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**Creating Connection by Design:
Supporting Adult Learners by Building Inclusive Online Academic Communities**

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Abstract

Students are struggling to build online connections in classrooms. This instructional model provides strategies for working with learners with social skill, mental health, and communication challenges to improve community.

Keywords: community, distance education, languishing, academic barriers, personal challenges

Online adult educators have learners with a variety of challenges. Effective teaching incorporates learning style adjustments and accommodates academic preferences of all students. The proposed instructional model provides strategies for teaching adults with social skill, mental health, and communication challenges in digital settings. The changing student population has heightened the need for this framework. More than 44% of autistic individuals participate in some form of post-secondary education (Cox & South, 2017), and rising numbers of college students experiencing anxiety and depression (Lipson & Eisenberg, 2018) require innovative teaching to effectively meet their needs. The recent shift to online learning has forced adult learners to adopt new forms of communication where they struggle to succeed (Grogan, 2015).

Making and maintaining connections is paramount to success. This inclusive instructional model offers strategies for building community relationships within the adult education classroom where bonding with others can create natural support systems. This design provides tools for online adult educators to adopt practices that assist all students, but particularly those facing social skill, mental health, and communication challenges. It is rooted in scholarly literature on teaching struggling learners, teaching and learning in online environments, instructor professional development, instructional technology, and disability studies.

Key elements of the model seek to increase engagement, participation, and a sense of community. The tools and strategies address the barriers identified by individuals facing impediments to success. Students may struggle to connect with others on a virtual platform. Clearly defining the goals and objectives of the course or activity prior to the implementation will inform which methods, strategies, tools, and accommodations are needed for successful virtual engagement. The overarching umbrella of strategies includes the delivery of academic instruction, open communication, and social skill repertoires (National Autism Center, 2015).

A Theoretical Foundation for a Model of Inclusive Online Communities

Community of Inquiry Theory and Social Learning Theory offer appropriate perspectives for examining course design that builds inclusive communities where all learners can succeed. Communities of Inquiry (CoI) contribute to an inclusive teaching model. A CoI focuses on

collaborative learning as a vehicle for creating online communities. CoI theory argues that deep learning occurs when learners become reflective thinkers and engaged discussion participants, behaviors present in the inclusive instructional model. The elements of CoI are social, cognitive, and teaching presence. CoI contributes to the model as it “goes beyond accessing information and focuses on the elements of an educational experience that facilitate the creation of communities of learners actively and collaboratively engaged in exploring, creating meaning, and confirming understanding” (Garrison, 2009). Inclusive instruction facilitates CoI by highlighting effective online practices that create a welcoming learning environment.

The CoI framework exemplifies constructivist learning as the process is student driven rather than instructor led; the student is “central to the learning process and the process is collaborative in nature” (Covelli, 2017, p. 142). Constructivism requires active learning where knowledge is created through interaction among learners and instructors rather than from students absorbing content delivered by instructors (Covelli, 2017). A constructivist approach to online learning that creates an effective CoI is an efficacious way to enhance adult learners’ success because inclusive communities use design principles that engage all students.

Bandura’s Social Learning Theory (SLT) (1971; 1986) draws on cognitive and behavioral elements where observing and imitating modeled behaviors, attitudes, and emotions foster learning and shape an individual's identity. It includes elements of environmental context and cognitive processes. Social Learning Theory is applicable to the development of a model for supporting adult learners in building online academic communities because the strategies presented allow learners to observe peers before acting, use peer responses as models for interaction, and then adopt the exemplar to their own participation; “new patterns of behavior can be acquired through direct experience or by observing the behavior of others” (Bandura, 1971 p. 3). The burden of individually improving social skills, adjusting to mental health changes, and using new forms of communication is lessened through supportive course design. Connecting a constructivist perspective through social learning theory builds on existing knowledge and adds new knowledge an individual gains by observing and interacting with others (Pritchard & Woollard, 2013). Both instructors and peers can expand experiences and grow.

