

Creating the Blended Online Community Leadership Model

Synthesizing Leadership Theories with the Community of Inquiry within a New Blended Online Faculty Development Course

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Abstract

This article explores the synthesis of three leadership theories into one hybrid theory and applies that theory to the Community of Inquiry model within online education. The theories of authentic leadership, path-goal theory, and transformational leadership blend with the elements of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence to create a blended online community leadership model. I used a recent faculty development course for online instructors from the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College Department of Distance Education to illustrate how this leadership theory could apply in the virtual classroom.

The recent COVID-19 crisis forced the learning institutions within the Army's educational enterprise to temporarily shift their teaching modality from largely face-to-face to an online format. In this online modality, new instructors need to understand their roles as leaders in their virtual classrooms and establish the elements within the Community of Inquiry (CoI) (Garrison et al., 2000). Garrison et al. (2010) define the CoI as a collaborative learning environment that facilitates a purposeful learning community and provides an understanding of meaningful online learning experiences. The CoI is foundationally important to course designers and educators for the successful implementation of online education. At the center of this model, educational experience represents the interaction of the three

elements of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. These three elements not only interact with each other but also overlap in their practical application. While the CoI explains how to enhance an online educational experience by establishing these three forms of presence, it does not convey the important role of leadership to foster them. As Öqvist and Malmström (2016) contend, teachers' leadership can facilitate the educational performance of students; thus, understanding how to apply leadership within the CoI framework can help practitioners better lead and facilitate their virtual classrooms.

The Army University course catalog includes several online courses conducted in asynchronous format; however, these courses all lack the collaboration and active learning advocated by Bailey and Bankus (2017) for Army online courses. While the Army University faculty development program focuses on face-to-face instruction, it does not include instruction on how to conduct blended online education (Van Der Werff & Bogdan, 2018). Across the entire U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command Army learning enterprise, only one organization specializes in this online modality. Within the U.S. Army Command and General Staff College, the Department of Distance Education (DDE) delivers the Army's Command and General Staff Officer's Course (CGSOC) to nonresident students in the online modality. This online version utilizes the same curriculum and learning objectives as the one-year resident course at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. As delivered by DDE, the first phase of CGSOC is the Common Core course conducted asynchronously. The second phase of CGSOC, the Advanced Operations Course, is conducted in a blended online format consisting of both synchronous and asynchronous instruction. This blended online format adds significantly to the learning environment over a purely asynchronous course (Yamagata-Lynch, 2014).

Realizing that the Army's professional military education will need to continue during the pandemic, leadership within the Combined Arms Center and Army University contacted DDE to develop a program for online education to apply across the enterprise. To distribute this capability across the many schools within the Combined Arms Center, members of DDE provided "train-the-trainer" faculty development in their newly developed Digital Learning Instructor's Course (DLIC), thereby creating a cadre of instructors at each institution to conduct dedicated faculty de-

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velopment for blended online courses. In support of this faculty development initiative, as Fortuna (2017) advocates, faculty and institutions also shared notable online learning successes with the broader Army educational community. A cornerstone of this program involves teaching instructors the importance of the CoI (Garrison et al., 2000). The CoI framework is built on socioconstructivism, reflective thinking, and practical inquiry (Tolu, 2013), combining the social dimension of community with inquiry to create engaging online or blended learning environments. During the DLIC course, instructors emphasize the elements of the CoI and provide examples to establish them. While several leadership theories can be applied to the virtual classroom environment, experience and research indicate that three leadership styles align particularly well with the CoI. These are authentic leadership, path-goal theory, and transformational leadership. As observed during the implementation of this program, the synthesis of CoI and leadership theory has a synergistic effect on the overall quality of the online or blended educational experience.

