

Developing a Sustainable Community of Inquiry: Reflections and Lessons Learned

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Abstract

While many articles have reported on ‘success stories’ of projects, innovations or programmes, it is much less common to read about specific circumstances and demands involving teachers which shed light on their responses in relation to the sustainability of innovations. This article is a reflection on one such case. It was based on an initiative on blended learning using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework introduced in one semester of a course on a postgraduate programme in Malaysia. Despite the benefits observed in students’ interaction and engagement, the initiative was discontinued in the following semesters. This article attempts to document and share some lessons derived from that experience of introducing the short-lived CoI. It first describes the context of the initiative which involved two language educators, one from Malaysia and the other from the US. It then presents some findings of the initiative based on three key elements of CoI, indicating how students had benefitted from their online interaction in the CoI. Finally, the article discusses lessons learned for a CoI to be sustainable in a course. It is argued that sustainability requires ecological thinking and action, and that learning from ‘failure’ can be as valuable as learning from the past experience of success.

Keywords: Sustainability, sustainable innovation, failure, community of inquiry, ecological perspective

Introduction

‘Sustainability’ is becoming an increasingly popular term in language education. A key question often raised in the literature is what makes an innovation, a practice or a programme sustainable. While successful innovative programmes are to be celebrated, studied, or even replicated, it is no less significant, we argue, to pay attention to those

programmes that appear to be not so successful or conventionally regarded as ‘failed’. There can be invaluable lessons to be learned, lessons which might be missed if everything went exactly as planned or if they are left relatively unexplored (i.e., learned only superficially). The inevitability of failure in this complex, changing world is to be recognized, and learning well from failure contributes to greater success (cf. Edmondson, 2011; Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019).

Through a reflective lens, this article considers how and why one such innovation in the form of an initiative of implementing the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theoretical framework (Garrison, 2017) in one semester of 14 weeks of a course was not sustainable. Despite apparent success with positive feedback from the students who underwent the course, the CoI was not reintroduced in the following semesters. The course was part of an MA programme in language studies offered at a university in Malaysia. In this article, we attempt to document and share some lessons derived from that experience of introducing the CoI by first describing the initiative, which was a collaboration between a language educator from the university in Malaysia and a language educator from a university in the US. This is followed by a review of some findings based on the CoI, which suggest how the students had benefitted from their engagement in the CoI. As will be pointed out later, while the CoI framework provides insights and ways for studying learning, it is complicated at first glance, comprising three elements with their respective categories and indicators. Finally, we discuss some lessons learned for a CoI to be sustainable in a course and conclude by arguing that sustainability requires ecological thinking and action.

Context of Reflection: An Initiative of Blended Learning Based on the Community of Inquiry Framework

Reflection or reflective thinking is not just mere thought; as Dewey (1933, p. 14) pointed out, it involves “willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance”. Reflective inquiry encourages one to confront the complexity of the phenomenon of one’s world with an attitude of open-mindedness. That is, it is about being open to reconsideration and reinterpretation based on evidence and ideas rather than the views one already holds (Loughran, 2021). In what follows, we offer a reflective account of a collaborative initiative between two educators as noted above.

The initiative to introduce a blended learning environment took place in a course as part of an MA programme at a university in Malaysia. This course had been conducted face-to-face for previous semesters and the online resources provided were in the form of reading materials and online submission of tasks and assignments. The idea of incorporating blended learning came about when a professor from the US was having a sabbatical at the aforementioned university in Malaysia. She has, for many years, been engaged with the literature on CoI and in implementing CoI in the classroom.

There were a total of 26 postgraduate students taking the course that semester. They were from Algeria, Bangladesh, China and Malaysia. In this course, they formed four groups of 6-7 students. This helped to make asynchronous discussions manageable and to prevent the students from being or feeling overwhelmed by otherwise having to respond to the posts of all the other students. They all utilized asynchronous discussion boards from Week 3 till Week 11 when completing the required course work. They were

asked to post two discussion entries per week throughout the semester based on each week of reading material. With face-to-face trainings and video recordings with examples, the students were also asked to self-code their discussion entries based on the four phases of Cognitive Presence: Trigger, Explorer, Integrator and Applicator (Pawan et al., 2003). Specifically, the students were given the following notes as a guide:

1. Trigger (Phase 1): At times, you may want to ask questions or make a point that takes the discussion to another direction. This is fine and good for stimulating further discussion. Please label your post as ‘trigger’ if you are posting for this purpose.
2. Explorer (Phase 2): The role of the ‘explorer’ is to ‘explore’ ideas on the discussion topic. These ideas could include, for example, brainstorming ideas, suggestions for consideration, and personal experiences you have had related to the topic. You can draw on all sorts of resources that shed light on the topic (previous readings, other courses, etc.). The ultimate goal of the explorer is to fully investigate the possibilities of the topic in discussion.
3. Integrator (Phase 3): The integrator’s role is to try to ‘integrate’ the ideas that have been presented in the discussion. The integration may engage in developing ideas that have been presented, finding common ground among diverse ideas mentioned in the discussion, or synthesizing important elements of the discussion. The ultimate goal of the integrator is to draw conclusions from ideas presented earlier by the other participants.
4. Applicator (Phase 4): At the end of each discussion, it is important to figure out how our ideas can be practically applied in real life, for example, in our teaching. The applicator will take our integrated ideas and show how they could be applied to a specific (even hypothetical) situation. This ‘application’ of our conclusions can help us see clearly the relevance of our ‘theoretical discussions’ to our specific situation. (Pawan et al., 2003, p. 137)

How Students Benefitted from the CoI: A Review of Some Findings of Student Engagement

In this section, we briefly review some findings based on the CoI on student engagement in the course, as reported in Smidt et al. (2021). Before that, a brief background on the CoI might be required. The CoI model, designed by Garrison et al. (2000), assumes that learning and engagement occur through the interaction of three essential presences—teaching, social and cognitive. When these three presences overlap, deep and meaningful educational experiences are provided for students. A CoI emerges as students collaboratively construct meaning within the context of a shared academic environment, and these three presences become essential when pursuing the goal of establishing an effective online community (Fiock, 2020). This model “sustained critical thinking, discourse, and higher-order knowledge acquisition and application” (Garrison, 2017, p. 50).

Cognitive presence is the extent to which participants construct meaning through sustained communication. Garrison et al. (2001) created the Practical Inquiry Model that consists of four phases: (1) a triggering event, where an issue is identified for further inquiry; (2) exploration, where individuals can explore the issue; (3) integration, where

learners form meaning from ideas discovered in the exploration phase; and (4) resolution/application, where students apply the knowledge learned from the previous phases into real-world applications. This was also discussed earlier where the students in the course were asked to self-code their discussion entries using the four phases of cognitive presence: Trigger, Explorer, Integrator and Applicator.

Social presence is the ability of participants to project personal characteristics into the community, presenting themselves to other participants as ‘real people’ and real classmates, despite existing on the virtual sphere. Garrison (2017) further develops social presence into three elements: affective communication, open communication and cohesive responses. According to Garrison (2017), affective communication consists of “expression of respect and welcome” (p. 45) while open communication “is built through a process of recognizing, complimenting, and responding to the questions and contributions of others” (p. 46). Finally, cohesive responses occur by “addressing others by name [and] using inclusive pronouns such as ‘we’ and ‘our’” (p. 46).

Teaching presence is defined as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence, categorized into design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction (Garrison, 2017), can be implemented by both teachers and students. In so doing, teaching presence can assist the actualization of cognitive presence in learners; it can increase learners’ awareness of their own contributions, as well as the contributions of others with regard to the learning process (Garrison & Akyol, 2013).

Based on our previous study (Smidt et al., 2021), the importance of teaching presence was evident in asynchronous discussion activities. Whereas teaching presence was essential to providing initial trigger questions to help students to get started with the activity, we noticed that further teaching presence in the face-to-face part of the blended course helped to facilitate the exchange and exploration of ideas among different groups. For example, exemplary posts from other groups were discovered and referred to, which led to co-construction of knowledge across members of all groups.

We also noticed that sharing feelings was a common theme among the students (Smidt et al., 2021). Perhaps unsurprisingly, sharing feelings helped participants to build social presence and stronger connections. The students were observed to share feelings which related to language and learning struggles, for example, when they expressed their difficulty in understanding the assigned reading (see also Majeski et al., 2018). When participants shared their struggles and opened themselves up to being vulnerable, they rallied around each other by sharing their comprehension of the text, thereby supporting their own learning and co-construction of knowledge. As a result, social presence was further promoted. It is possible that the students tended to open themselves more in a blended context because they got to know each other in the face-to-face part of the course and felt safer sharing their struggles. As Gerdes (2010) suggested, high levels of social presence promote trust that is critical for effective collaborative learning.

Our study also confirmed previous research on the four phases of cognitive presence and showed that explorer was implemented most, followed by integrator, trigger and applicator (e.g., Guo et al., 2021). It is also interesting to note that the four phases of cognitive presence did not occur in order. Rather, they were intertwined, and the students jumped freely among the different phases. Finally, we found that beyond instructor-created triggers, student-created triggers also yielded great student interactions. All three

presences were found to work in tandem: student engagement was promoted through the varied roles demonstrating how cognitive, teaching and social presences were undertaken by the students in their co-constructed CoI.