From Theory to Practice

Areas important to inclusive course design include methods of communication, features of the Learning Management System, uses of innovative technology, and mentorship.

Engaging in Effective Communication

When working with postsecondary students, the key is engagement. The CoI framework speaks specifically to the collaboration needed between students and instructors versus being presented information to master. The CoI comprises three essential elements: social presence and connection with others, teaching presence and how to convey information, and cognitive presence when determining each student's unique learning styles (Garrison, 2009). Wang, Zhai, Shen, & Chen (2021) identify teaching presence as being paramount in designing courses to increase success. The design, facilitation, and awareness of various cognitive and social processes are recognized to promote meaningful as well as academically worthwhile outcomes.

Frequent communication is essential. Planned communication and emails promote belonging. Students gain a feeling of connection when they receive a personal message from an instructor welcoming them to the course. Sharing a clear syllabus with milestones identified can be followed by scheduled emails referencing upcoming due dates and weekly goals. Instructors can offer personal feedback on projects and plan group meetings to allow students to gain a sense of community. For adults with social skill difficulties, mental health issues, or communication challenges, providing lecture notes, assigning a peer notetaker, offering study guides for tests, and allowing longer verbal response times can highlight key information and contribute to success. Important exchanges of information in written form can be referenced later.

Instructors should be clear, concise, concrete, and logical when communicating rather than assuming students understand information. Students may have experience using organizational tools; however, in a different environment, the tools and skills used previously, especially when aiding with executive functioning, might not transfer easily to a novel setting. Students may need transition time to acclimate and determine new routines and useful tools.

While engaging with each student, deciding the best way to teach or assess competency is important to determine if learners understand the material. This can be done in person or via email. Offering students advanced negotiation of deadlines, extra time for tests, and/or separate “quiet” places for tests can be beneficial. Alternative assessment methods may include a written paper, an interview, or recorded presentation about the subject matter.

Adult learners with disabilities can feel particularly isolated when participating in online learning situations. Gurbuz, Hanley, & Riby (2018) discuss the barriers some students experience as a result of social skill deficits and social opportunities when lacking self-esteem and motivation. While supporting the social connections, careful planning is necessary to include opportunities for students to meet and work together as a small group with flexible means of participation. Some students prefer to type in a chat box rather than speak, and others may not want to have their face appear on screen. Giving adult learners multiple opportunities to participate builds confidence and comfort in social situations.

Clear, Consistent, and Concise Course Organization

Organized courses are essential to successful community building. Trust is established when students can easily navigate the course Learning Management System (LMS) and receive reliably consistent information from the instructor. The CoI framework has identified “design and organization” as a key component needed to establish teaching presence, the building block on which the other aspects of community are built in online environments (Garrison, 2009, p. 353). Wang et al. (2021) described teaching presence as essential to course “quality” and “students’ learning efficacy” (p.1). A focus on establishing teaching presence is crucial.

Trust is critical to social connection; creating trust enhances the instructor-student relationship and peer relationships within the course. Hill et al. (2009) argued social learning theory can inform course organization and build community through intentional peer-to-peer activities, prioritizing frequent communication, using technology tools, and updating courses consistently. By focusing on the establishment of clear, consistent, and concise course

organization through the lens of social theory, adult educators can more effectively build engagement and community, which enhances student success.

Leveraging the LMS's tools enhances teaching presence. Providing consistent, accurate, and updated information and communication, and using the LMS calendar for accurate assignment due dates provides critical clarity. When updates are not consistently reflected in the LMS, announcements, and email reminders, students lose confidence and trust in themselves and in the instructor, and disengage. Adult learners have tight schedules with multiple responsibilities, so they rely on advance notice of due dates and timely updates. Students transitioning from high school and students with disabilities often benefit from more structure; clear expectations and due dates lessen their sense of being overwhelmed and uninformed, so they believe they are capable of learning in this environment (Cox & South, 2017).

