

Dr Misty Cook – Singapore – 6th September 2021

Effective teaching practices in supporting students in and beyond class time in an online academic literacy module

Purpose and context of the presentation

The context is a seminar-based class focusing on academic discussion in which students elaborate on discussions, justify contributions, pose questions and evaluate discourse, for example by presenting and discussing an academic paper. Cook's topic is psychology and workplace/social skills.

Building a Community of Practice

The focus for Dr Cook was on building a community using a good balance between teacher presence, social presence and cognitive presence.

Definitions from the literature

Teacher presence. Teachers should:

- Provide a positive learning experience.
- Organise, present and scaffold content to facilitate learning through multiple learning activities, assessments and feedback.

Social presence. Teachers should:

- Be approachable.
- Create space for peer interaction and support.
- Promote high order and critical thinking skills through supported peer interactions.

Cognitive presence. Teachers should:

- Teach students how to critically analyse information and construct meaning.
- Ensure students engage with content that they can relate to and find relevant.

These three presences contribute to a conducive online learning environment. When instructors engage students well in interactive learning, students feel a sense of belonging which leads to an increase in student engagement and a decrease in student drop-outs.

Illustration of Practice

In order to promote student-teacher interactions and therefore teacher presence and social presence, Dr Cook struck a careful balance in every synchronous online lesson between teacher-talk and student-student interactions. Her lessons include the following segments:

- Recap of required readings and content delivery (teacher talk).
- Student group tasks for application of concepts, at least 20 minutes.
- Whole class discussion and student presentations, around 30 minutes.
- Recap of lesson and wrap up covering key points, 5 to 15 minutes).
- One to two five-minute breaks to prevent Zoom fatigue.

To promote cognitive presence, Dr Cook ensures that topics of discussion are relevant and of interest to the students, such as leadership or politics. Readings are connected to these topics, to ensure interest is maintained. From there, students must find ways to link the topic and the readings with examples that they find relevant, for example elections in Singapore, which allows students to engage cognitively with the material.

Example: Students were asked to read an academic article on the psychology of higher education. The article covered topics such as what motivates higher education students to learn and the different ways these students learn. This article served a dual purpose: the teacher used the article as a template for deconstructing and analysing academic writing, through examination of paragraph development and language. At the same time, the article's content allowed the students to link to their own experiences of learning in higher education and consider the insights into learning that the article may offer, from where they could develop presentations on topics extending beyond the reading, engaging them cognitively.

Results of Practice

Dr Cook surveyed students to ascertain whether her practice was engaging students.

Teacher and social presence

Student responses showed that most students found the lessons interesting and engaging. These findings highlight the crucial role of the teacher and of student discussion opportunities in student engagement.

Cognitive presence

Students identified that the topics they found most interesting were topics they could relate to, such as psychology in education. Even if these topics were highly theoretical, students engaged well in them, provided they were personally interested.

Academic literacies

A major purpose of the course is for students to develop academic literacy and writing. A majority of students reported high or very high engagement and interest in academic writing from this course.

Assessment

Students' attitudes to assessment showed that they strongly preferred the more applicable and engaging third assignment despite its higher level of difficulty, and they preferred the second assignment over the first assignment, which also provided the least opportunity for personal relevance and interest. Therefore, when there is a strong cognitive presence, they are more engaged and satisfied with their learning.