

Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform

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Published by *K20 Center*

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Time Frame 60 Minutes

Essential Question(s)

How do you foster a classroom community in a virtual classroom?

Summary

Forging a path of strong community in an online classroom can be a challenge. Teachers and students are separated, and maintaining a sense of community relies on some of the same practices we use in the in-person classroom. However, when coupled with uniquely designed virtual materials, authentic teaching strategies will ultimately open the doors of inquiry-based collaborative learning for your students.

Learning Goals

- Participants explore research regarding the importance of building community as it pertains to learning.
- Participants analyze interactive strategies to determine their potential effectiveness in addressing challenges to building a classroom community in a virtual environment.

Attachments

- Best Practices Blended Learning—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.docx
- Best Practices Blended Learning—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.pdf
- Best Practices Interaction in Online Classrooms—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.docx
- Best Practices Interaction in Online Classrooms—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.pdf
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.docx
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.pdf
- Presentation Slides—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.pptx
- T-Chart—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.docx
- T-Chart—Fostering a Classroom Community in a Virtual Platform.pdf

Materials

- Computer, tablet, or personal device
- Internet or WiFi
- Best Practices: Blended Learning (attached; 1 per participant)
- Best Practices: Interaction in Online Classrooms (attached; 1 per participant)
- Instructional Strategy Note Sheet (attached; 1 per participant)
- T-Chart (attached; 1 per participant, or use this Googledoc)
- Presentation Slides (attached)

Engage

Facilitator's Note: Transition Phrases

Throughout the narrative, you will notice the phrase, "Transition Phrase." This is the phrase that will let your producer (the person you have presenting the slide show for you) know that they need to click to the next slide.

Facilitator's Note: Setting Up

Prior to the session, you need to ensure you complete the following in order to be properly set-up:

1. **Engage: Padlet.** Set up a Padlet activity for the Engage portion of the session. Include the question, *"Are you currently teaching or working in a virtual or blended environment?"* Once you have set up your Padlet, copy the QR code, and create a TinyURL to put on **slide 7**. Make sure you also include the complete link in the slide notes for your producer so that they can drop it in the chat for your participants when the time comes.
2. **Explain: Zoom Poll.** Set up a Zoom Poll for a Virtual Four Corners activity on **slide 29**.
3. **Extend: T-Chart Google Doc.** In the attachments is a Word document that you can upload into Google Docs. Make sure prior to sharing the Google Doc with your participants that you change the share settings on the document to *"Anyone with the link,"* and *"Editor."*
4. **Evaluate: Padlet.** Set up a Padlet activity for the Evaluate portion of the session. Include the question, *"How does Social Presence in a virtual platform contribute to fostering a classroom community?"* Once you have set up your Padlet, copy the QR code, and create a TinyURL to put on **slide 33**. Make sure you also include the complete link in the slide notes for your producer so that they can drop it in the chat for your participants when the time comes.

Begin by having the title slide displayed. Introduce yourself and welcome your participants.

Display the appropriate slide to review your grant goals with participants (**slides 3-5**).

- GEAR UP for the FUTURE (**slide 3**)
- GEAR UP OKC (**slide 4**)
- GEAR UP for MY SUCCESS (**slide 5**)

Display **slide 6.** Begin with participants doing the Icebreaker activity in order to get to know each other a little bit better. Instruct them to find the three dots next to their image and select *"Rename."* Have them rename themselves with their first name and school district. Take a moment to point out the example: Stephanie, Norman PS.

Alternative Naming

If you are presenting in one school district, consider having the participants include their school.

Example: Stephanie, Norman North

Alternatively, if you are presenting in one school, consider having participants include their grade levels or subject areas.

Example: Stephanie, 9th Grade Life Science

Make sure to welcome participants as they are renaming themselves.

Next, using the chat function, instruct participants to choose an animal that best represents them as an educator. Encourage them to explain why they chose that animal. Make sure to give shout-outs regarding responses. Let participants know that you enjoyed their responses and hope that through the remainder of this session you can get to know each other a bit more during the collaboration time.

Transition Phrase: "Now that we have had the opportunity to get to know each other, we will dive into our next activity and engage in a collaborative discussion."

Display **slide 7.** Inform participants that for the next activity, Social Presence will be modeled, which is one of our main topics of discussion today. This activity includes using Padlet, a virtual collaboration tool. Ask participants to use the reactions tool in Zoom and give you a thumbs up if they have used Padlet before.