Review of Literature

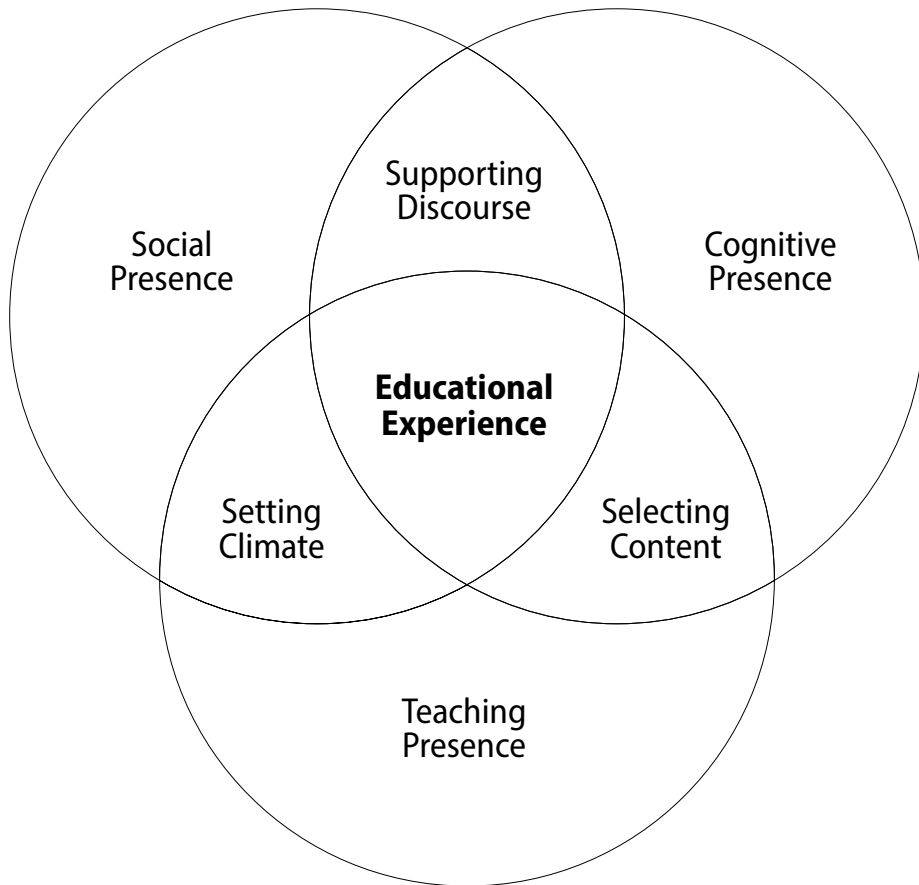
Before describing the fusion of the various elements of the CoI with the proposed leadership theories, it is important to review foundational literature and supplementary studies explaining these elements. This will aid in understanding how they complement each other in later sections of this article.

Community of Inquiry

Garrison et al. (2000) first introduced the CoI framework (Figure 1, page 25) when studying computer-mediated communication and computer conferencing in support of an educational experience. This framework “identifies the core elements of a collaborative constructivist learning environment required to create and sustain a purposeful learning community” (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 2). The overlap of these elements provides an understanding of “the dynamics of deep and meaningful online learning experiences” (Garrison et al., 2010, p. 2). Garrison et al. (2001) describe the importance of this community: “Such a community involves (re)constructing experience and knowledge through the critical analysis of the subject matter, questioning, and the challenging of assumptions” (p. 2). Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) utilize their analysis of a study from Cleveland-Innes et al. (2007) to further describe the CoI as involving the public and personal search for meaning and understanding. Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. go on to illustrate their theoretical foundation in the view of teaching within a constructive-cooperative framework, citing Vygotsky’s (1978) work in constructivism.



Figure 1
The Community of Inquiry



From “Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education,” by D. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, 2000, *Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), p. 88. ([https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516\(00\)00016-6](https://doi.org/10.1016/S1096-7516(00)00016-6)).

Social Presence

The first element of the CoI is social presence, defined as creating an environment of collaborative, educational, and free discourse (Zilka et al., 2018). Social presence is the ability of participants to socially and emotionally project themselves and to promote direct communication as real people between individuals and make personal representation explicit (Akyol et al., 2009; Garrison & Anderson, 2003). With social presence,



students freely express their opinions and beliefs. Boettcher and Conrad (2016) describe it on a more personal level by stating that it creates connections between students and instructors as three-dimensional people with families, lives, ideas, and other personal details. Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) explain social presence as affective and open communication that leads to group cohesion and contributes to a learning community rich in participation, trust, and acceptance. Garrison et al. (2000) elaborate further by asserting that social presence illustrates a qualitative difference between a collaborative research community and the environment of merely downloading information.

