

*A Model of Online Cultural Presence*

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Online learning culture is a specific culture found within the academic framework of higher education. Terms such as independent learning, self-efficacy, and self-identity are frequently associated with online learning culture. These terms align with individualistic cultural norms and struggle to find a place in the psyche of ethnically diverse learners who identify with communal cultural norms. Ethnic culture influences social and learning experiences (Aroson & Laughter, 2015; Booker, Merriweather, & Campbell-Whatley, 2016; Campbell, 2015). This article will present a model of cultural presence to be used in conjunction with the CoI model in online spaces.

The Community of Inquiry Theory (CoI) is widely applied to online teaching practices and course development. Available data suggests CoI creates robust learning and social interactions in online spaces. CoI (Garrison, 2000) is often associated with online learning best practices. CoI consists of three interconnected aspects of online learning: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Cognitive presence is one's ability to make meaning of academic content (Garrison et al., 2000). Social presence is the psychological and social attribute of online spaces, and teaching presence, the skill of facilitation and delivery of curriculum and content in online spaces (Garrison et al., 2000). Although CoI is frequently referred to as a model of best teaching and learning practices; influences of ethnicity and culture on social, psychological, and cognitive presence and student experiences is not represented within the model, nor is it listed as a limitation within any of the previous studies.

Communal cultural norms differ significantly from norms associated with online learning culture such as independence and self-focus. Differences culture increase acculturative stress among first-generation or diverse student populations (Cox-Davenport, 2014). Without considerations for cultural differences, current best practices contribute to experiences

of marginalization, isolation, and depression for under-represented students taking online classes.

In order to bridge this gap in the research, a model of cultural presence is presented to increase the cultural scope of the CoI framework. Cultural presence is defined as “the intentional inclusion, use, and application of ethnic and cultural norms within the teaching and learning process that supports learning, student well-being, and meaningful outcomes. Cultural presence applies to teaching and learning, course design, and the student socialization in the online space” (Plotts, 2., 2018). Cultural presence is constructed through five aspects of course design and teaching. Those five areas are: intentionality, transactional vs. relational course design, convergent vs. divergent thinking, collaboration and contextual learning, and independent vs. interdependent learning. The five aspects of cultural presence are designed to work in tandem with the current model of CoI and is used to enhance learning experiences for under-represented student populations.

Intentionality is one’s ability to understand the how and why of what is occurring in their online space. Researchers noted that a specific and intentional focus from faculty is required for knowledge and skill regarding culturally responsive teaching (Soper & Ukot, 2016). To facilitate cultural presence in the online spaces, faculty require specific training in areas such as effective collaboration across culture, the building and maintaining of community, and how to foster appropriate learning climates in virtual spaces with the use of culturally responsive models of teaching (Plotts, 2019).

Current design models of online teaching are transactional. These transactional models contribute to significant barriers to creating human connection. Transactional connections in online spaces are orchestrated and quantified (i.e. week one - post once - respond twice). Instead, faculty can focus on the relational nature of information delivery and exchanges by focusing on building a sense of community and course climate. This will help create more meaningful connections between students and their peers and students and the course content.

Independent learning is often associated with online learning outcomes. However, the concept of independence or individuality is Eurocentric in nature. Instead, creating cultural presence focuses on the interdependence of learning for students in online spaces. Cultural presence applies opportunities such as social modeling, building peer support, and the increase for interconnectedness as cultural norms within the online course.

Online culture is often associated with one’s ability to think critically. According to Garrison et al., (2010) the researchers originally placed more value on cognitive presence (critical thinking), than the social and teaching presence but, noted that cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence were equivalent and contributed equally to learning outcomes in online spaces. Yet, communal cultures often support and/or shows preference for diver-

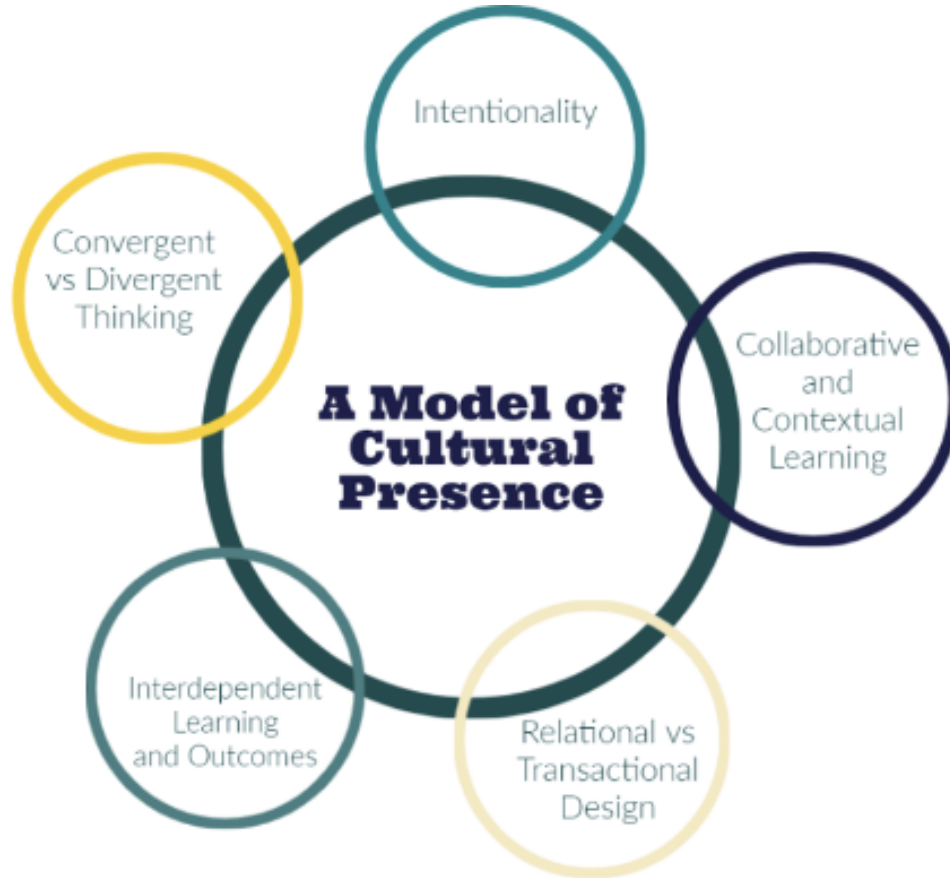


Figure 1.

gent thinking (creative/imaginative thinking) over convergent (critical thinking). Applying the model of cultural presence within an online course increases opportunities for divergent thinking within the teaching and learning process.

Finally, collaborative and contextual learning are associated with online learning best practices. However, the current models CoI and collaboration rarely highlight the role culture plays in collaborative experiences. Current models omit the importance of how ethnic student groups use cultural norms to socially position themselves in collaborative experiences. This absence contributes to negative experiences for under-represented populations. Social positioning via cultural norms is an important aspect for many minoritized students working collaboratively in online spaces (Maldonado-Torres, 2016).

Cultural presence is an important facet of effective online teaching and learning. Com-

munity psychology, multi-cultural psychology, and learning and cognition research highlights the importance of effective culturally responsive teaching for minoritized student groups. The lack of culturally responsive teaching in online spaces contributes to the acculturative stress among various student populations. Using this model of cultural presence for online spaces can support faculty and instructional designers in creating robust learning experiences for students of various ethnic groups.