Teacher's Note: Padlet as a Tool

Padlet is a great tool in creating virtual collaboration with students. Even better, you may use any device to access Padlet (phone, tablet, computer).

Point out the QR code and TinyURL on **slide 7**. Instruct participants to access the Padlet activity that you have set up. Take a moment to drop the complete URL into the chat for participants to access the activity this way as well.

Make sure to put participants at ease if they are not able to access Padlet comfortably due to internet access, device capability, etc. Inform them that they can just play along and participate in whatever way they can. Everyone will still benefit from the discussion/experiences of other participants, and they may use the chat feature to submit their responses.

Display the Padlet screen where participants will be posting.

Once participants have access to Padlet, instruct them to click the "+" button to create their posts using the following K20 Learn Strategy "How am I feeling? What am I thinking?" on the following question: *Are you currently teaching or working in a virtual or blended environment?*

Ask them to add their name to their post. Ask them to take time to read other responses and reflect on what others have to say when they have posted their own response. Some participants may experience the same challenges and successes. Take a moment to talk about creating a virtual collaborative and interactive environment through Social Presence. Respond to some of the participant comments.

Transition Phrase: "Thank you for your comments. I hope that Padlet enabled you to actively visualize this collaborative tool. Let's begin reviewing and discussing a "Community of Inquiry."

Display **slide 8.** Inform participants that the session is meant to be a collaborative one. They should feel free to engage and take chances of sharing out. Remind them that they are all in the session to learn from one another. Review the Essential Question.

Transition Phrase: "Isn't this the question of the day? This topic is on the minds of many educators today given that more of us are switching to a virtual environment."

Display **slide 9**. Inform participants that the Learning Objectives support answering the Essential Question. Introduce the idea that they are going to explore research regarding the importance of building community. Review the Learning Objectives.

Transition Phrase: "We are going to look at the challenges faced when building a Community of Inquiry (CoI) in a virtual space. We will explore and analyze what strategies can be used to support building that CoI."

Explore

Display **slide 10.** Inform participants that you are going to explore the three Presences that make up a CoI. Participants may know a lot or a little about these. Research supports that these three Presences are what make up an effective virtual classroom.

Transition Phrase: "The Presences are Cognitive Presence, Teaching Presence, Social Presence."

Display **slide 11.** Inform participants that you are going to take this information and access their prior knowledge. They will participate in a modified version of a strategy called Honeycomb Harvest. Over the next few slides, there will be statements related to one of the three Presences of Community of Inquiry (Cognitive, Teaching, or Social). After reading each statement, the participants will decide which Presence is being represented. They will read the statement, and based on their choice, have them place a **1** for **Cognitive Presence**, **2** for **Teaching Presence**, or a **3** for **Social Presence** in the Chat function.

Transition Phrase: "If you have paper and a pen handy, number 1 to 5. Jot down the answer that you put for each of these statements. We are going to come back to it later for reference. Please note that there is more than one correct answer."

- Participants are kept on task and engaged in productive dialogue. (**Slide 12**)
- I feel comfortable disagreeing with course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust. (**Slide 13**)
- It is clear how to participate in learning activities. Timeframes and due dates are communicated. (**Slide 14**)
- Combining new information helps me answer questions raised in course activities. (**Slide 15**)
- I feel as if my point of view is acknowledged by other course participants. (**Slide 16**)
- I feel encouraged to explore new concepts. (**Slide 17**)

Transition Phrase: "Let's take a deeper look into the three Presences we just explored."

Explain

Display **slide 18.** Inform participants that you want to take a couple of minutes and talk about research. Say, "I know you are probably thrilled to hear that. We won't spend a long time talking about the specifics of it, but it is important that what we do in our classrooms is backed by research." Share with them that many of these ideas and research came from the book *E-Learning in the 21st Century: A Community of Inquiry Framework for Research and Practice* by D. Randy Garrison.

The framework that is displayed on this slide is the **theoretical backbone** of a lot of e-learning. A Community of Inquiry framework was formed around **three main ideas**, and then is broken into **three different Presences**. These ideas are:

1. The experience of living alongside students in a classroom
2. The concept of developing a community of learners
3. The idea that interaction alone does not develop engaged students

These ideas are encapsulated within the Presences and how those Presences interact together create a Community of Inquiry (CoI).