Teaching Presence

The second element of 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). Garrison et al. (2000) goes into a little more detail with three indicators of teaching presence consisting of instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction. Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) define teaching presence as “the act of designing, facilitating, and orienting cognitive and social processes to obtain the results foreseen according to the students’ needs and capabilities” (p. 351). They also use three elements from a Garrison and Anderson (2003) article to describe the three teachers’ responsibilities as “design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct teaching” (Gutierrez-Santiuste et al., 2015, p. 351). Even though the terminology is slightly different, the overall idea remains the same. The first component of this element deals with the encompassing structure of the learning environment and the process. Facilitating discourse involves understanding the role of the learning community as a promoter of the construction of knowledge and meaning where a convergence of interest, commitment, motivation, and learning takes place (Gutierrez-Santiuste et al., 2015). The last component of direct teaching is a less common occurrence and usually only required when there is a specific issue of content and the teacher’s leadership is apparent. This is the first area where leadership is mentioned within the CoI framework. Leadership is key to achieving teaching presence, as the instructor must take control of the group in the sense that a guide leads a party along a quest. Studies show that teaching presence is the strongest indicator of cognitive presence in online educational experiences (Garrison et al., 2010; Kovanović et al., 2018).



Cognitive Presence

Finally, the most important element within the CoI model to the success of higher education is cognitive presence. Garrison et al. (2000) describe it as constructing mean-

ing using discussion, reflection, and critical thinking and contend that it is most essential to successful performance in higher education. Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) cite Maddrell et al.'s (2011) study that illustrates only cognitive presence correlates in a significant and positive manner with achievement measures. They reinforce the importance of cognitive presence as it "thus indicates the extent to which the learning objectives are achieved" (p. 350). Gutierrez-Santiuste et al. (2015) further explain that the goal of the cognitive processes "is to promote the analysis, construction, and confirmation of meaning and understanding within a community of students through reflection and discourse" (p. 350). They continue with the description of the model within cognitive presence as consisting of four nonsequential phases of activation, exploration, integration, and resolution (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Garrison et al., 2000).

This model with the four phases of cognitive presence parallels Kolb's (1984) experiential learning model using concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. There are further parallels to Dewey's (1938/1991) model consisting of impulse, observation, knowledge, and judgment. Comparing the three models, activation (which was previously described as a triggering event) very closely resembles Kolb's (1984) concrete experience and Dewey's (1938/1991) impulse (Garrison et al. 2000). Garrison and Anderson (2003) describe exploration as an inquisitive process that involves understanding the nature of the problem and then looking for important information and possible explanations. This correlates closely with Dewey's (1938/1991) element of observation and Kolb's (1984) component of reflective observation. The third element of the cognitive presence model is integration, described by Garrison and Anderson (2003) as a reflexive phase directed to the construction of meaning. Integration will happen several times during the learning process and will shift between private reflection and public discourse. Integration is related to Kolb's (1984) abstract conceptualization in which the individual forms abstract concepts based on observation and with Dewey's (1938/1991) third step in which knowledge is developing from observation. The fourth element of the cognitive presence model is resolution, described by Garrison and Anderson (2003) as a committed deductive process that typically also creates new questions. The deductive component of resolution is also present in Dewey (1938/1991) and Kolb (1984) with judgment and active experimentation as their fourth steps, respectively.

Leadership Theories

Leadership is a multifaceted subject into which the Army invests much thought, education, and literature. No article involving leadership and an Army school would be complete without an Army doctrinal definition. Army Doctrine Publication 6-22 defines leadership as "the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation to accomplish the mission and improve the organization" (U.S. Depart-



ment of the Army, 2012, p. 1). Not surprisingly, given the myriad tasks Army leaders face on a day-to-day basis, the Army does not prescribe any single leadership style or theory, as there is no one-size-fits-all solution. In this unique setting of the virtual classroom, instructors must adopt leadership approaches that foster the establishment of the three elements of the Col.

