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Adapting to the Pandemic Community of Inquiry and the SGM-A

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In the sands of West Texas, at the resident Sergeants Major Academy (SGM-A), the COVID-19 global pandemic and the isolation it required changed the way instructors deliver education. In March 2020, as the SGM-A closed its doors to physical on location learning, instructors had to adapt to a new distance education teaching style for its Soldiers. This article covers the SGM-A's challenges and discoveries as it switched to distance learning to still accomplish its mission. This article explains the SGM-A's need for distance education and discusses Community of Inquiry (CoI), a collaborative environment founded on three communication elements, social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence.

Distance Education

Traditionally, at most brick-and-mortar educational institutions, instructors predominantly taught in a face-to-face environment. Even so, distance education was not a new teaching method, it was initially established in 1892 when the University of Chicago began the first national distance college program (Cotty, 2012). But it wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic forced all educational institutions to adopt distance education. This transition was an eye-opener, and the SGM-A faculty had to quickly learn how to teach the material without the luxury of being directly in front of their students.

In the beginning of the SGM-A's transition to distance education, the challenges inherent with this new style of

teaching caused stress and anxiety. Its impersonal aspect hindered the connection between students and instructors, as well as students and lesson materials. This new method of instruction at the SGM-A was a significant challenge for both teachers and students. Once we started using the Community of Inquiry framework, the relationship between students and instructors and students and learning materials, reformed themselves.

The Community of Inquiry

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a way for teachers and learners to build meaning together from a collaborative relationship.

A CoI is a collaborative environment founded upon open but purposeful communication. The essential elements in this process are social, cognitive and teaching presence. It is in the overlap of the three presences where the essence of a community of inquiry exists and meaningful collaboration occurs. (Garrison, 2009, para. 4)

The theory was originally developed in the late 1990s by a group of scholars and has since been modified by numerous scholars and distance education practitioners (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Garrison & Archer, 2007). Using (Blackboard) technology, SGM-A instructors used all three important CoI elements and built trust and motivation in their students, achieving success during a global pandemic.

Social Presence

Students want to get to know their instructors as “real people” in addition to their roles as mentors and subject-matter experts. The *social presence* aspect is the importance and difficulty participants (both instructors and students) face when projecting themselves as real people during learning transactions. They face this challenge without the extra benefit of visual and voice contact associated with face-to-face interaction (Kasworm, et al., 2010, p. 324). Distance education students require the social presence of the instructor and other students to feel a sense of belonging, reduce their feelings of isolation, and build their trust in the learning community (Garrison, 2009). A strong social presence allows students to express, share, and contribute freely in a safe space.

Creating a social presence at the SGM-A required instructors to employ methods that demonstrated their human side. This included sharing pictures of their families, hobbies, pets, and even their homes to their students. Some instructors played music for a few minutes before class, during breaks, and at the



United States Army Sergeants Major Academy. Photo taken January 26, 2022. (U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Justin Smith)

end of the virtual day. Other instructors encouraged their students to play their favorite or traditional music from their country (be the DJ for the day) for the class. These actions allowed the virtual classroom to relax and prepared students for the lesson.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence is a technique instructors use to ensure social presence and cognitive presence goals are acquired and retained (Kasworm, et al., 2010). Designing and developing the course and guiding and supporting the students during course material delivery is the simplest teaching presence technique (Garrison, 2009). In other words, teaching presence is expressed in everything instructors do to guide, support, and shape their students' experiences.

During the SGM-A's transition to distance learning, one of the main obstacles in building *teaching presence* was creating a collaborative classroom environment. Through trial and error and instructor collaboration, faculty found that providing open-ended questions and turning on the camera in Blackboard were two simple things allowing students and instructors to build a healthy virtual classroom environment. By simply activating the web camera, students could visually see instructors and their classmates as they communicated their thoughts, ideas, and information. This simple action created a deeper connection with both the students, instructors, and the lessons being covered. To further engage students, instructors often used the Blackboard drawing tool to draw, write text, or highlight portions of their screen, enhancing the learning experience along with using voice and video. This helped visual learners and prompted more discussion and group collaboration.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence refers to the “ability to realize the cognitive domain goals of higher education that is,

knowledge generation and critical thinking" (Kasworm, et al., 2010, p. 324). The key to this element is providing active and engaging learning activities to students for the lessons to be effective. The primary focus of cognitive presence is to develop a higher-order thinking process (i.e., critical thinking or practical inquiry) that integrates existing learning with new learning through reflection, discussion, and feedback (Garrison, 2009). This process encourages students to explore their ideas, thoughts, and beliefs through activities developed, and actions taken, to meaningfully connect with the content (Kasworm, 2010).

Implementation

Once SGM-A received the order to switch to an all-distance learning format, it quickly built practical and collaborative exercises that engaged students and instructors by having students share their thoughts, ideas, and experiences with the class virtually. Instructors became creative in keeping students actively engaged with each other and their lessons of instruction using various teaching methods to include the use of student-centered

chat groups in Blackboard. Chat groups enabled them to share and discuss their thoughts and experiences about the lessons with minimal instructor oversight. This separation allowed students to informally learn more about each other and increased their willingness to share and collaborate with each other. This bond of trust allowed them to reflect on their daily lessons in a group environment.

Conclusion

The SGM-A's need for distance education brought about by the global pandemic forced them to develop a collaborative environment founded on three communication elements, social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Overall, the unprecedented world crisis forced change, creativity, and adaptation in all educational institutions. By using technology and modern-learning theories, such as CoI, the SGM-A empowered both its instructors and students and remained successful in its mission to educate and create capable new sergeants major for the U.S. Army and the future fight. ■

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