Reflections and Some Lessons for Sustainability of Innovations

Whether based on the CoI analysis or student feedback after the course, the introduction of blended learning based on CoI in this specific postgraduate course can be considered a success. Why then was this blended learning not continuing in the following semesters? Here we gather reflections from both the language educators, discuss how and why this was so, and consider some lessons learned which may be helpful to keep in mind, especially in those teaching or educational contexts with a focus on sustainable innovations.

To begin with, the initiative was an accidental collaborative effort between the two educators from Malaysia and the US. We used the word ‘accidental’ because the Malaysian educator was approached by the management of the Faculty of Languages and Linguistics at the university to welcome ‘a visiting professor’ from the US into a course he was teaching. He, therefore, welcomed the US professor as he would any other visiting guests to the university. He had little knowledge about what the US educator planned to do with his course, except for the fact that she was into blended learning, which he favourably considered for his course as a means of increasing potential student learning and engagement.

Not only was he unclear about the purpose of the US professor’s visit; he was also unaware of CoI. The US educator came on her sabbatical, with a research project to complete, and this project would require collaboration with the Malaysian counterpart and data to be collected in collaboration with the Malaysian educator. All this was unknown to the Malaysian educator before the postgraduate course commenced.

It was about one-two weeks before the course started that the Malaysian educator knew that he was going to implement blended learning based on “something called Community of Inquiry” or CoI. He was not prepared for that and felt comforted and confident only after being reassured by the US educator that he would just teach his course as usual, with some readjustments to the usual tasks to take into consideration teaching, social, and cognitive presences of CoI. The US educator would take care of the implementation of CoI and the analysis of various roles and presences of CoI on a weekly basis. What became clear towards the end of the course is that he appreciated how the US educator was sharing with his students the analysis of his students’ interaction in the CoI; he was particularly pleased to learn about how actively engaged the students were with the course materials and with each other’s online posts.

Despite all these encouraging observations, the CoI was not implemented in subsequent semesters. It may be argued that the Malaysian educator had failed to sustain the initiative implemented in the course he was teaching after the US educator completed her sabbatical and left for her university (which was right after the semester she had stayed at the Malaysian university). Some lessons can be drawn from his experience:

1. Engagement of the instructor: The Malaysian educator had perceived his role as merely welcoming the US educator into his classroom; It was the US educator who implemented the CoI. While he warmly welcomed the opportunity of innovating his existing course which had been conducted face-to-face for many semesters and now with the presence of the US educator, enriching it with a CoI, he was not directly involved in analyzing the students' interaction and identifying the different participant roles in the CoI. Had he been engaged with the co-implementation of the CoI, he would have benefitted from the opportunity of learning directly from the expert (the US educator) and developed the confidence and expertise to implement a similar CoI in subsequent semesters.
2. The need to develop a good understanding of any innovation, including the key concepts associated with it: in order to implement a CoI in a blended or online context, one would need to be able to identify and assess the three presences of teaching, social and cognitive in the CoI. In addition, one would need to be familiar with the features, characteristics or categories such as the four phases of cognitive presence: Trigger, Explorer, Integrator and Applicator. All these concepts are admittedly complicated at least at first glance. As suggested in recent research, ease of use of a tool or a platform is an important factor that contributes to the success or failure in innovative pedagogy (e.g., Tang et al., 2022). With little engagement in implementing the CoI and analyzing student interaction based on the CoI, the Malaysian educator found it most challenging, if not impossible, to introduce again a CoI in the following semester all on his own based on key aspects of CoI including the three presences and the four phases of cognitive presence.
3. The potential value of collaborative implementation or group support: It should be clear by now that the CoI was only introduced in one course which was taught by the Malaysian educator in one semester; other courses on the same postgraduate programme or other programmes run by the Faculty did not implement the CoI. That is, there was no other instructor from the same Faculty involved in introducing the CoI together with the Malaysian educator. Turning to insights from other teaching contexts, we can learn from Vedder-Weiss et al. (2018), for example, who considered the possibility of teachers' collaborative learning through exploring an instructional failure. The educators in the study engaged in an analysis and collaborative critique of a recorded ninth-grade geometry lesson presented by their colleague, with their colleague present for the criticisms and feedback. This experience provided an opportunity for the team to learn from their colleague's failure, while simultaneously allowing the team an opportunity to hone their adaptive expertise. It revised the colleague's thinking and teaching, and this failure that was shared with the team proved productive for their own learning. Danneels and Vestal (2020) also emphasize the need for organizational members to make explicit efforts to learn from failure and do so in a climate where the involved individuals feel safe to talk about difficult issues, as well as collectively and deliberately reflecting on prior experiences. Linking this to our discussion of the CoI continuation, would the Malaysian educator have felt more confident to implement CoI again if there had been a supportive team or group to discuss issues with and address challenges together?

