

A Brief Introduction of the Community of Inquiry and its Theoretical Foundation

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Abstract: Community of Inquiry theory as a new teaching theory proposed in this century based on social construction theory is of great significance for the development and practice of teaching theory in the era of the epidemic. This essay will explore the predecessors of the community of inquiry theory and elaborate on the specific content of the community of inquiry theory.

Keywords: Community of Inquiry theory; Social Construction Theory; Teaching theory

1. Social Construction Theory

To better understand the Community of Inquiry, we need to introduce and elaborate on the theory of its roots--Social Construction Theory. Language teaching cannot be sufficient without the guidance of psychology, and the basic ideas of psychology are one of the foundations of the various pedagogical theories. In terms of learning theories, educational psychology can be divided into three schools of thought, namely behaviorism, cognitive psychology and humanism. Social Construction Theory is one of the main branches of Cognitive psychology. (Ge, 2004)

The cognitive view of learning is that learning is the organization and reorganization of cognitive structures, the search for knowledge, and the processing of information. Knowledge is derived from the interaction of subject and object. Teaching and learning are about guiding students to engage in meaningful learning that leads them to construct knowledge based on their prior experiences, mental structures, and beliefs, so cognitive scholars focus on and emphasize the active, social and contextual nature of learning.

Social construction theory was developed by Vygotsky in the 1970s by incorporating the theory of Psychological Development Theory developed of himself in the 1950s. Social construction theory sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon. It emphasizes social interpretation and the intersubjective influence in communication. The modern cognitive theory of constructivism emphasizes the 'learning' focus. Learning is not only about acquiring language habits but also about the creative use of language structures. Teachers are expected to give full power to students' independent learning, not only to help them master English and develop the ability to use it; but more importantly, to teach them how to learn. This is why teachers are encouraged to engage in rich multi-directional communication, discussion, or collaborative problem-solving between teachers and students, and to promote cooperative and interactive learning. The teacher is the organizer, guide, and helper in the whole learning process. (Ge, 2004)

Communities of Inquiry have their origins in this view of combining the individual (reflective) and shared (collaborative) worlds. This is consistent with Vygotsky's social constructivist approach to education and his concept of "learning as a process of inquiry". (Lee and Smagorinsky 2000, p.6)

2. The concept of Community of Inquiry

Communities of Inquiry are based on Dewey's Inquiry-based learning and Vygotsky's theory of collaborative construction, first proposed by Matthew Lipman in 2003. Dewey believed that Inquiry was central to reflective thinking and essential to education. Vygotsky's belief that 'individuals and societies create and are created by each other' (Wells 2000: 55) extends to the idea that Learning is a process of Inquiry. (Lee, Smagorinsky 2000: 6). The Community of Inquiry Framework was developed by D. Randy Garrison, Professor Emeritus at the University of Calgary, Canada, Terry Anderson, Professor at Athabasca University, and Walter Archer, Professor at the University of Alberta, in 2000. Archer and others led the construction and development in 2000 (Chuanzhi Yin 2020; Yanyan Shan 2021). By 2017, its seminal paper "Critical Inquiry in text-based environments: computer conferencing in

higher education” (Garrison et al. 2000) was cited more than 4,000 times, laying the theoretical foundation for empirical research on interdisciplinary learning and learning theory in different educational settings. Community of Inquiry theory is a coherent theory that can provide theoretical guidance for practice as well as feedback to assess practice outcomes (Garrison 2011; Garrison, Vaughan 2008).

In a world where everything is connected by technology, a community could be defined by the member’s identity in a group, not by the physical distance or location. So the purpose of the foundation of a community is for a group of people with the same identity who want to do the same thing. Inquiry is a collaborative construction process that avoids ideological constraints and is a model for collaborative thinking and learning. The interrelationship between an inquiry and the community is: inquiry has its social meaning and relies on the community of inquiry.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) is a coherent and descriptive framework that describes a collaborative and constructive approach to thinking and learning (Garrison, 2011). The Community of Inquiry is generally designed to use in higher education. It aims to enable learners to co-construct a body of knowledge through meaningful and collaborative exchange. Garrison et al. (2007) were the first to use this theory to reveal the unique laws of online teaching and learning, suggesting that effective knowledge construction must have three systematic elements: Teaching Presence, Social Presence, and Cognitive Presence.

