction. PTI utilized survey results to propose four recommendations, two of which were related to community building: a) to increase opportunities for teacher-student interaction, and b) to foster virtual community, particularly student to student interaction. These recommendations are, in essence, directing us to enhance social presence.

## SOCIAL PRESENCE

Thinking about community building in a face-to-face setting might call to mind icebreakers and introductions. While these are certainly possible in online spaces, there needs to be an even more intentional focus on building social presence throughout the entirety of a learning experience – a semester-long course, a four-year doctoral program, a one-week intensive institute – rather than only at the beginning. Operating in a virtual space can leave learners feeling isolated, and they may feel some of the challenges outlined in the previous section. We should attend to this key component of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework’s goal of creating deep and meaningful learning experiences. Social presence is, in fact, the essence of community and connections, and is necessary in the design and delivery of online courses and programs built on a foundation of social-constructivism.

Social presence can be broken down into five elements: *affective association*, *community cohesion*, *instructor involvement*, *interaction intensity*, and *knowledge and experience* (Whiteside et al., 2017; see Figure 2). Similar to the overarching Col framework, these categories overlap, as many elements of powerful constructivist learning environments reflect the interdependent nature of the relationship among learners, facilitators, and content. For example, the category of *instructor involvement* is listed under social presence to represent the intentional acts of the instructor to build community through powerful instruction. However, the broader Col category of teacher presence also reflects the intentional actions of an instructor to provide visible, facilitated guidance to learners during instruction. Though other scholars have explored the connections between teacher presence and the other categories in relation to learner-centered education (Swan et al., 2020), our experiences necessitate a focus on the overlapping elements of social presence.



Figure 2: Elements of Social Presence (Institute of Education Sciences, 2020)

### Affective Association

Establishing emotional connections, including using humor and sharing and learning about one another's lives, is a central component of social presence. An example of this might be a faculty member sharing pictures of their family and pets, along with personal and professional connections to the content of a course. In our program, we provide preview videos for upcoming courses that are informal, personable, and humanizing so that we might dismantle positions of power in the faculty role. Faculty members share a bit about themselves in these videos and why the course content is especially important. In addition, students might begin a course by posting a video of themselves in their favorite study space at home to introduce themselves to the cohort. Activities like this allow students and faculty to communicate warmth and emotion, as well as to present the parts of their personae that make them who they are as they join the community as co-learners. Tending to *affective association* allows us to "see" our students, even in an online setting.

### Community Cohesion

A cohesive community of learners ensures social connections and a supportive learning environment. Students should know the expectations for how they will work together as a community through

collaborative norm-setting and clear guidelines for participation. Interacting in online spaces, faculty and students must commit to engage each other with honesty, open-mindedness, and vulnerability as they listen deeply to better understand various perspectives. In addition, creating a cohesive community helps them rely on each other for cognitive and emotional support. A common mistake in virtual courses is to simply have students introduce themselves without engineering a way for students to connect and converse. Instructor modeling is especially important in showing students how to connect in meaningful and appropriate ways in online discussion forums. These positive connections and social interactions create *community cohesion* in virtual learning environments.

### Instructor Involvement

An instructor's intentional interactions shape the learning community in implicit and explicit ways. For example, an instructor should consider their students in designing activities that relate to real challenges they face in the workplace, as advocated by adult learning theory (Merriam, 2001). In addition, providing timely and consistent feedback not only affords opportunities for learners to critically reflect on their thinking but also helps them feel recognized and supported in the learning environment. Importantly, instructors must become part of the learning community, not simply maestros who orchestrate it. To avoid being the sage on the stage, *instructor involvement* requires being visible in more ways than simply delivering content through video-based lectures.

### Interaction Intensity

Online learning communities are strengthened when the learners within them engage fully with one another and the instructor. Discussion forums with expectations for both quantity and quality of posts and replies can encourage full participation that extends the learning and the sense of connection in the community. Instructors should monitor forums and encourage students to interact with one another through questioning, playing devil's advocate, and/or extending and connecting ideas. A sense of connection among members of the learning community can result in more deep and nuanced understandings of complex concepts. *Interaction intensity* also aligns with the concept of critical friendship in a learning community where learners feel comfortable asking each other hard questions and where they take ownership for helping others learn.

### Knowledge and Experience

Situated learning recognizes that cognition is situated, social, and distributed (Putnam & Borko, 2000) where learners contribute their *knowledge and experiences* to the community. This is another element that overlaps with the Col category of cognitive presence, but this aspect is about the recognition and appreciation for student knowledge and experiences as strengths in the community. Instructors should highlight students' unique backgrounds and resources and encourage them to use those to further the learning of the community. While this is something that all excellent teachers know and do when they teach in a physical classroom, it is sometimes ignored in online settings. The key is understanding where your learners are and using that as a bridge to the current course concepts and material. One successful strategy we have seen in this area is the consistent use of weekly announcements to summarize and synthesize small group conversations, highlighting



students who connected course concepts to their personal and professional experiences to assist the understanding of their group. *Knowledge and experiences*, when made visible and appreciated, contribute to the social connections among learners.

## SURPRISING OPPORTUNITIES AND LESSONS LEARNED

Designing and delivering courses to reflect the many-faceted aspects of social presence requires intention and time, two things that may be in short supply during a pandemic as our priorities shift to the physical, mental, and emotional well-being of ourselves and our family and friends. Although at first mourning the loss of our face-to-face summer institutes, we have been pleasantly surprised by opportunities that successfully served as community building efforts and enhanced social presence in the online space. These opportunities included how Zoom meetings actually make using names of our students easier because the names are right on the screen; how virtual social events such as trivia nights and campus "tours" can be an effective way to have fun with your students in an informal, relaxed environment; and that an online Canvas shell for a cohort of students that follows them throughout their program can be an ideal opportunity and space for community that persists beyond one class session or semester. We have (re)discovered collaborative tools such as Google Docs, Google Slides, Padlet, and Perusall that create space for learners to create materials together in real-time during online instruction. The benefits of social connection in this time of extreme isolation should provide us all the motivation we need to intentionally attend to social presence.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR IMPROVING SOCIAL PRESENCE

Pandemic or not, tenets of social presence should be built into online courses and programs that have a foundation of social constructivist learning. Reflective of our own ongoing learning experiences, we conclude with a list of guiding questions for EdD faculty to consider as they design, implement, and refine online courses and programs.

- How have I communicated my personality or humanity to my students in this online setting? How can I help students feel comfortable doing the same?
- How have I made clear the expectations and norms for interacting online? How can I frame and provide gentle reminders of their importance and purpose?
- How have I created opportunities for student interaction that are conceptually intensive and sustained? How can I model and engage in rigorous online interaction?
- How is my online class more than just delivery and receiving of content knowledge? How can I create opportunities for learners to take ownership of group learning and communication as a community of learners?
- How have I encouraged learners to draw on their personal experiences and contexts to connect to new learning and deepen discussions? How can I include job-embedded learning activities?

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