Transition Phrase: "Where the three Presences intersect, we get the educational experience that students have in classrooms."

Display **slide 19.** Inform participants that these three Presences are **interdependent** (thus the representation by a Venn diagram).

The following three transitions will display a basic definition of each Presence on the slide:

- Transition 1: *Social Presence* is the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities. According to Garrison, one of the biggest shortcomings of traditional distance learning is the **implicit denial of community.** There **can be that sense of community** in a virtual environment.
- Transition 2: *Cognitive Presence* is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse. This includes encouraging students to have **substantive conversations leading to deeper understanding.** Additionally, this is the context of critical thinking and scientific inquiry.
- Transition 3: *Teaching Presence* is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. **The teacher and the learner are not in separate roles.** Sometimes the student assumes the role of the teacher. These aren't fixed states.

Transition Phrase: "This was a brief explanation of the three Presences, but today we really want to focus on Social Presence."

Display **slide 20.** Share with the group the official definition of Social Presence, according to Garrison.

Transition once the definition has been shared.

Display **slide 21.** Share that the main topic and focus today includes Social Presence:

"What is Social Presence? Social Presence is the master conductor that synchronizes the instructor, students, norms, academic content, instructional strategies, and outcomes within a learning experience. The more students develop their social presence and improve engagement, the greater control they have over their own learning."

Share with participants that there are three aspects of Social Presence you would like to share with them today.

1. First is an ***Affective*** **experience**: This includes taking the opportunity to express emotion. We can do this through the use of humor, which conveys goodwill. Strategies include the use of emojis, using the rename feature, or changing virtual backgrounds to foster emotional connections or climate. The greater the connection, the more we encourage an environment of trust in terms of academic discourse.
2. The second aspect is ***Cohesive*** **experience**: Cohesive communication begins with Social Presence and simple behavior such as addressing others by name.
3. Lastly, an ***Interactive*** **experience**: Keeping learners involved sparks interest and a desire to participate. This refers to learners who compliment or agree with other learners, disagree with other learners, and/or ask questions of other learners and/or the teacher. It is not easy for students to engage in critical discourse, but creating a Community of Inquiry based on a strong Social Presence will cultivate a collaborative environment over time.

Transition Phrase: "Previously, we asked you to activate prior knowledge and answer questions regarding a Community of Inquiry. Let's look at those questions again."

Display **slide 22.** Inform participants that for this next activity, they are going to complete another modified Honeycomb Harvest. Based on the discussions of creating a Community of Inquiry through Social Presence, participants may want to re-evaluate their previous answers.

The next few slides will have statements related to one of the Presences in the Community of Inquiry. In the same way as the earlier activity, participants will place a 1 for Cognitive Presence, 2 for Teaching Presence, or a 3 for Social Presence in the chat function. Say, "As we review the statements, we will be asking for some audience participation, so please be ready to share out."

Transition Phrase: "You may want to refer to the answers you noted for our first Honeycomb Harvest activity."

Display **slide 23.** Participants are kept on task and engage in productive dialogue.

Possible guiding questions to ask (encourage participants to unmute their microphone when sharing):

- Did any of you change your answer from our previous Honeycomb Harvest? You may use the thumbs up or heart feature to indicate that you did change your mind.
- What strategies do you use to keep students on task and engaged in dialogue?

Display **slide 24.** I feel comfortable disagreeing with course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.

Display **slide 25**. It is clear how to participate in learning activities, and timeframes and due dates are communicated.

Possible guiding questions to ask (encourage participants to unmute their microphone when sharing):

- *Did any of you change your answer from our previous* Honeycomb Harvest*?* You may use the thumbs up or heart feature to indicate that you did change your mind.
- *What strategies do you use to clearly communicate directions with students?*

Display **slide 26**. Combining new information helps me answer questions raised in course activities.

Possible guiding questions to ask (encourage participants to unmute their microphone when sharing):

- *Did any of you change your answer from our previous* Honeycomb Harvest*?* You may use the thumbs up or heart feature to indicate that you did change your mind.

Display **slide 27**. I feel as if my point of view is acknowledged by other course participants.

Possible guiding questions to ask (encourage participants to unmute their microphone when sharing):

- *Did any of you change your answer from our previous* Honeycomb Harvest*?* You may use the thumbs up or heart feature to indicate that you did change your mind.
- *What are some strategies we can use virtually to foster a safe space for students to share their point of view?*
- Allowing students to feel validated in their thinking and cognitive processes reaffirms their connection with their peers and Social Presence. *How can we ensure that they ultimately want to participate in the process?*

Display **slide 28**. I feel encouraged to explore new concepts.

