Achieving the Benefits of Blended Learning within a Fully Online Learning Environment: A Focus on Synchronous Communication

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Abstract: This paper builds upon and extends Garrison and Kanuka’s (2004) discussion of blended learning and associated best practices and considers the possibility that the synchronous and asynchronous communication aspects of the blended learning environment can be achieved within a totally online environment. In the blended learning definition they present, the synchronous communication portion of the blended learning environment is equated with face-to-face class learning experiences. However, technological advances through innovative software programs have recently allowed for effective and powerful synchronous voice communication amongst a community of learners who may be dispersed across the country and beyond. Some best practices approaches for synchronous voice communication sessions within a higher education are explored to demonstrate how the varied communication aspects of the blended learning environment can be best achieved within a totally online environment, using a multi-faceted instructional approach.

Introduction

Garrison and Kanuka (2004) provide a convincing argument for the transformative learning potential within our higher education institutions that can be realized through a blended learning approach to instruction. They define blended learning as “the thoughtful integration of classroom face-to-face learning experiences with online learning experiences” and suggest “there is considerable intuitive appeal to the concept of integrating the strengths of synchronous (face-to-face) and asynchronous (text-based Internet) learning activities” (p. 96). Graham (in press) in his analysis of current and future trends of blended learning also points toward increased excellence in learning as he suggests that a compelling reason for its use is that it has the potential for increased pedagogical richness within higher education institutions. “Blended learning approaches increase the level of active learning strategies, peer-to-peer learning strategies, and learner centered strategies used” (p.7).

While their arguments for the significance of blended learning in increasing teaching excellence is convincing, there are many learners within higher education who do not go to a
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post-secondary campus to obtain their certificates, diplomas and degrees. In particular “adult learners are often non-traditional in their approach to pursuing graduate professional education degrees …[they] choose to reside in their communities and continue to earn a salary at the workplace while completing a graduate degree through online education” (Willment, et. al., 2004, p. 1). For workplace education, it was reported that 20% of training in “world class organizations” is being delivered online with a prediction of $11.4 billion to be spent on e-learning in the US in 2003 (Gill, 2003). Higher education has experienced similar changes (Guardian Unlimited, 2004).

Both of the authors instruct in a program where it is possible to earn a Masters in Education Degree without ever stepping onto campus. As a result, we wonder whether students who learn within a totally online environment can ever hope to experience the best of the ideal learning experiences as presented by Garrison and Kanuka (2004) since they are missing part of the blended learning equation, specifically the classroom face-to-face learning environment.

In this paper, we narrow our focus to explore the significance of the synchronous and asynchronous communication aspects of Garrison and Kanuka’s (2004) model of blended learning. Because blended learning, as defined above, is often associated with two or more different kinds of learning (i.e. face-to-face and online instruction), we use the term “multi-faceted online learning” to describe the use of two kinds of online instruction. While we acknowledge that we cannot exactly replicate the ideals of the face-to-face interaction within their model, we do believe that the multi-faceted online learning approach we recommend does help to enrich the quality of interaction within the learning community. Specifically, focusing the effective use of new technologies, through innovative software programs, allow for synchronous voice communication within an online learning environment that used to be limited
to asynchronous communication. This new innovation opens the door for the benefits of the face-to-face interaction even though students and the instructor never physically meet. -on synchronous communication. However, technological advances through innovative software programs (i.e. “Elluminate” and “Centra”) have Specifically, learners can meet in real-time, via their computer screens, a microphone and speaker connections and fully participate in an interactive class. As a class, they can view/listen to presentations, converse in large and small groups, connect to Internet sites and prepare notes that can be saved and downloaded to their computers. In addition, these synchronous classes are recorded for later reference and for the students who are unable to attend that specific “class”. In summary, although the face-to-face component is missing within a fully online environment, we believe that these technological advances provide us tools to achieve the multi-faceted communication processes that are usually only associated with the blended learning environment as proposed by Garrison and Kanuka (2004). Within this paper, we begin by articulating our philosophical orientation to instruction, utilizing the communities of inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). Then, we demonstrate how the ideals of the community of inquiry approach have been animated within fully online learning environment that utilizes software to facilitate the synchronous and asynchronous communication.

