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[Book Review] Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry by D. Randy Garrison

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Thinking Collaboratively: Learning in a Community of Inquiry: D. Randy Garrison

As a passionate advocate of working and learning collaboratively I approached this book with the upmost interest. And it did not disappoint, the content of this book is, or should be, of extreme interest to educational technologists, instructional designers, and educators working in higher education institutions. It would be of particular interest to those who feel that collaboration at a distance is either not viable or not worthwhile, as it demonstrates both how to ensure viability and just how worthwhile such experiences can be.

In this book Garrison sets out his Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework, specifying the theoretical background to his ideas in detail. He sets out why thinking collaboratively in higher education is both desirable and necessary, quoting both Dewey and Vygotsky to back up his claims. The necessity and power of thinking collaboratively for engendering deep and meaningful learning are his chief themes argued for throughout the book.

The CoI framework (page 59) itself has been developed over many years and has been explored by many colleagues and peers of Garrison, giving a wide body of literature to back up his ideas. The chief novelty of Garrison's approach is to set out three "presences" that must overtly exist within an effectively functioning community of inquiry. The presences are social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Although the presences are separately considered and defined a community of enquiry exists and functions effectively through a complex interplay between each of these presences.

Social presence (page 72 – 75) is clearly vital in such a community as participation is key. Social presence is not about "getting on well", although this may be the outcome of the CoI process. It is about developing an ethos of respect and trust within the community that allows and encourages full participation in the debates, challenges and reflective thinking that characterises a functioning CoI. The degree to which a sense of identity and belonging is engendered within the group is a predictor of fruitful outcomes from that CoI. Social presence must first be focused on the purpose of the inquiry. However where an inquiry is artificial or the task trivial then the students will not feel it worthwhile to make the effort needed to establish the second aspect of social presence, which is free and open communication. Personal relationships, the third aspect of social presence, must be allowed to grow over time through the participants communicating openly within a group that has an established and purposeful identity.

Personal relationships can inhibit the respectful communication necessary in a CoI but if the focus is on working together to establish deep and meaningful learning as part of achieving a particular outcome then relationships can form slowly and naturally over time. The idea that students will not support or work together is dismissed through the argument that where the purpose of the CoI is well established and something that each participant can identify with, then relationships will grow. Garrison also suggests that where the CoI is a crucial part of the learning on a course of study then non-participation can justifiably result in failing the course. Thus the motivation to become involved may be extrinsic but with clearly stated ground rules of participation, outcomes required and leadership within the group, the motivation to stay involved should quickly become intrinsic.

Cognitive presence (page 75 – 77) is the second of the presences and is perhaps the most obvious in a thinking and learning environment. Cognitive presence is rewarded through the intrinsic satisfaction of constructing meaning and being recognised as a contributing member of the thinking

and learning community. A key education issue associated with cognitive presence is the need to ensure that students move through the phases of inquiry in a timely manner. This aspect must be considered at the planning phase as the design of the task can influence how the students move towards a conclusion but it also depends on the ideas within the third aspect of the CoI framework, that of teaching presence and collaborative and distributed leadership with the group. The necessity for leadership and how that is operationalised within the group is a particular feature of Garrison's theories of collaborative thinking and learning.

It is within the teaching presence, termed "the backbone of the community" (page 88) that I found the most that is new and thought provoking. Teaching presence is a complex interplay between instructional design, facilitation of the community and direction of the learning and is to be shared within the community. The first and foremost role of the teaching presence is to design and prepare learning tasks that will engage the interest of the students and allow the deep and meaningful learning experiences that are possible in a community of inquiry. This is obviously the role of an instructor but Garrison makes the point that the other roles that are identifiable as "teaching presence", facilitation and direction, should be more and more shared and employed by all and any member of the CoL (page 80). As the community comes together and establishes cohesion within the members, the teaching presence is overt, students are asked to introduce themselves to one another, in order to quickly establish a social presence, challenging questions are asked and how to challenge others' ideas respectfully is modelled by the instructor. However from the start the expectation is stated that these facilitation and direction roles should more and more be taken over by members of the community. In a CoI that is functioning optimally each member knows that they will both teach and learn within that community, that is teaching presence necessitates that individuals assume appropriate degrees of responsibility to regulate learning while receiving the support and direction of the community.