Possible guiding questions to ask (encourage participants to unmute their microphone when sharing):

- *Did any of you change your answer from our previous* Honeycomb Harvest*?* You may use the thumbs up or heart feature to indicate that you did change your mind.
- *What is the importance of encouraging students to explore new concepts, and how much is this based on accessing prior knowledge so that educators can scaffold new information?*

Transition Phrase: "Reflect and consider if your response changed from the previous Honeycomb Harvest and explain why."

Display **slide 29.** Inform participants that you will now be doing a modified virtual version of the Four Corners strategy using the Zoom Poll feature. Thinking about what you discussed regarding the Social Presence. Instruct participants to pick one of the pictures that they think best represents "Social Presence." Say, "Using the poll that we created, please respond with your choice of picture by choosing the number that matches the picture you chose."

Once all of the participants have selected a response, show the poll results and discuss those as a group. Ask, *"Is there anyone who would be willing to share why they chose 1, 2, 3, or 4?"*

Transition Phrase: "So just like we had a variety of answers, the way we go about creating a Social Presence in a virtual environment can vary greatly depending on the needs of students."

Extend

Display **slide 30**. Inform participants that you want to address **real needs** that they face regarding establishing a community in a virtual space. Ask participants the question: *What are some of the barriers that you are facing with regard to Social Presence while establishing a Community of Inquiry?*

Using a collaborative Google Doc, participants will complete the left side of a T-Chart. Let them know that they will address the right side at a later time. Share the link with participants and instruct them to open this on their computer. You should also share it on the screen for them.

Invite participants to open the document and type on the left side any barriers they feel that they face when establishing a Social Presence.

Make sure to check in with participants and see that they were all able to open the Google Doc. Have them give you a thumbs up in the reactions if it worked. If they can't open the document, it's okay. Instruct them to post some of the barriers they face in the chat, and you can put them into the T-Chart for them.

Facilitator's Note: Possible Barriers

1. We can't use facial cues to guide our teaching (cameras are off).
2. Social presence does not mean supporting engagement for purely social purposes.
3. There is a problem balancing the social and the academic.
4. Students don't feel connected to teachers or peers.
5. Limited experience with technology.
6. Not everybody has had great experiences with virtual learning.
7. Lack of motivation, due to being at home and not with their peers.
8. Personal cognitions. A few online learners may be struggling with self-defeating opinions and beliefs. They may believe that they do not have the ability to be successful in a virtual platform.
9. Some learners may associate virtual learning with loneliness and isolation.
10. Boredom. When learners are bored in the classroom, whether in-person or online, they will check out.

Transition Phrase: "Now that we have listed some barriers, let's discuss some solutions."

Display **slide 31.** Share with participants that as educators, often our biggest resources are the people or other educators around us. Remind participants that this session is filled with people who have a wealth of knowledge that they want to draw from today. Ask them, now that they have identified barriers, **what are some solutions that they can identify?** Instruct participants to look at the Barriers column and think about strategies or solutions to remove that barrier.

Instruct them to go back to the document that they were just on and **contribute some solutions that they have found work for them**. Again, if they can't access that document, instruct them to use the chat to let you know the barrier and solution they are thinking about. Then you can type it in the document for them.

Facilitator's Note: Possible Solutions

We can't use facial cues to guide our teaching. (Cameras are off).

- Always, Sometimes, or Never True - How does this help?
  Use this strategy to create a game that provides students with a sense of security, wanting to turn their cameras on and participate. Create statements that challenge the phobias connected to a virtual environment.
- Caption This - How does this help? Create images that provide positive connotations connected to virtual learning and invite students to analyze the images while creating captions.

Social presence does not mean supporting engagement for purely social purposes.

- Establishing Norms - How does this help? Developing and establishing norms set the tone and expectations that it is time to focus on learning activities. Encourage students to work together and co-create these norms in a democratic fashion, providing a space for discussion and collaboration.

Problem balancing the social and the academic.

- CUS and Discuss - How does this help? Re-establish the norms that students co-created with the teachers. Use this strategy so that students can re-read, circle, underline, and star important information and points. Let students compare their notes in an online discussion.

