Cultivating a community of learners in a distance learning postgraduate course for language professionals

Angelos Konstantinidis[1] and Cecilia Goria[2]

Abstract. The purpose of this contribution is to share reflections and practices in cultivating a community of learners in the context of a professional development programme at Master's level for language teachers. The programme implements a highly participatory pedagogical model of online learning which combines the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999) with the Community Indicator Framework (CIF) (Galley, Conole, & Alevizou, 2012). The tangible outcome of our revised interpretation of the two models is a cohesive community characterised by a strong sense of commitment towards the learning of the individuals as well as that of the group. This affects the quality of the learning experience, enhances academic achievements, and increases student retention.

Keywords: online community, language teachers, distance learning.

1. Introduction

Online and distance learning is increasingly used in teacher education programmes since it affords access to course materials anytime/anywhere, participation from disperse geographical locations, and a flexible schedule. At the same time, it faces a number of challenges such as effective use of technology, students' personal commitments affecting engagement with the course, and students' feelings of isolation affecting their participation.

The Master of Arts in Digital Technologies for Language Teaching (MA in DTLT), University of Nottingham, is a two-year part-time online distance learning

programme that targets qualified teachers interested in developing their theoretical and practical expertise in the field of digital technologies with a specific focus on the learning and teaching of foreign languages. The programme addresses the aforementioned challenges by leveraging course design as well as a series of Web 2.0 tools to cultivate a strong sense of learners' community and increase students' commitment to the programme.

In the following section we present the development of our pedagogical framework and reflect on its design. Next, we briefly discuss its implementation and, lastly, we list the most important outcomes.

## 2.   The development of our framework

In creating our framework for designing and implementing the programme, we laid two cornerstones. The first is the CoI by Garrison et al. (1999). The CoI posits that valuable educational experiences are embedded within a CoI consisted of teachers and students, where learning occurs through the interaction of three core elements, namely *cognitive* presence, the extent that participants are in position to construct meaning through communication; *social* presence, the participants' ability to project their socioemotional traits into the community; and *teaching* presence, which relates to the design and facilitation of the educational experience.

Our second cornerstone is the CIF by Galley et al. (2012), a tool for monitoring, observing and supporting collaborative activities in online communities of practice. The CIF identifies four fundamental aspects of experience: *participation,* the ways in which individuals engage in activity; *cohesion,* the ties between individuals and the community as a whole; *identity,* how individuals perceive the community and their place within it; and *creative capability,* the ability of the community to create shared artefacts and knowledge (Goria & Lagares, 2015, p. 224).

CoI and CIF differ in two ways. Firstly, CoI provides a framework for computer mediated communication for closed educational settings, while CIF is informed by the principles of open education and focuses on open social networks for education professionals. Secondly, CoI supports purposely designed educational experiences, while CIF supports community development in an open social network site. Given that the MA in the DTLT programme sits within an institutionally closed online educational context and yet employs open pedagogies based on the wider social web and its students' online communities, we attempted to reconcile

the two models to develop a framework (Figure 1) for monitoring and supporting the development of our learning community. What follows is a brief description of this process.

Figure 1.   'Learning in online communities' framework adapted from CoI and CIF
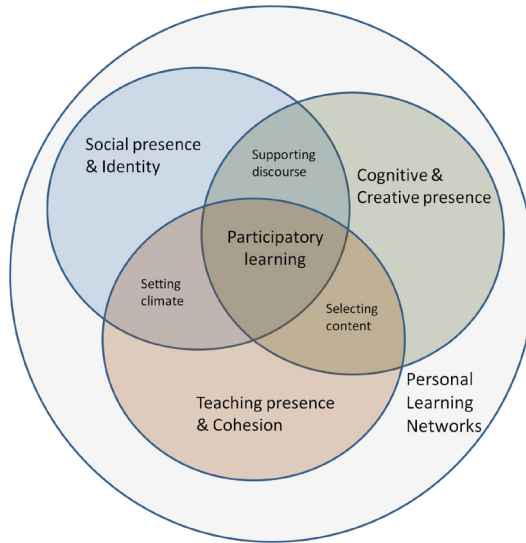
Firstly, we associated *social* presence with *identity* since both are related to the social characteristics of a community. Next, we placed *cohesion* along with *teaching* presence, since we believe it is a primary function of the teacher to establish ties between members. We placed *creative capability* in the *cognitive* sphere, since it is related to the ability of the community to engage in productive activities. Lastly, we positioned *participation* in the centre since it is related to the whole operation of the community.