Authentic Leadership

The first leadership theory for analysis is authentic leadership. Interestingly, there is no common definition for authentic leadership theory, but a good working definition comes from Avolio et al. (2004). In this definition, authentic leaders have gained high levels of authenticity by knowing who they are and what they value and believe in, and by demonstrating those values and beliefs in transparent interactions with others. By developing these qualities, leaders become authentic leaders. Studies show authentic leadership is desirable due to the higher levels of self-esteem and psychological well-being (Kernis, 2003), and higher levels of friendliness and elevated performance (Grandey et al., 2005). One could consider Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and former U.S. President Barack Obama as strong examples of authentic leadership. Both men were regarded as authentic in the communication of their values and in the transparency of their interactions with others. Both stood for values they strongly believed in and challenged others to see issues from their point of view. Both men had high levels of self-esteem and were very friendly to other people. They also largely conducted themselves in a manner free from scandals and ethical questions.

Path-Goal Theory

The next leadership theory is the path-goal theory, which entered leadership literature in the 1970s from the writings of Evans (1970) and House (1971). Northouse (2016) describes path-goal leadership as leaders motivating followers to accomplish designated goals. Specifically, these leaders move followers along the path to their goals by choosing specific behaviors that are best suited to the followers' needs and their situations. This theory includes four leadership behaviors: directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented (House & Mitchell, 1974). By choosing the behavior appropriate for the particular situation, leaders increase followers' expectations for success and satisfaction. A modern example of a leader in the path-goal theory could be Steve Jobs from Apple Corporation. By embodying the elements of the path-goal theory, Jobs was able to motivate his employees to accomplish amazing success through his use of high levels of support, participation, and achievement orientation.



Transformational Leadership

The final leadership theory for review is transformational leadership. The term “transformational leadership” was first used by Downton (1973); however, political sociologist James MacGregor Burns (1978) illustrated its importance to the study of leadership.

Transformational leadership involves engagement and interaction with others, creating a connection that raises motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower. This type of leader attends to the needs and motives of followers and tries to help them reach their fullest potential (Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership is an extremely popular leadership model attributed to many prominent historical figures. Although transformational leadership is associated with elevated motivation and morality, transformative leaders are not necessarily positive role models. Certainly, Alexander the Great and Abraham Lincoln could be described as positive examples of transformational leadership for their ability to create a connection with their people and inspire them on a moral crusade. On the other hand, Adolf Hitler accomplished similar transformational motivation of the masses in 1930s Germany with a far more negative purpose. Thus, the aspect of morality in the leader can be highly subjective and dependent on the situation.

Synthesis of Theories within Elements of the Community of Inquiry

This section will discuss the synthesis of leadership theories with presence elements in a blended online educational environment. The Blended Online Community Leadership Model (Figure 2, page 30) was developed to graphically depict this synthesis. This model is based on three years of practical experience in leading the department within DDE responsible for the online blended courses in the Advanced Operations Course. This department consists of 38 instructors and approximately 1,270 students. At the end of this section is a discussion of the DLIC, which is a “train-the-trainer” faculty development course for instructors across the Army University enterprise.

As mentioned earlier, this course is designed to teach the art of leading and instructing blended online education to other faculty development instructors. They will, in turn, teach instructors within their own educational institutions. From late April 2020 to July 2020, members of DDE conducted 10 iterations of this faculty development course to over 100 instructors representing 25 schools across the Army learning enterprise.