Students don't feel connected to teachers or peers.

- Fist to Five - How does this help? The Fist to Five strategy gives teachers a quick and easy way to identify the needs of their students before discussing a topic in more depth.

Students don't want to log on.

- Cliffhangers - How does this help? Provide cliffhangers in both synchronous and asynchronous settings. Give the students something to look forward to. Leave them wanting more.

Boredom. When learners are bored in the classroom, whether in-person or online, they will check out.

- Zoom or Google Hangout Polls - How does this help? Conduct surveys, interviews, and pre-assessments to identify their expectations.

Not everybody has had great experiences with virtual learning.

- Establishing Norms - How does this help? You cannot erase students' pasts, but you can encourage them in the present. Place importance on the benefits of e-learning in advance, so they understand the expectations, which can lower anxiety about previous negative experiences.

Grades: work not being turned in.

- Choice Boards - How does this help? Giving the students an opportunity to choose what assignment they get can increase motivation. For example, provide the students with a choice between two different assignments, but both assignments meet the objective being taught.

Lack of motivation, due to being at home and not with their peers.

- Gamify Learning - Kahoot, Get a Life - How does this help? Allow for some friendly competition that engages a socially collaborative environment. Incorporating gaming into learning gives online learners the motivation they need to achieve desired outcomes.

Online discussions lack depth and engagement.

- Chalk Talk - How does this help? Give students the opportunity to respond to prompts posted digitally in Padlet and have them respond to others by commenting on people's posts.

- Student-Led Discussions - How does this help? Break students up into small groups. One person each week can be in charge of leading the blog discussion. Outline certain requirements like vocab, etc. depending on the content. Require students to respond to other students, hopefully leading to substantive conversations.

Personal cognitions. A few online learners may be struggling with self-defeating opinions and beliefs. They may believe they do not have the ability to be successful in a virtual platform.

- Always, Sometimes, or Never True - How does this help? Help learners to overcome this struggle by acknowledging its existence and to evaluate what is going on. Engage online learners in thought-provoking questions that allow them to think critically to examine their assumptions and beliefs.

Some learners may associate virtual learning with loneliness and isolation.

- Virtual Breakout Rooms and Two Stars and A Wish activity - How does this help? Develop an activity that incorporates online group activities that allow them to practice problem-solving with their peers.

Some students may have limited experience with technology.

- Create a Youtube channel or Screencast - How does this help? Offer online tutorials and personalized support. Create online demos and encourage them to practice with their classmates.

Ask the audience to raise their hand and share a solution that they gave and explain. Take the time to discuss the barriers and solutions provided.

Transition Phrase: "If we had more time, we could discuss this longer. There were many great solutions given here!"

Evaluate

Display **slide 32.** Say, "If you have any questions, please use Zoom's reaction feature to raise your hand and unmute your mic to ask your question."

Transition Phrase: "We may not have all the answers, but I hope that we can assist each other any way that we can. If there are no more questions, let's move on to our last activity."

Display **slide 33.** Announce to participants that you will be wrapping up the discussion regarding the Social Presence. You will complete the last collaborative activity in Padlet and reflect on the information that has been shared. Take a moment to drop the complete URL into the chat for participants to access this way as well.

Display the Padlet screen where participants will be posting.

Once participants have access to Padlet, instruct them to click the "+" button to create their post on the following question: *How does Social Presence in a virtual platform contribute to fostering a classroom community?*

Ask them to add their name to their post. Once they have posted their response, instruct them to take time to read others and reflect on some of the responses (foster discussion as people are posting).

Transition phrase: "Thank you for your responses in Padlet. Our session is finished for today."

Research Rationale

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a social constructivist model of learning in online and blended environments (Garrison et al., 2000). The CoI framework is divided into three equally important Presences: Teaching, Cognitive, and Social. When designing a blended learning program, teachers must remain conscious of the learning community's social dynamics. Any change in the learning environment, however small, can alter the social dynamics of a learning community. According to Salmon (2013), the importance of relationships among students is paramount to the success of blended learning programs. GEAR UP is positioned to support students beyond the classroom, which takes on the format of a virtual setting. Effective student relationships can take shape in a variety of ways: trust building; intentional social interactions in both face-to-face and online settings; established support measures among teachers and students; embedded support mechanisms which help students clarify, receive feedback, or ask questions; along with opportunities to work in pairs and small groups.

Resources

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