All this essentially brings us back to the central issue raised in this article: on sustainable innovation. Further lessons and insights can be drawn from previous research

about programme sustainability, which often investigates the question: What factors help to increase the likelihood of sustainability? The answer is clearly worth pursuing when one is planning a programme one hopes will have longevity and impact. Scheirer (2005, p. 320) suggested the importance of five factors for programme sustainability: (1) a programme is modifiable over time; (2) a ‘champion’ of the programme is present; (3) a programme ‘fits’ with the mission and procedures of its organization; (4) benefits to staff members and/or clients (i.e., students) are readily perceived; and (5) stakeholders in other organizations provide support. It has been recommended that all stakeholders be engaged with the planning, action steps, as well as follow-through (Boyle et al., 2021), and if they and key staff members perceive benefits to themselves or their clients, the programme is therefore more likely to be sustained (Scheirer, 2005).

While the five factors appear to be self-explanatory, Point 2 on a Programme Champion, who is pivotal to programme sustainability and success, warrants further discussion. The expectation of a Programme Champion is that the individual will earnestly advocate for the needs of the programme in all areas, and the Programme Champion should ideally have access to upper management as well as influence and understanding of day-to-day programme operations (Scheirer, 2005). He or she exists to aid, encourage and enthusiastically advocate. A key issue raised and emphasized here about the role of the Programme Champion, whose effectiveness is often unfortunately overlooked in connection with the institutional environment, is that the development of the student would be negatively impacted when the adult leading them is not well supported by other adults, such as colleagues, the management or other professionals, in their endeavours to support students or programmes (Nel et al., 2016). All this points to the importance of ecological thinking: involvement and integration of all parties are central to sustainability success, taking into account the entire system, its elements and their relationships (cf. Chau et al., 2022). Sustainability is, as Hays and Reinders (2020) reminded us, inherently ecological. If we wish to develop a sustainable community of inquiry, we will need to think ecologically and take the necessary action to sustain it.

Before we close the article, we would also like to make clear the whole notion of failure meant in this article. There seem to be two schools of thought as far as learning from failure is concerned. The first is failure helps people more than success; it is believed that we learn more from failure, not success. The second is contrary to the first: because learning from failures is not always achieved, we learn more from success than failure. Both make great sense.

Our position on the issue is, however, that it is our attitude towards the event or encounter that decides on the value of the whole experience called ‘failure’ (or ‘success’, for that matter). Recent research has shown, for example, that many people tend to ignore or shy away from failure because failures are ego threatening, and they learn more from success as a result. One study suggested that while people tend to learn less from personal failure than from personal success, when ego concerns are irrelevant, people learn just as much from others’ failures as from others’ successes (Eskreis-Winkler & Fishbach, 2019). It might well be claimed that readers of this article will learn something from the discussion here because the article describes a ‘failed project of others’ (i.e., not ego threatening); perhaps more importantly, for our purpose here, we hope we have shown that learning from failure, as described here, can be as valuable as learning from success.

Conclusion

Shin (2016) recently shared how an online course offered at a university in the US brought together a group of language teaching professionals from around the world into a virtual community of practice through a CoI. The community continued to collaborate virtually and engage in research and publications together even after the online course ended. It was suggested that this was possible because of the strong social bonds established during the course. Together with Shin (2016), we hope our discussion in the present article has added to our current knowledge of how to go about sustaining a CoI. While Shin (2016) has offered an excellent example of a sustainable CoI, we hope this article has contributed to what Edmondson (2011, p. 51) called “Building a learning culture”. That is, it is important to:

create and reinforce a culture that counteracts the blame game and makes people feel both comfortable with and responsible for surfacing and learning from failures. ... [O]rganizations [need to] develop a clear understanding of what happened—not of “who did it” —when things go wrong. (Edmondson, 2011, p. 51)

In other words, building a learning culture suggests a break from routine thinking and action and replacing them with a good understanding of the inevitability of apparent failure in today’s complex world. In the context of our discussion, although there is an initial and important focus on an initiative or individual, the bigger picture is really about how that initiative or individual is understood, interpreted, responded to and supported by others. In considering some lessons learned from a CoI initiative and insights gained from the literature, we hope we have made clear that programme sustainability, or sustainability in and of any other kinds of initiative, requires a move away from routine thinking towards ecological thinking. This means collective efforts are required from all stakeholders or parties to ensure the sustainability of an(y) innovation; it means sustainability is ultimately a matter of community.

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