We included participants' Personal Learning Networks (PLNs) into the model for three reasons. Firstly, each participant's PLN is significantly enhanced through his/ her participation to the programme. Secondly, learning outputs of each participant's PLN affects the learning experience of the community. Thirdly, the pedagogical approach implemented with our programme actively scaffolds the development of our students' PLNs. Hence, there is a reciprocal exchange between each student's PLN and the community. We considered that such a relation would best be illustrated by drawing a surrounding circle that encapsulates the community and its participants.

3.   Implementation of the framework

3.1.   Social presence

Three methods are employed for enhancing social presence:

- *Welcoming new students.* Part of our induction process, we invite new students to join a closed group and engage them in a series of warm-up activities.

- *Celebrating social events.* We use various web tools and ways to celebrate social events in which our students are invited to participate.

- *Synchronous meetings.* We schedule online synchronous meetings regularly.

3.2.   Identity

We employ four methods to promote group identity:

- *Addressing students as a group.* We cultivate a culture of shared responsibility in studying and doing the activities.

- *Peer-feedback.* We constantly encourage peer-feedback.

- *Group tasks.* During each year students have to complete at least one group task.

- *Dissertation Show.* Every summer all community members are invited to the dissertation show, an online event where second-year students present ongoing work on dissertations. Since dissertations are the most important assignments that students undertake, this event helps them feel that they are all in the same boat.

3.3.   Cognitive presence

We followed the critical inquiry model (Garrison et al., 1999) in the design and implementation of our overall strategy and the individual learning tasks to enhance cognitive presence:

- *Triggering event.* Integration of web tools in the activities positively affects their reception from students.

- *Exploration phase.* Students are encouraged to employ their PLN in their quest for information.

- *Integration and resolution phases.* We design tasks that challenge students to step out from the exploration phase and reach the integration and subsequently the resolution phases.

3.4.   Creative presence

The focus of our efforts is on ways of establishing a conducive context for creative processes. Our strategy is built on four pillars:

- *Spirit of collaboration.* This is not to suggest that creativity can only be expressed through collaborative practices, rather that members should sense that there is a shared goal and that reaching this goal necessitates collaborating with others instead of antagonising.

- *Spirit of openness.* We hold that open education can be realised in many ways. One of these ways is to cultivate the identity of 'open scholar' to the members of the community (Weller, 2012). Indeed, our community members develop most of the practices described as the characteristics of open scholar.

- *Spirit of problem-based learning.* Rather than lecturing about the weekly topics, we prepare tasks that resemble real-world problems.

- *Spirit of technology integration.* We consider technology integration important for a number of reasons, such as authenticity in tasks, collaboration, etc.

3.5.   Teaching presence

The role of the teacher can be acquired by any community member, so the following ways of establishing teaching presence should be approached with this premise in mind:

- *Peer interaction.* We encourage peer-to-peer interaction since it is the first step for adopting teacher's role by students. Accordingly, use of

different platforms that we support in the programme provides multiple opportunities for interaction.

- *Shifting roles.* We actively encourage students to acquire the role of the teacher in several occasions (i.e. sharing expertise).

3.6. Cohesion

We consider group cohesion not as something static, but rather as constantly evolving and changing depending on the member who acquires the role of the teacher at any given moment. Although this may seem challenging in maintaining a coherent community, we employ the following strategies to cultivate a cohesive atmosphere:

- *Non-hierarchical relations.* We establish a mutual relationship with tutors and students alike. The use of the inclusive 'we' is a feature of the way groups are addressed.

- *Casual language and environments.* We eschew formalities both in language and in online environments.

- *Self-disclosure.* Self-disclosure helps members to build friendly relations. We facilitate self-disclosure through online social games.

4. Outcomes

The tangible outcome of our revised interpretation of the two models is an active and cohesive community characterised by a strong sense of commitment towards the learning of the individuals as well as that of the group. This affects the quality of the learning experience, enhances academic achievements, and increases student retention.

5. Conclusion

In this paper we discussed and reflected on the development of the pedagogical framework for cultivating an online community of learners at the online distance learning MA in DTLT. We presented an array of strategies that we employ and we consider important for the success of the framework. We perceive that the proposed framework offers to our programme, as well as to other educators who organise

and facilitate similar online courses, a valuable tool to monitor and support the development of a learning community.

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