Another possibly surprising attribute of a CoI is that there will be direct instruction during the time of its existence, and that direct instruction will particularly occur after the social and cognitive presences within the CoI have been established. Direct instruction (page 95) is seen as a way to provide leadership within the CoI, something which is seen as essential, and is never simply the role of the instructor. It is always to be seen as something that any member of the community may and should provide as appropriate during the process. Direct instruction is seen to include maintaining an open and respectful climate within the community, providing new information to the group, diagnosing misconceptions, giving feedback and using metacognition to regulate the discourse.

Metacognition is a further important aspect of a CoI, indeed the overarching goal of a CoI is to enable the participants to construct another level of awareness, that of metacognition. A CoI invites awareness of both how an individual thinks and learns but also how other members of the group are thinking and learning, as such individual metacognition is inspired by the CoI process, as is co-regulatory activity.

A very interesting point made by Garrison in this book is the need for the content of any course using CoI as a learning tool not to be too onerous (page 91). He states that those in charge of setting out the content of a course should identify the key ideas which are essential to know within that course and focus only on them. If the course content is too full, the students will as a matter of self-preservation fall back on rote memorisation, especially if assessment requires mainly recall. Since this will not be deep learning, such knowledge will be quickly forgotten. On the other hand if key ideas are presented and explored through the discourse of a CoL, where ideas are challenged and misconceptions exposed and corrected, the learning will be both deep and lasting. Innovative and

appropriate assessments will be needed for courses that employ CoI as learning tools, ones that assess the level of learning that is likely to have been the outcome of the CoI process.

However despite the importance of the ideas in this book, which I heartily endorse as important for anyone interested in educational technology, as much of the technology currently available actively works against the collaborative thinking described here, instructional design, as many of its messages are key to designing deep learning opportunities or education at HEIs, this book is not all good. The text is highly repetitive to the point that it feels sometimes as though it is browbeating the reader into accepting the ideas, rather than arguing for them or persuading the reader. This is one reason I would not advocate this book as reading at PhD level, this writing style is not to be emulated. A second reason I would not advocate this book to those studying at PhD is that it simply ignores several seminal writers in the field of collaborative learning or communities of practice. For example there is no mention of Lave & Wenger's communities of practice and the meaning of identity is taken as shared, without reference to the wide field of literature which discusses identity.

A third reason that I found this book deeply frustrating was the lack of practical illustration, it took Garrison until page 89 of a 115 page book to make a practical suggestion about how to institute a CoL. It is true to say that once Garrison embarked on writing about the research behind communities of enquiry in chapter 6 and about the principles of practice in chapter 7, his writing began to flow more fluently and the readability improved considerably. A careful but serious edit of this book to remove the repetition of ideas and phrases is likely to reduce the text by at least 20%, leaving space to include more illustration of the ideas in practice. It is clear that these illustrations exist from the many research projects and communities of inquiry that Garrison has been part of. Using them to provide exemplars of the meaning of the three presences would be powerful. I agree wholeheartedly that every CoI has to proceed in its own particular fashion, there cannot be rules to follow, only principles that underpin effective establishment of collaborative thinking and learning. However developing a vision of what a CoI would look and feel like in different contexts would be greatly enhanced by some sharing of exemplars.

This book contains important ideas that are not constrained by face to face or distance learning, a community of inquiry can be established in both situations. There is some suggestion that a blended learning environment may be the ideal, using face to face to quickly establish social presence whilst the benefits of on-line discussion allow for reflective thinking and challenging responses which take time to formulate. However it is clear from the examples that are eventually given, that the lack of face-to- face or the technology to facilitate on-line discussion is not a reason not to use the power of a CoI to offer students the best experiences of thinking and learning.