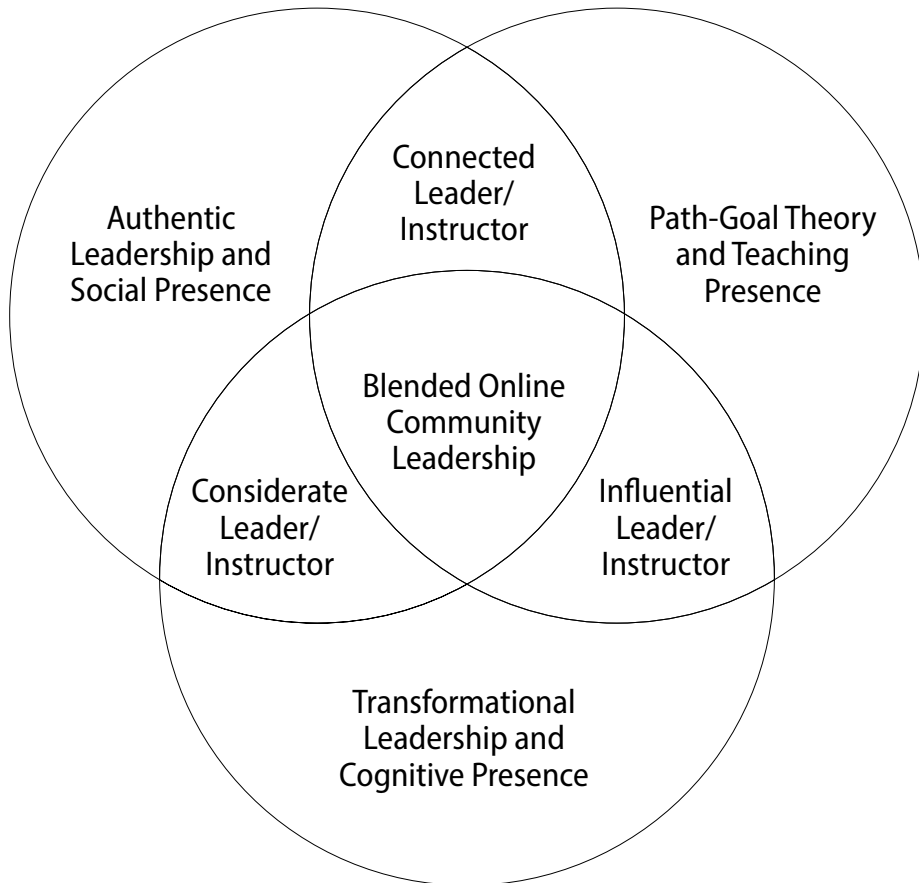
Authentic Leadership and Social Presence

The first combination of theory with presence is authentic leadership theory with social presence. In describing aspects of authentic leadership, Yukl (2013) describes these



Figure 2

The Blended Online Community Leadership Model



leaders as possessing positive leader values, self-awareness, and a trusting relationship with followers. He explains that authentic leaders have positive core values such as high ethical standards that enable them to create a special relationship with their followers. For social presence, Curtis and Lawson (2001, as cited in Nicholson & Uematsu, 2013) describe how collaboration in social presence provides scaffolding for student thinking and encourages a social interdependence and exchange of information and resources. Members of these collaborative groups challenge and encourage each other, adding a sense of teamwork and enhancing the social presence of the course. As de facto team leaders for their students, instructors should always display ethical decision-making to set an example for students. Anecdotal examples provided by participants in the DLIC help highlight the importance of this instructor role. As one instructor in the course



reminded his peers, instructors are constantly under scrutiny from their students, potentially impacting their position as authentic leaders. Another instructor shared an example in which a student made a comment in class that other members of the group might have found offensive. The instructor quickly addressed the comment and the student publicly, reminding everyone to be respectful and considerate of others, thereby reinforcing the ethical expectations of the group. Ethical leaders create ethical followers. The relationship between team leaders and team members requires high mutual trust and open and honest communication; for social presence to be ingrained within the group, there can be no question of the leader's ethics. As Avolio and Gardner (2005, as cited in Lyubovnikova et al., 2017) point out, using self-regulation allows authentic leaders to bring their true values and intentions into alignment with their actions, revealing their authentic selves to their followers. This facilitates positive social exchange and social information processing, resulting in improved quality and quantity of collaboration (Blau, 1964; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1977). This environment of trust within the group occurs when members feel they can speak honestly and openly, even when it may be on a controversial topic if the discussion remains professional. This honest discourse leads to better understanding among the group on a personal and professional level.