Utilization of Available Innovative Technology

Web 2.0 tools build communities and enhance learning. Rather than merely providing static content, they are interactive, and user generated, promoting constructivist learning and increasing motivation. Innovative technology encourages social interaction (Peterson-Ahmad, 2018; Pinto & Leite, 2020; Sügümlü & Aslan, 2022). Learners, especially those with disabilities, mental health concerns, and communication difficulties, benefit from the integration of innovative tools into course design. These options are effective for “connecting people and resources, facilitating interaction, fostering collaboration and active participation and aiding opportunities for critical thinking” (Peterson-Ahmad, 2018, p. 3). Students can access and review materials often, providing additional assistance with difficult concepts.

Struggling students lack a sense of belonging; a welcoming CoI enables them to engage with peers through collaboration that increases comprehension (Garrison, 2009). Social presence, open communication, group cohesion, and emotional expressions are visible on platforms for document sharing that enable collaborative resource sharing, writing, and editing. Mapping tools allow learners to engage with content and learn from each other, reflecting teaching presence that facilitates discourse, delivers the curriculum, and guides constructive exchange. Online question/answer formats and polls require learners to collectively engage with content and exemplify cognitive presence like exploration, integration of ideas, and information exchange (Garrison, 2009). CoIs can be incorporated in online course design and delivery that supports all learners, particularly those with social skill, mental health, and communication challenges.

Learning is generated when students observe and imitate the behaviors, attitudes, and emotions of others (Bandura, 1971; Bandura & Walters, 1977). Technology tools provide peer models students see before responding. Interactive online collaborative presentations spark interest and motivation. Responding to peers on social media provides a unique opportunity for some disabled learners due to its brevity. Websites with visual representations and animations increase memory retention (Deaton, 2015). This technology applies SLT to online learning.

Mentorship & Role Models

Ahn, Hu, & Vega (2020) discussed the importance of role models in learning environments and social interactions. Social learning highlights role modeling in four areas: (a)

attention, or attending to the role model and the behavior exhibited; (b) retention, when remembering how to apply the behavior in future interactions and environments; (c) motor production, or being able to model or imitate the behavior; and (d) motivation and reinforcement to choose to observe and apply the skills and behaviors exhibited by another individual or group (Bandura, 1971; 1986). Role models can serve a valuable purpose when demonstrating the behavior or initiating processes that other students can reference for their own practice.

Lubin & Brooks (2021) identified potential barriers for adult learners with social skill, mental health, or communication challenges. These adult learners may have receptive difficulties such as processing verbal exchanges, misunderstanding sarcasm, idioms and jokes, taking a literal interpretation of words, and misunderstanding gestures and body language. The expressive difficulties of adults with social skill deficits and communication barriers may include problems initiating communication. Many students have difficulty staying on topic, taking turns, and following conversational nuances. Some may be slower to organize thoughts and speak, and tone and volume may be unusual. Idiosyncratic use of words and phrases may occur. A mentor would be a valuable tool to process the questions of a learner struggling with these issues.

According to Zhang & Lin (2021), the CoI framework has been successful in fostering interrelationships of collaborative thinking and learning in an online setting. Mentoring captures the learner's cognitive, motivational, and behavioral characteristics. Mentors can facilitate students' learning and connections with instructors and peers. Mentors act as a community for students to collaborate with and identify specific behaviors and actions that they can apply to their own learning and daily lives.

Conclusion

When designing courses, adult educators should rely on the principles of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) which focus on learner-centered activities accessible to all students through effective collaboration. Educators “need to change their ways of thinking... to reimagine the ways learning occurs and is assessed in the online classroom” (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018, p. 20). By changing one's epistemological perspective, an instructor can view design as a way to facilitate learning for all learners rather than stay with the traditional outlook of supporting learners with disabilities separately through individual accommodations. This shift requires that instructors recognize it is not the struggling learners that are the problem, but rather rigid instructional methods that support the needs of some students rather than all learners that are the issue (Rogers-Shaw et al., 2018). By effectively promoting social learning in CoIs, as the model proposes, adult educators can address the needs of all students in innovative ways.

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