Building a Community of Learners:
The Value of Social Presence and Peer Mentoring in an Online Nutrition Course

Background & Actions

What is Social Presence?

➤ an important component in Garrison and Vaughan's Community of Inquiry Model

➤ "the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities." (Garrison, 2009)

Social Presence: Why the Focus?

➤ Social Presence Creates Comfort

➤ Social Presence Contributes to Learner Success

Social Presence Online: Addressing and Assessing

➤ **2008-2010:** Aragon's strategies (2003) were used to establish and maintain social presence in an online nutrition course for Community Nutrition Educators (CNEs) in the Simply Good Eating Program.

   ❖ Strategies: Welcome Page; Student Profiles; Internet Café; facilitator response time; discussion forums, etc.

➤ **CNEs:** were surveyed on course 'social presence'

Community of Inquiry
Garrison & Vaughan (2008)

Adapted from Garrison and Vaughan (2008)

Peer Mentoring Online: What Value?

Peer Mentors participated in the Summer 2012 Online Nutrition Course

➤ Actions:

   ❖ CNEs: surveyed end of course on Value of Mentors
   ❖ Peer Mentors: completed reflection papers weekly/end of course

CNE Survey Results: Value of Mentors

Question: *What value do you see in having peer mentors?*

• *(Name of peer mentor) helped me a lot with a tech problem I was having.*
• *Good idea to have them. Make their contact info easier to find.*

Peer Mentor Reflection: Value of Mentors

I really enjoyed how the class had the discussion component to it. It was valuable to hear the thoughts and ideas from other nutrition educators and I think we all learned a lot of new ideas from everyone. Even though we may have taught a lesson multiple times, there is always something that can be added to enhance the lesson. I think the discussion component made the class more laid-back and enjoyable. The discussion topics allowed us apply the content from the modules to our work as well as our everyday lives.
   AM, Peer Mentor

Data

Use of Aragon's Social Presence Strategies

CNE Survey Results

Question: *How useful were these strategies to increasing your online comfort level?*