Our Philosophical Orientation To Learning Within Higher Education

Garrison, et al. (2000) posit that “a worthwhile educational experience is embedded within a Community of Inquiry that is composed of teachers and students … learning occurs within the Community through the interaction of three core elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence” (p. 88), as outlined in Fig. 1.
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Community is central driving force for the three elements outlined in the model above and it “provides the stabilizing, cohesive influence that balances the open communication and limitless access to information. Communities also provide the conditions for free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). This sense of community can be achieved through the powerful combining of each of the aspects within this community of inquiry model, which are each described below.

Cognitive presence is defined as “the extent to which the participants are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000, p. 89). This resonates with a central assumption we hold as facilitators of learning within our courses, whether delivered face-to-face or online. Core to our philosophy is a learner-centered approach, which “focuses primarily on the learner and the learning process and secondarily on those who help the learner learn” (Mackeracher, 1996, p. 2). In a learner-centered approach, the process of learning is central and our role as a teaching presence is a responsive activity, adapting to the learners’ activities and the connections they are making as they acquire “knowledge or skills they need for themselves, their work or the world around them, or to solve problems” (Mackeracher, 1996, p. 3). We believe that knowledge is not handed down from the instructor, but rather constructed in the context of the student engagement with the course content. Lapadat (2002) argues that the social constructivist view of learning recognizes learning as “interactive, discursive, and situated” and that online courses have the potential “to foster pedagogies and learning environments designed according to constructivist principles.”

As indicated in the definition of the cognitive presence, the central learning process utilized is sustained communication or the dialectical process, specifically “a dialectical process involves an internal or external discussion which explores alternative viewpoints in order to
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develop an integrated viewpoint synthesized from the best aspects of all alternatives (Mackeracher, 1996, p. 6). In our instruction, we focus on the process of dialogue, rather than discussion, as the central vehicle for sustained communication. This focus allows for a more accurate reflection of the community of inquiry we attempt to build within our courses. The word “dialogue” comes from the Greek dialogos. Dia means through. Logos means the words, or more broadly the meaning. In dialogue, a group accesses a larger pool of common meaning, which cannot be accessed individually. In essence we are not trying to win in a dialogue. In dialogue the community of inquiry explores complex difficult issues from many points of view. (Senge, 1990, p. 240 – 245)

In order for rich and sustained communication to occur through dialogue, a strong social presence must be present within the community. Specifically, “participants [are able to] project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’ ” (Garrison, et al., 2000, p. 89). Rossman (2000) likens this to the creation and maintenance of a safe psychological climate. In his review of distance education learning principles for adult learners he states that “adults must feel secure and safe within any learning situation … in distance learning settings, the facilitator must work diligently to assure that learner responses are valued” (p. 7). In addition, to the creation and maintenance of this safe psychological climate in cultivating dialogue around the learning experiences within a course, we also feel that we must create overt opportunities for learners to share their personal stories and to also socialize with each other. We feel that creating and sustaining a strong social presence is important regardless of the instruction medium, but we believe that the intentional cultivation of this safe social presence is particularly critical within the online learning environment. Rovai and Jordan (2004) in exploring the importance of creating a sense of
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community, particularly within the online environment, suggest that one of the most common challenges for these students is the feeling of isolation; in essence the opposite of a strong social presence. “Student who feel they do no fit in and have low sense of community tend to feel isolated and are at-risk of becoming dropouts” (p. 3).

The final element of the community of inquiry model is the teaching presence, which “manages the environment and focuses and facilitates the learning experiences” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 98). The management of the environment is a pivotal responsibility of the instructor and it includes “the selection, organization and primary presentation of course content, as well as the design and development of learning activities and assessment” (Garrison, et al., 2000, p. 90). While this is a critical component, within the face-to-face environment, it is even more central within the online environment because the instructor is not presently physically to serve as an immediate and responsive intermediary between the content and the students. Instructors within a fully online environment (Baynton et al., 2003) have noted the importance of increasing their time commitment prior to launching a course, because “course development is set once it is in the students hands; online teaching requires considerable upfront planning and organization” (p. 42). The second component of the teaching presence, facilitating learning experiences, is something that we share with learners within our classes. In higher education, especially at the graduate level, is it important to share this responsibility with the learners. Finally, the establishment of a dynamic and interactive teaching presence is conduit to achieve the social and cognitive presence within a community of inquiry

In summary then, a community of inquiry is an important framework for our philosophical orientation to facilitating learning within higher education. By establishing a strong sense of community amongst the learners, dialogue is fostered so that learners can move toward a higher
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level of thinking and in essence construct knowledge that is meaningful for each of them.