Garrison defines Presence as the identity constructed through meaningful and purposeful communication. Effective teaching presupposes a high level of all three presences:

(1) Teaching presence is the process of designing, facilitating and guiding learners’ meaningful constructions to achieve educational goals and values (Anderson et al. 2001: 5), including three sub-dimensions of instructional design and management, facilitated dialogue, and direct instruction, centered on helping learners to enhance their personal reflection and learning in shared communication and meaningful constructions. Among them, instructional design and management encompasses setting course content, designing instructional methods, defining instructional sessions, using online tools effectively, and establishing online class order; facilitating dialogue refers to creating learning environments that help trigger discussions to facilitate teacher-student discussions or student-student constructed dialogues in the learning process, ultimately leading to students’ meaningful construction and understanding of the learning content; and direct instruction refers to introducing content and asking questions that providing academic guidance, focusing the discussion on the questions, summarizing the discussion, and confirming understanding, diagnosing misunderstandings, and responding to technical issues through assessment and interpretive feedback (Wu Shomeng et al., 2020). Teaching presence connects elements that link social and cognitive presence to the learning experience, and interactions between teachers and students increase the effectiveness of online learning environments (Garrison, Anderson 2003; Muirhead, Juwah 2004) and promote positive student performance and achievement (Appana 2008; Gallien, Oomen-Early 2008).

(2) Cognitive presence refers to the extent to which learners construct meaning through ongoing reflection and dialogue, including four stages of triggering events, Inquiry, integration, and resolution, which are directly related to actual learning outcomes (Akyol, Garrison 2011). It is the core thinking and learning factors in the Community of Inquiry. Cognitive presence is achieved through the Practical Inquiry model (PI model), which is a process incorporating phases of exploration, integration and resolution. Starting from the triggering event that happens in the shared world, learners get the awareness of it. To solve the event, they need to take the triggering event into their own private world to understand and digest. During this phase, they have completed the integration and resolution part. Then they use the idea they got to put it into action in the shared world again. This whole process is an intuitive and integral procedure. The transition from individual’s internal environment to a shared external environment requires communication as a necessary bridge, so proactive communication and an inclusive and open atmosphere are important throughout the process. In the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, effective online learning requires the formation of a learning community in which learners engage in collaborative learning online through participation in the community (Liu, Deng Ke 2021). The PI model represents a picture of the complex process of constructing meaning reflectively and negotiating understanding collaboratively (Garrison 2017).

(3) Social presence focuses on creating a positive learning environment that promotes inquiry, questioning, and sharing (Garrison 2017: 37) and includes three elements of emotional expression, open communication, and team togetherness. (Pengyue Guo, Adira Saab, Lin Wu, Wilfried Admiraal, 2021).

Social presence is concerned firstly with the purpose of inquiry and secondly with ensuring free and open communication within the group. Only then will the basis for group cohesion be established. The social presence plays an irreplaceable role in the Community of Inquiry as a necessary condition for the cognitive and teaching presence, and if the social presence is not ensured, the whole inquiry process will not be externalized from the individual to the community.

In a Community of Inquiry, each individual's role is that of both student and teacher, both absorber and transmitter of knowledge, while all participants work together to construct the same body of knowledge. According to the basic ideas of constructivism, students' learning is essentially the process of actively and positively constructing knowledge based on their own knowledge experiences. Students' active participation and construction characterize the state of high-quality classroom learning and teaching. (Shouren Wang, 2016)

Community of Inquiry theory transcends the temporal and spatial dimensions of online and offline teaching and learning to build a theoretical framework for effective teaching and learning based on a system of three elements that have strong explanatory power for blended teaching and learning mechanisms. The Community of Inquiry theoretical framework places the focus on practical education rather than on mediating technologies such as the web. The teaching presence can directly promote the social presence and cognitive presence, and the social presence further promotes the cognitive presence. The three presence interact organically to promote the formation of a Community of Inquiry and enhance learners' second language proficiency and learning confidence (Mo, Lee 2017; Zhang 2020).

Communities of inquiry leverage the technological capabilities of a rapidly evolving digital society to create the conditions for ongoing discussions that blend a breadth of access to information with the depth of collaborative thinking and learning experiences.

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