

Design of an Online Community

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## **Introduction**

This paper focuses on an online community of practice dedicated to the Community of Inquiry, CoI, theoretical framework. The nascent website may be found at:

<https://dkoch60.wixsite.com/ecoi>

## **Background**

The CoI framework was introduced by researchers at the University at Alberta in 1999 and was built on the constructivist works of John Dewey (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). The framework describes the process of creating a meaningful learning experience for a group of individuals through the interaction of three interconnected domains – social, teaching and cognitive presence. The CoI framework is the theory by which my dissertation is based as I will be examining the effect an enhanced discussion platform has on a student's level of course engagement or social presence.

Research on the framework is currently curated by two online communities maintained by the Athabasca University. The first site (S1), <https://coi.athabascau.ca/>, is built on the BuddyPress platform and contains an orientation video, a discussion forum, information on the framework as well as a member's section. This site links to what appears to be a more recently created multi-user blog site (S2), <http://www.thecommunityofinquiry.org/>. The intention of creating a sister site maintained by the same institution is unclear as S1 contains many of the same elements as S2. A membership tracking graph on S2 indicates that membership is steadily growing while activity on S1 stagnates.

The focus of the two sites is to act as online communities of practice as they contain the three key elements as described by Wenger, domain, practice, and community and they intend to develop knowledge (2002). The two communities address sharing knowledge in the form of

curated information, online discussions, and sharing research initiatives centered on the CoI framework. As such, the domain is the CoI framework, the practice is the sharing of content and collaboration on research, with the community being those involved in accessing content and interacting with one another on the two websites.

### **Design Proposal**

As an academic community devoted to the advancement of a theoretical framework, access to seminal works as well as ongoing research is vital and is modeled in exemplar online sites such as HASTAC and AERA (American Educational Research Association, n.d.). For both CoI sites, S1 and S2, there are active members, yet it is difficult to assess what precisely draws them to the site outside of updated content and access to other resources such as a validated survey, background information, and possible connection to others in the field. Several components appear less than successful maintaining an active community and include the blog for both sites, recent activity feed, social media feeds, email communications, welcome to the community, and the most surprising – the discussion forum. Due to the lack of social components and distribution of content across two active sites, the result is that the communities function more as a content repository than a community.

The proposed eCoI website, <https://dkoch60.wixsite.com/ecoi>, will function as the premier website devoted to hosting a community of practice focused on the Community of Inquiry theoretical framework. eCoI supplants the two existing sites, S1 and S2, and builds on their successes by salvaging successful components and introduces additional functionality intended on increasing community vitality. Hosting the community on one platform at an academic devoted to research on the theoretical framework provides an air of legitimacy, provides dedicated resources such as access to an academic library, website hosting, and a

technology coordinator/community manager. Also, university hosting serves as a means to attract new members through existing relationships with other academic institutions, professional organizations, and academically-themed conferences.

The new site is modeled in part after the HASTAC virtual organization's open access website (Jarrett, et al. 2019) and contains several successful components. The dedicated staffing allows for active curation of blog posts, news feeds, social media posts, as well as information related to initiatives related to the community. The staff member also acts as a technology steward and evaluates platforms and tools for both functionality and usability for the community (Wenger, White, & Smith, 2009). As an example, the discussion forum in the existing site has not had an active post in two years and some threads are over 4 years old. With a dedicated technology steward, an evaluation of the platform and its functionality within the community could be evaluated for design and implementation improvements.

In addition to a dedicated staff member, bi-annually elected officials will work as part of a leadership team to set the tone of the community through clearly stated rules of engagement, welcoming activities for new members, encouragement of personal development of new members through mentoring activities, and lead the annual meeting planning team. The leadership team will work to initiate, promote, and evaluate online activities appropriate to the different classes of members – students, practitioners, and researchers – understanding members engage at different levels from lurking or information gathering to full participation in discussions and mentoring.

Additional features will be introduced and assessed on an ongoing basis by the technology steward as a way of keeping the community active and keeping up with new collaboration processes used by community members. As an example, one experimental feature

is a weekly online twitter chat modeled after the weekly #gardenchat hosted by Bren Hass. The weekly chat takes place on Twitter using the #eCoIChat hashtag. Evaluation of the engagement process could be made based on the level of tweets, feedback from community members, as well as through online polls.

The proposed resources, activities, and access to members would build on the principle of proximity to heighten a sufficient commitment to the community as a whole (Kraut, 2012). With a more significant commitment, engagement could be measured through outcomes such as enrollment and membership levels, social activities such as blog posts, discussion posts, and social media mentions, and sharing of research initiatives and annual meeting involvement.

### **Conclusion**

The creation of a new online community was proposed to replace two existing communities. The purpose of the online community is to host a community of practice for those interested in the CoI theoretical framework. The new community is based upon similar online communities of practice that utilizes successful engagement techniques to maintain community identity. They include access to curated research publications through the association with an academic library, group discussions and blogs, mentoring of new members and mentoring opportunities for those with experience, and the chance to have a leadership role and be part of an annual meeting for the community.

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