Can this ideal framework be achieved within a fully online learning environment?

Garrison & Kanuka (2004) suggest, within the blended learning environment, it is the combination of the reflective and indepth dialogue that occurs within asynchronous communication and the quick and interactive dialogue that occurs within synchronous communication that pushes our higher education learning toward a critical inquiry approach. The following discussion primarily highlights our use of synchronous voice communication, via technology, to demonstrate how we animate the ideals of a community of inquiry framework within a multi-faceted online learning environment. In addition, while we realize the importance asynchronous communication in order to achieve a community inquiry, it will not be a major focus of the following discussion.

The Effective Use of Online Synchronous Classes

The following discussion highlights the chronological use of three synchronous communication classes typically spread throughout a thirteen-week graduate level course. These courses, housed within the Faculty of Education, are designed to blend both synchronous and asynchronous communication components with the majority of the content presented and the dialogue occurring within an asynchronous format. Each of these synchronous events is presented in chronological order with a brief description followed by an analysis of each event through the perspective of the “three presences” associated with the community of inquiry framework.

Synchronous Class One: Setting the Stage

Description

Setting the stage is important in any class that an instructor launches regardless of the medium of
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delivery. For example, in a face-to-face class, the goals for the first class are usually to set the climate, to begin supportive dialogue and to launch the content of the course. The synchronous class, scheduled during the first week of the term, has equivalent goals as demonstrated by the agenda that is prepared and sent out to the students in advance of event (see Figure 2). Once members gather for the synchronous class, the technical support person and the instructor ensure that each member of the learning community is comfortable with the technology; specifically by checking their computer connections, ensuring their microphones work and their volume level is appropriate and finally determining if they are also able to send text messages within the message board.

Once the technical issues have been taken care of, the instructor and students are able to move forward in the class agenda by introducing themselves to the learning community. An overt process to establish a learning community follows this. The members of the class reflect upon the process of learning; articulating past positive learning processes that they would like to carry forward into this course and also outlining negative learning processes that they would like to avoid. Past community norms have included: valuing and supporting the full range and variety of ideas and learning styles within the group, monitoring the breadth and depth of postings within the discussion board and continuously assessing how the group is doing to ensure that people are feeling satisfied about the process and content.

Once community norms are established, the instructor begins to focus on the content of the course through the combination of a mini-lecture and a question and answer process regarding some initial course concepts. This synchronous dialogue is then continued within the asynchronous communication format.
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The final agenda item for the first synchronous class is: the review of the course outline and exploration of the course website where most of the course activity will occur. It is important the instructor talk through the outline and the course website so the students can hear “the person” behind the course.

Linkages to Community of Inquiry Model

As illustrated in table 1, setting the stage really supports all three “presences” of the Community of Inquiry model. Since this synchronous class occurs at the beginning of a course, a strong teaching presence plays the central role. Specifically, by setting a clear agenda, providing technical supports, establishing community norms, and reviewing the course outline and the course shell, the instructor is establishing a clear and organized framework for the learning community.

The social presence is also focused upon in this initial synchronous class through introductions and the establishment of group norms. The development of group norms allows the community to focus on how they like to learn so that the requisite safe learning environment required for a strong cognitive presence is established. Finally, the cognitive presence is briefly established through the use of a mini lecture and short large group dialogue around some specific content component.

We believe that the achievement of these three components within the Community of Inquiry model can be reached more rapidly by incorporating this synchronous class within this early portion of a course and suggest that it would take several weeks of asynchronous communication, as the only medium of communication, to establish this same level of community.

Synchronous Class Two: A Focus on Dialogue
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For approximately six weeks between synchronous class one and two, the course is conducted utilizing asynchronous dialogue. It has been widely accepted that asynchronous dialogue fosters enhanced reflection and a sustained engagement with the course content. “The use of writing [in asynchronous dialogue] may be crucial when the objective is to facilitate thinking about complex issues and deep, meaningful learning” (Garrison et. al., 2000, p. 90-91). Each student is encouraged to post their thoughts and ideas and if they are absent from the discussion board, the instructor is able to follow-up with them individually to support their participation.

