

# Building Community in Online Learning Environments

## Online but Not Alone

Students and teachers often worry that online learning can be isolating, and virtual classrooms pose unique challenges to nurturing connections amongst learners. Nevertheless, there are strategies and techniques for building and maintaining a sense of community in online learning environments. Can online learning be just as good a learning experience as face-to-face instruction (Erickson, 2020)?

This resource outlines the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, which describes how learning emerges from the learners' educational experience. The resource adapts CoI principles to provide concrete tips for building engaged, collaborative learning communities in online environments.

Research shows that a sense of community can be crucial to motivating and supporting students. Not only do collaboration and mutual discovery help learners feel more engaged with course content; they also enhance the sense of cooperation, shared responsibility, and overall educational experience of participants (Hilliard & Stewart, 2019; Anderson, 2017). CoI suggests that optimal learning communities emerge at the intersection of three different kinds of presence: social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000 & 2010).

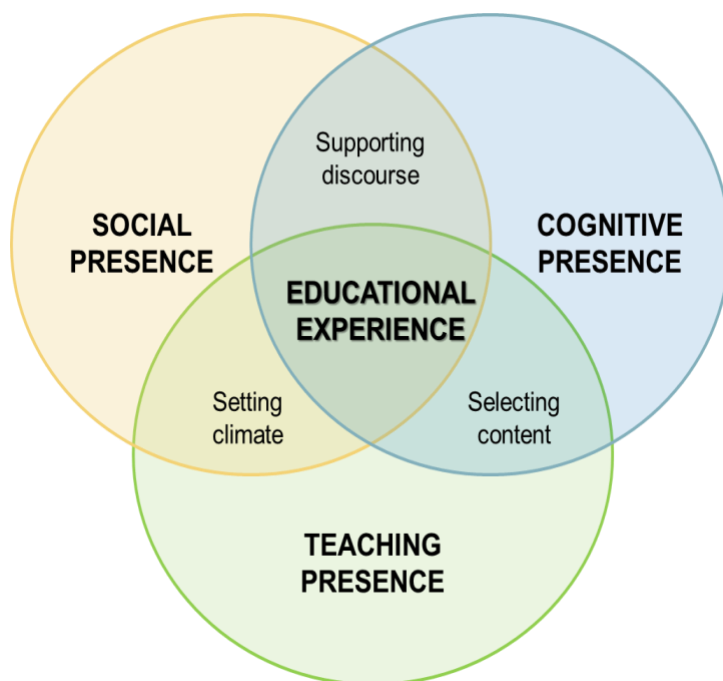


Figure 1 Community of Inquiry Model

**Social presence** involves “the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as real people.” (Garrison et al., 2000)

**Teaching presence** involves “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to support learning” (Fiock, 2020)

**Cognitive presence** involves participants’ “ability to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection” and communication (Fiock, 2020)

Considering how these forms of presence overlap and inform course design and implementation can help students succeed online—not alone, but in a community.

## Col Categories and Indicators

The table below identifies how each type of presence (social, teaching, and cognitive) can be categorized and indicated through various activities.

Presence	Categories	Example Indicators
<b>Social</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional/affective expression</li> <li>• Open communication</li> <li>• Group cohesion</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Risk-free expression</li> <li>• Mutual awareness and recognition</li> <li>• Building and sustaining group commitment</li> <li>• Collaboration</li> </ul>
<b>Teaching</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Instructional design and organization</li> <li>• Direct instruction</li> <li>• Facilitating communication</li> <li>• Building understanding</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing personal meaning</li> <li>• Defining and initiating discussion topics</li> <li>• Focusing discussion</li> </ul>
<b>Cognitive</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Triggering event: identifying problems and topics</li> <li>• Exploration: research, collaboration and communication</li> <li>• Integration: analyzing, synthesizing, and constructing meaning</li> <li>• Resolution: applying knowledge</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Exchanging information</li> <li>• Connecting ideas</li> <li>• Applying new ideas</li> </ul>

Adapted from: Garrison et al. (2000) & Garrison (2007)

## Online Community Building Strategies

The table below provides strategies for building community in online learning environments and tips for implementing these strategies. Implementing strategies that foster various forms of interactions and presence will help generate a robust online learning community. Remember to check with your Course Instructor before making changes to the course Quercus page or implementing changes related to course evaluation and grading.

#	Strategy	Examples and Tips for Implementation
1	Post a welcome message for the course	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Use Quercus <a href="#">announcements</a>, inbox function, or an email listserv to reach out to students before the first meeting.</li> </ul>
2	Introduce yourself	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create an <a href="#">introductory video</a> about yourself in an asynchronous setting.</li> <li>During synchronous sessions, use both audio and video.</li> <li>In addition to the usual information, tell students something that lets them know about your personality—e.g. pets, family photo, favourite hobby, a show you are watching, etc.</li> </ul>
3	Invite students to post profiles or introductory videos	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Post profile pictures on <a href="#">Quercus</a> or use <a href="#">discussion boards</a> to post videos or written introductions.</li> <li>Enable threaded responses and encourage students to comment on each other's posts.</li> </ul>
4	Provide clear expectations on how students can reach you.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For example, via office hours, University of Toronto email address, Quercus inbox, etc.</li> <li>Tell students when and how quickly they can expect a response (e.g., within one business day; not within 24 hours of a major due date).</li> </ul>
5	Make yourself available	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Consider setting aside some time at the beginning/end of class for informal conversation and student questions. If possible, offer by-appointment and drop-in office hours.</li> <li>Enable the “waiting room” function for video office hours (if available) and consider using spreadsheets allowing students to sign up for timeslots.</li> </ul>
6	Provide clear learning outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Create <a href="#">learning outcomes</a> that are clearly communicated to students at the start of the course and the beginning of each class.</li> <li>Schedules (with clear break times, if applicable) are especially important in online learning.</li> </ul>