During DLIC, instructors participated in an exercise designed to institute trust and respect among the group. During the first online group session, all members introduced themselves to the entire team based not only on professional aspects of their lives but also on personal aspects as well. Team members were encouraged to spend a few minutes sharing their personal backgrounds, and the elements that have served to define their self-concept and character. To set the example, the instructors began the exercise by providing the first self-introductions, exposing some of their vulnerabilities as human beings. This allowed everyone to gain a more in-depth personal understanding of each member's perspective in the group, which led to greater respect and trust in each other by sharing their personal histories. Initially, the exercise was personally uncomfortable for some members of the group; however, as the exercise proceeded and more participants shared their personal perspectives, their inhibitions diminished, and they were able to reinforce a climate of honesty and transparency. Having the instructor initiate this process helped set this tone early and encouraged other group members to feel safe sharing their information. As the team members observed the leader sharing personal, self-reflective insights, they began to emulate this behavior. To further mitigate students' apprehensions about sharing potentially highly personal information and perspectives, instructors also established the class as a nonattribution setting in which anything said within the group remained within the group. To protect this environment, students were required to agree as a group before the online session would be recorded.

Continuing with additional techniques, instructors can utilize team reflexivity by periodically directing the group to reflect upon their status in the course. As Lyubovnikova et al. (2017) assert, authentic leaders foster a climate of team reflexivity. Their definition of reflexivity is derived from a West et al. (1997) study as "the extent to which group



members overtly reflect upon, and communicate about the group's objectives, strategies (e.g., decision making) and processes (e.g., communication), and adapt them to current or anticipated circumstances" (p. 296). Hannah et al. (2011) explain that this reflexivity will foster an authentic social-cognitive exchange relationship that manifests between the team and the leader characterized by phases of constructive open reflection pursuing shared goals. They also remind us that members of a team tend to imitate the behaviors and values of influential role models like authentic leaders (Bandura, 1977). In the DLIC, the lead instructor shared the technique of periodically holding a group discussion to determine if they felt learning objectives were met, and whether any adjustments should be made to group norms or processes. At various points in the course, he would ask the group for feedback on whether they felt the curriculum and instruction met their needs, and what changes they would like to incorporate. Anytime the group made a recommendation for change, the instructor incorporated the change where appropriate in the remainder of the course. This reinforced a sense of team among the students, significantly improving social presence within the group by giving them a voice in shaping their own academic environment.

Path-Goal Theory and Teaching Presence

As previously described, the path-goal theory includes four elements of directive, supportive, participative, and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors. Teachers who employ these four leadership behaviors have a high level of developmental leadership (Öqvist & Malmström, 2016). Teaching presence consists of the three components of design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction (Anderson et al., 2001). These behaviors and elements meld to improve the effectiveness of an online environment. The direct instructional method combines with the directive leadership behavior in which the instructor provides clear tasks and instructions. Within the DLIC course, one instructor illustrated the partnership of direct instruction and direct leadership behavior by highlighting the task and purpose for the group on every exercise the students conduct. When the instructor observes the group struggling with a facet of the exercise, the instructor should step in to provide further guidance and clarification. Another DLIC instructor reminded the class that as the subject matter expert for their course, instructors should be able to illustrate to the students "what right looks like."

The next combination of facilitating discourse with participative and supportive leadership behaviors was also highlighted within the instructors' discussion. The DLIC course encourages instructors to actively participate with their students using online discussion boards. As one instructor highlighted, this can help check on students' learning by observing when a student does not fully answer a discussion question. In these situations, the instructor can ask probing questions, pushing the student to expound upon his or her initial response and confirming the student's achievement of learning objec-



tives. Another instructor-provided example is to publicly provide positive feedback to a student who presents a well-constructed argument in an online discussion forum. This action by an instructor reinforces “what right looks like” for discussion board responses. Finally, design and organization combine with the directive and achievement-oriented leadership behaviors. This aspect is most evident in the DLIC with the focus on course structures, course maps, and course expectations. In the DLIC, several of the instructors shared their personal examples of using a course syllabus or a course map to ensure their students understand how the course will progress. One instructor preferred using course maps to demonstrate course flow as they connect better with visual learners. Not surprisingly, the instructor identified as a visual learner. Another instructor began a discussion regarding course expectations and assignment submission dates, asserting these dates must be adhered to. Another instructor agreed that due dates are important but suggested that case-by-case exceptions may be warranted if a student has extenuating circumstances. This approach can still meet the achievement-orientation leadership style by working with a student to overcome a personal issue.