Description:

As mentioned previously, during the central portion of the course, another synchronous class is scheduled (see figure 3). This well positioned meeting allows for the “energy and enthusiasm that are spontaneous and contagious” associated with face-to-face discussion. (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 99). It also helps us to sustain the supportive community we have been building throughout our asynchronous communication. The format for this synchronous class is usually designed and presented by a team of student presenters because during the central portion of a typical graduate course, they are charged with presenting and designing a process for dialogue during their week of assigned course material. Typically the student presenters utilize the asynchronous communication format as the platform for their presentation and discussion. However, those who are scheduled to present during the week in which there is a synchronous communication session, are encouraged to utilize this medium for their presentation and dialogue.

A common design feature during this mid term synchronous class is the use of small group dialogue. The recent technological advancement (within the synchronous communication
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software) of providing breakout rooms and white boards has allowed instructors and students to closely replicate the small group format frequently used within face-to-face classrooms. Regardless of the context, a small group dialogue, as opposed to a large group dialogue, is often more sustained and indepth and allows for more active participation from each member of the learning community.

While the majority of this mid-way synchronous class is student designed and led, it is useful to allocate approximately 15 minutes for the class to review the community norms that were established during the first synchronous class of the course. Students have a chance to affirm what has been working well for their learning journey thus far and to suggest areas for improvement.

Finally, the use of synchronous classes affords the community a change from a text-based approach to learning, tapping into other learning styles, such as audio visual and spatial styles. For example, a group of student presenters, who were utilizing a synchronous class for their presentation, chose to have small groups use the white board and the “drawing tools” to create graffiti art to communicate some of their responses to the content of the presentation.

Linkages to Community of Inquiry Model

At this stage of the course, the strong teaching presence that was so apparent initially now begins to fade into the background as suggested by the community of inquiry model. However, the teacher presence is felt behind the scenes through student presenter coaching and in the instructor led dialogue that reviews the group norms that were established in the first synchronous class.

The social presence and cognitive presence becomes the focus of this mid-course synchronous class. Specifically, the cognitive presence that has been sustained throughout the student presentations and asynchronous dialogues continues within the synchronous class.
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presentations and small group dialogues that are led and facilitated by a team of student presenters. In addition, a variety of learning styles are utilized within these synchronous classes through the use of a variety of engaging activities.

Finally, the social presence is engaged through the use of small group dialogue, allowing for increased interaction and personal connections. As well, the group norms that were established during the first synchronous class are re-visited so that students can assess their performance in terms of sustaining a safe and supportive learning community.

Synchronous Class Three: Course Closure

The final synchronous class occurs sometime during the final two weeks of a course. As illustrated by figure 4, the focus for this session is to provide a forum for feedback on final papers/projects. Once this feedback has been provided and key learnings acknowledged; this final synchronous class moves into course closure. A large group dialogue, facilitated by the instructor, focuses on the achievement of the prescribed needs as identified by the course outcomes and the felt needs (Brookfield, 1986, p. 22) that each of the students had as they entered into the course. Providing a facilitative process for concluding reflections about course content, the community of learners, key concepts learned and ongoing learning journeys is an important part of every course and the opportunity to do this within a synchronous environment allows the instructor and the students to conclude the course together.

Linkages to Community of Inquiry Model

Finally, as the course comes to the end in this final synchronous class, all three “presences” are maintained within varying emphasis. The cognitive presence is the central focus of this session as students provide leadership in providing each other supportive feedback on each other’s final projects within a mini-conference format. According to Palloff and Pratt
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(2003), including collaborative activity is probably the best way to tap into all learning styles present in the group. In addition, collaborative activity promotes the development of critical thinking skills, co-creation of knowledge and meaning and reflection and presents the possibility of transformational learning (p. 36-37). The social presence underlies this final session as students take risks in providing each other with constructive feedback on each other’s projects. In addition, since the final fifteen minutes of the course is devoted to a formal course closure, students are able to say farewell to their learning community, an important ritual that acknowledges that social value of acknowledging endings.