7	Design tutorials for learner choice, flexibility, and control	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide options for how and when students interact with materials, the instructor, and each other.</li> <li>• Where possible, provide choice of topic, content and/or format (e.g. video, written, podcast, arts-based, etc.).</li> </ul>
8	Create tutorial guidelines for acceptable behaviour	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• During an early class meeting, ask students to collaboratively create a <a href="#">community agreement</a> and/or a netiquette guide.</li> </ul>
9	Facilitate icebreaker activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Break students into groups of 2–3, give them time to chat, and then have them introduce their partners to the larger group. It might help to provide specific time limits and pieces of information they should gather about their partners.</li> <li>• Regular social presence can also be enhanced by asking students to describe the weather where they are or inviting them to bring significant objects for “show-and-tell.”</li> </ul>
10	Incorporate early activities to familiarize students with the technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Set precedents for engagement early in the course. Introduce students to <a href="#">breakout groups</a>, <a href="#">chat panels</a>, the “<a href="#">raise hand</a>” function, Quercus modules, and other tools you intend to use.</li> <li>• Consider devoting time to a “virtual tour” of the learning spaces (e.g., Bb Collaborate, MS Teams, course Quercus page), and include frequent access checks (e.g., “can everyone hear me?”; “is this function available to everyone?”).</li> <li>• Organize virtual “treasure hunts” (e.g., find the icon, discover the function).</li> </ul>
11	Model posting and responding on discussion forums and during class activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Model expected behaviours and encourage diverse perspectives, divergent thinking, and experimentation. Use thought-provoking open-ended discussion prompts or debates.</li> <li>• Encourage students to participate and respond to each other in discussion boards and live discussions.</li> </ul>
12	Be present in discussion forums	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Facilitate/guide without dominating the discussion; ensure to allow time and space for students to contribute.</li> </ul>
13	Encourage students to interact with one another	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In synchronous and asynchronous settings, <a href="#">encourage students to talk and respond to one another</a> rather than just the instructor.</li> <li>• Threaded discussion boards and weekly “respondent” duties can facilitate this kind of interaction.</li> </ul>
14	Provide multiple means of participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allow students to participate in multiple ways. Facilitate verbal and written discussion and invite students to share their ideas through various media (videos, images, weblinks).</li> <li>• During live discussions, monitor the chat panel and repeat pertinent comments when possible.</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>For discussion boards and assignment submissions, keep expectations flexible and give learners a choice of topics/formats.</li> <li>Consider supplementing traditional assignments with podcasts, blog posts, vlogs, creative submissions, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>15</b>	Provide opportunities for learners to be experts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Allow students to sign up as topic experts; provide opportunities for them to teach their peers manageable portions of the course content or give them chances to connect content to their real-world experiences (e.g., how content might connect to their lives, values, other courses, etc.).</li> <li>Encourage students to find supplemental resources and share them with the class (e.g., library resources, articles, videos, documentaries, books, news stories, etc.).</li> </ul>
<b>16</b>	Incorporate team-based, collaborative or problem-solving activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Have students work through a problem together. Invite students to get creative with team names; use breakout groups to facilitate smaller group problem-solving.</li> <li>Consider holding a debate where each team must argue an opposing point of an issue or topic. It can help to assign student roles, e.g., notetaker, first speaker, questioner, etc.</li> </ul>
<b>17</b>	Incorporate peer-review sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><a href="#">Peer-review sessions</a> can be done in large or small groups (e.g., pairs), synchronously or asynchronously, and formally or informally. In a class leading up to a major deadline, allow students to exchange early drafts of their work and receive peer feedback.</li> </ul>
<b>18</b>	Provide timely, actionable, and substantive feedback.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide clear, explicit feedback with the opportunity to ask questions for clarification when possible.</li> </ul>
<b>19</b>	Share stories and experiences with students	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Share professional and relevant personal anecdotes; incorporate humour if/where appropriate.</li> <li>Invite (but don't force) students to share their own experiences with the class.</li> </ul>
<b>20</b>	Encourage reflection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Provide time to reflect on the learning experience, reflecting on how current knowledge/learning will be used in the future. Encourage students to share what was successful and what wasn't.</li> <li>Short, ungraded writing assignments or digital forms can be great ways to encourage learner reflection.</li> </ul>

Strategies adapted from: Flock (2020) & University of Virginia Center for Teaching Excellence (n.d.)

## References

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## U of T CTSI / TATP Resources

- Active Learning and Adapting Teaching Techniques*. <https://tatp.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/Active-Learning-and-Adapting-Teaching-Techniques1.pdf>
- Community of Inquiry*. <https://teaching.utoronto.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/Community-of-Inquiry.pdf>
- Teaching with Technology & Teaching Online*. <https://tatp.utoronto.ca/teaching-toolkit/teaching-with-technology-teaching-online/>