Transformational Leadership and Cognitive Presence

The third combination for analysis is transformational leadership with cognitive presence. Transformational leadership can be broken down into four factors of idealized influence (or charisma), inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Bass & Avolio, 1990). Garrison (2007) defines cognitive presence as “the exploration, construction, resolution and confirmation of understanding through collaboration and reflection in a community of inquiry” (p. 65). Cognitive presence consists of four phases: activation, exploration, integration, and resolution. These subelements of transformational leadership and phases of cognitive presence can combine to increase their effect in an online classroom. The activation from cognitive presence takes place through the charisma and inspirational motivation of the instructor. This is achieved by presenting challenges or tasks and explaining why it is important for the group to take on this challenge. During the DLIC, instructors shared examples of charismatic leaders in history who activated their group, inspiring them to achieve unbelievable tasks. Henry V’s Saint Crispin’s Day speech is a classic example cited by the group (Shakespeare, 1599/2002). The next phase of exploration involves elements of intellectual stimulation in which students should explore additional relevant information regarding the challenge at hand. Discourse between the groups brings more experience and knowledge into the community, allowing them to brainstorm and question the nature of the problem. In the DLIC, instructors discussed ideas to challenge students with divergent thinking to generate ideas and options. One instructor presented a technique used called “think-write-share” (U.S. Army Training and Doctrine Command, 2018, p. 199) in which students think about the problem at hand and write down whatever ideas




come to mind. After the students have recorded their individual ideas, they share these ideas with the group to explore additional possibilities.

The next phase of integration involves elements from the idealized influence, continued intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration. Here instructors help students construct meaning from the ideas generated from the exploratory phase. The instructor uses charisma to stimulate the intellect of students and consider the input from individual students. The instructor then acts as a coach and advisor to assist the students in becoming fully actualized. Some of the instructors in the faculty development program course shared their experiences of leading groups through aspects of the military decision-making process in which students analyze data gathered in staff estimates to produce a formal, coordinated plan. Students apply critical thinking to the analysis of this data and organize that product into useful categories or lines of effort. These categories of information are then synthesized to create the formal plan addressing the problem to be solved. The last phase of resolution continues to incorporate inspirational motivation and intellectual stimulation. In this phase, a solution generated from exploration and integration is tested and implemented (Garrison et al., 2000). Instructors encourage the students to test their created solution to the problem, noting the strengths and weaknesses of their solution. Instructors continue to stress the importance of critical thinking to address issues in the implementation of their course of action. One instructor in the DLIC compared this to teaching a group of students the art of “wargaming” or comparing courses of action in military planning. As the students progress through the implementation of their plan, problems may arise, so the students must maintain the mental agility to address the problems as they appear. As the students solve the problem at hand, they may discover a new problem spawned from solving the current problem and may need to develop a sequel plan for use later.

Conclusion

The analysis of the CoI illustrates highly effective methods for conducting online education (Garrison et al., 2000). As this becomes the new norm in Army professional military education, the current faculty development program is under revision to teach this art to instructors across the Army University enterprise. This application of the CoI is not enough, however, as instructors need to fully understand their roles as leaders within their respective virtual classrooms. No one leadership theory applies equally to the three elements of social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence. A new dynamic leadership theory requires the synthesis of multiple leadership theories to fit the three presence elements within the CoI. The human aspects of authentic leadership interface well with establishing the personal, trusting relationships of social presence.



The motivation and direction of path-goal theory couples well with design and facilitation of teaching presence. Finally, the charisma, inspirational motivation, and intellectual stimulation of transformational leadership partners with the discussion, reflection, and critical thinking of cognitive presence. This amalgamation of leadership theories with the elements of presence within the CoI forges a stronger alloy for instructors to better teach and lead their courses. Elements of this approach are incorporated into the new DLIC program used for Army University faculty development to transfer this method to other instructors across the enterprise. The purpose is to develop not only better educators but also better leaders across the Army. 

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