• Facilitator's Welcome Page: 97% useful/very useful
• 3/60 View of You (Student Introductions): 89% useful/very useful
• Small Class Size: 86% useful/very useful
• Discussion Forums: 89% useful/very useful
• Internet Café: 47% useful/very useful
• Quick Response to Email: 93% useful/very useful
• Quick Response to Discussion Postings: 92% useful/very useful
• Use of Humor: 93% useful/very useful
• Use of Emoticons: 69% useful/very useful.
• Use of Student's Name when Communicating: 78% useful/very useful
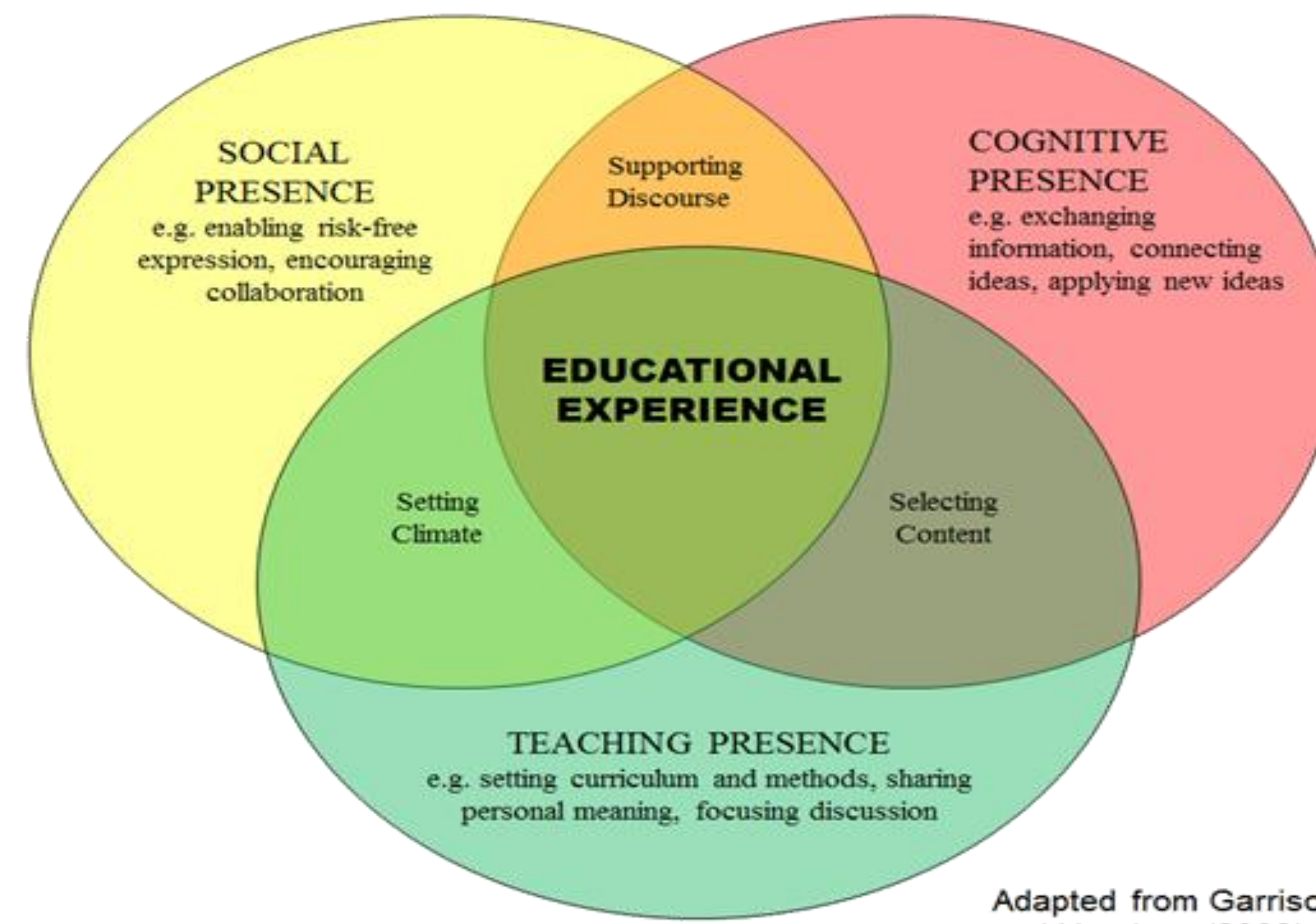
Quotes
On Social Presence

I really liked this aspect so you could get a sense of who your "classmates" were. Otherwise they are just names! After the intros, I could say, oh she's the one that has 2 toddlers at home, etc.
   CNE, on class introductions, online

You know that you, as the teacher, are easy to access and have this class first and foremost on your mind. Nice to know!
   CNE, on facilitator response time to questions

References

Aragon, S.R., Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, no. 100, Winter 2003 © Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Garrison, D. R. (2009). Communities of inquiry in online learning: Social, teaching and cognitive presence. In C. Howard et al. (Eds.), Encyclopedia of distance and online learning (2nd ed., pp. 352-355). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.

Conclusions

Technology may open new worlds to learners but does not, by itself, inspire critical or creative thinking, or deep and engaged learning

-Aaron Doering, associate professor of Learning Technologies and co-director of LT Media Lab, University of Minnesota, Online Learning Update, July 6, 2012

▪ The use of Social Presence strategies increases online comfort level
▪ Peer Mentors appear to add value; more research needs to be done
▪ Technology supports our courses and trainings, but should not drive them

Next Steps

Continue to offer Social Presence strategies; investigate further use of the Community of Inquiry Model; and consider Peer Mentoring in future hybridized online nutrition course offerings, to research Cognitive Presence

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Peer Review: Thanks!
To Mary Jo Katras, PhD, Extension Educator, Building Healthy & Strong Families, Center for Family Development
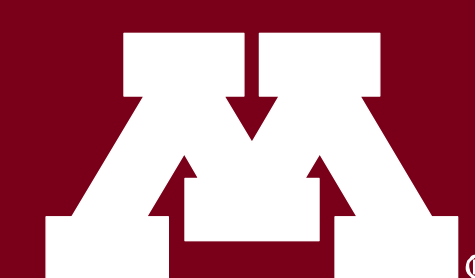
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