As mentioned previously, by the middle of the course, the teaching presence plays a decreasingly overt role within the community inquiry. However, it is still felt in this final session, as the instructor intentionally facilitates the large group dialogue that focuses on key learnings and the process of saying goodbye. By doing so, the instructor formally acknowledges the high value that they have placed on being part of such a rich learning community.

**General Tips for Synchronous Communication: Concluding Comments**

One of the advantages of learning online is that students have a tremendous amount of flexibility regarding their chosen times to attend “class”. Many students who are geographically close to campus still choose to take courses utilizing a fully online format because they do not have the time to commit to physically attending class once a week. However, when synchronous communication sessions are incorporated into an online environment, to achieve the benefits of varied communication processes, the advantage of total flexibility has been lost. Therefore, it is critical that students see these sessions as providing them with an enhanced learning environment. The following tips for synchronous communication will help instructors utilize these sessions to work toward an excellent multi-faceted online learning environment.
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- Provide a focused agenda and distribute to the learning community at least one day in advance of the session.
- Each session should only be two hours in length at the most. Never go over time!
- Only schedule three to four synchronous classes within a thirteen course.
- Ensure that technical support is present within each synchronous class.
- Design a variety of interactive and engaging learning activities and presentations within each synchronous class.

Through the effective use of both asynchronous and synchronous communication, we believe that our students who are learning within a totally online environment can also experience the multi-faceted communication processes that are central to a community of inquiry as demonstrated through the cognitive, social and teaching presences (Garrison and Kanuka, 2004). As they indicate, the asynchronous aspects of a course allow for reflective and thoughtful discourse and the synchronous aspects encourage students to think “on their feet” and to be assertive in contributing to the conservation. While they are linking synchronous communication with face-to-face interaction, the preceding examples of utilizing voice-activated online synchronous communication demonstrate that the varied communication ideals they speak of can be effectively transferred to a multi-faceted online classroom.
References


Guardian Unlimited. (2004). *The online revolution, mark II*. Retrieved Apr. 21, 2005, from [http://education.guardian.co.uk/elearning/story/0,10577,1190470,00.html](http://education.guardian.co.uk/elearning/story/0,10577,1190470,00.html)


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Figure 1: *Community of Inquiry Model* (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p.88).
### Setting the Stage: Agenda

- **Checking In:** Checking our connections, microphones, direct messaging and finding out who’s here.
- **Introducing Ourselves**
- **Establishing a Learning Community:** Building Community Norms
- **Reviewing the Course Outline**
- **Qualities of an Organization:** Large Group Dialogue
- **Questions and Checking Out**

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### Welcome to Week 8 on Organizational Change

*This week’s presenters are student 1, student 2 and student 3. We look forward to leading this session this evening.*

### This Evening’s Agenda

- Guided Presentation
- Small Group Dialogue
- Reconvening to Large Group
- Reviewing Our Community Norms
- Questions and Checking Out

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### Figure 2: Setting the Stage Agenda

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### Figure 3: Focus on Dialogue Agenda

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### Mini-Conference and Course Closure Agenda

#### a) Small Group Agenda - Please use the following process to share your final projects:

- Talk about your final projects and if people in your small group have begun to review the projects please begin to provide specific feedback: strengths and suggestions for improvement.
- Discuss five central concepts that have emerged as a result of reviewing each other’s projects and bring these themes back to the large group discussion.
- Please assign a facilitator, reporter and timekeeper.
- We will reconvene within the large group in 45 minutes.

#### b) Bringing Our Course to Closure: Large Group Dialogue

- Comment on the connections between your learning experiences within this course and the course outcomes.
- A “star” (what went well) and a “wish” (what should I consider for next time).

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### Figure 4: Closure Agenda
Table 1.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Presence</th>
<th>Synchronous Classes (Time)</th>
<th>Critical Components</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Teaching Presence</td>
<td>Setting the Stage (Beginning)</td>
<td>• Agenda</td>
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<td>• Technical supports</td>
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<td>Focus on Dialogue (Mid term)</td>
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<td>• Review the community norm</td>
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<td>Closure (End)</td>
<td>• large group dialogue</td>
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<td>Social Presence</td>
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<td>• Introduction</td>
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<td>• Establish a community norm</td>
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<td>Focus on Dialogue (Mid term)</td>
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<td>Cognitive Presence</td>
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