Everyone Teaches, Everyone Learns: Reconceiving Communities of Inquiry

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Abstract: Online discussions conceived as communities of inquiry (CoI) should place as much emphasis on learners teaching teachers as teachers teaching learners. First, in CoI as originally conceived, learners teaching teachers is a possibility. Teachers and learners are identified in the first instance as "participants." Second, online discussions succeed or fail depending on participants' level of engagement. Learner teaching and teacher learning increase the chances of success by increasing the ways participants can contribute to discussions. Third, given that participants in CoI are intended to search for and find collaborative solutions to shared problems, it is just as important that learners share their solutions with teachers as it is for teachers to share theirs with learners. Fourth, the CoI model is based on the American philosopher John Dewey's "new order of conceptions." Dewey demonstrated at his Laboratory School in Chicago that students, regardless of age, can contribute as much as or even more than teachers to the solution of shared problems. Finally, learner teaching is important even when it seems that teachers know "everything" and learners know "nothing." Dewey taught us that students never learn exactly what teachers teach, because the experience they bring to it is unique to them. Sharing what they actually learn tests teacher knowledge, and together they take one step closer to achieving a truly collaborative solution to the problem being investigated.

Introduction

Following the pioneering work of Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson and Walter Archer in Canada, online teachers in the U.S. and internationally see their discussion boards as communities of inquiry (CoI) in which "participants…construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89). CoI are based on John Dewey's model of practical inquiry in *How We Think*. "The product of…inquiry" in both "is the resolution of [a] dilemma or problem" (Ibid., p. 98). CoI are also based on Dewey's "My Pedagogic Creed," where he says that education is a social process. In CoI, "collaboration is seen as an essential aspect of cognitive development since cognition cannot be separated from the social context" (Ibid., p. 92). CoI research has produced mixed results (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2009; Saadatmand et al., 2017; Stover & Holland, 2018). According to Garrison (2007, p. 65), CoI can have "great difficulty" sustaining communication beyond an initial, exploratory phase. To reach the final,

resolution phase there must be "shared goals requiring a collaborative solution" (Ibid., p. 66). The underlying reason many communities of inquiry fail is that their goal is not to find a collaborative solution to a shared problem (Beckett, 2019).

Communities of Inquiry

The CoI model has three essential elements: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. "Teaching presence…may be provided by any of the participants in a community of inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 101). Teaching presence includes two main functions: discussion design and organization and discourse facilitation. Design, organization and facilitation, "though likely to be the primary responsibility of the teacher" (Ibid., pp. 89-90), "may be performed by any one participant in a Community of Inquiry" (Ibid., p. 89). Discourse facilitation specifically, one indicator of which is direct instruction, "is a responsibility that may be shared among the teacher and some or all of the other participants or students" (Ibid., p. 90). Issues have arisen concerning the effectiveness of participants' teaching presence (e.g., Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010), of the communities of inquiry model itself (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009), and of online discussions generally (Cho & Tobias, 2016), in sustaining communication and producing collaborative solutions. Educational activities fail when participants are not fully engaged. Communities of inquiry fail when learners are not given the opportunity to teach and teachers are not given the opportunity to learn. Though hardly conclusive, multiple searches of multiple databases using the phrases "learners teaching teachers" and "students teaching teachers" produced only single digit results, one of which is an article by Terry Anderson (Anderson & Dron, 2011); and in none of the articles and eBooks is learner teaching and teacher learning the main topic.

Dewey's New Order of Conceptions

Communities of inquiry would be more effective if as much emphasis were placed on learners teaching teachers as teachers teaching learners by focusing discussions on unresolved issues or problems which challenge teachers as well as learners. This design would fulfil the promise of Dewey's "new order of conceptions leading to new modes of practice" (1938/1963, p. 5). Education for Dewey was a collaborative enterprise (Vanderstraeten, 2002). His Laboratory School was conceived as a "cooperative society on a small scale" (Dewey, quoted in Mayhew & Edwards, 1936, p. 5). Teachers transmitted "established custom" (Dewey, 1916, p. 79); learners experimented with new ways of doing things; and the goal was to discover the way that worked best for the group as a whole. For Dewey, teachers and learners are participants in educational activities. Teachers contribute by teaching. But they also learn. Learners contribute by learning. But they also teach. In a process that involves learners assessing teacher teaching, teachers assessing leaner learning, learners and teachers seeking new knowledge and coming to a shared understanding on some topics and agreeing to differ on others, everyone teaches and everyone learns. And because the aim of an activity is to increase the body of shared knowledge, it is just as important that learners share their knowledge with teachers as it is for teachers to share their knowledge with learners.

In Dewey's new order of conceptions, what ultimately counts is not what teachers teach (or learn) or what learners learn (or teach) but the impact their teaching and learning has on the group as a whole (Beckett, 2018). Teachers and learners are members of a group—a class, a community, a society—and their task is to increase the knowledge of the group. Evidence of success comes from what the group does: the decisions it makes and actions it takes are more knowledgeable. Dewey saw the role of the teacher as "guide and leader" (Dewey, quoted in Engel, 2008, p. 118) in activities intended to promote social renewal. If he were with us today, teaching online, he would guide and lead learners as together they seek to renew their academic and professional communities. Unlike many communities of inquiry to date, Dewey's CoI would be as effective in achieving their goals as historians tell us the Laboratory School was in achieving its goals (Cremin, 1969; Cuban, 1993; Spring, 2013). Most CoI today are designed to advance learners' understanding of current theories and practices. Dewey and learners would be more engaged, knowing that the future of their academic and professional communities depended on them. They would focus on understanding current theories and practices *and* on ways they can be improved.

Teacher/Learner Engagement

Placing as much emphasis on learners teaching teachers as teachers teaching learners increases the chances of success by increasing the ways participants can engage in and contribute to discussions. No longer dependent on the altruism (and professionalism) of teachers (whose role is to help learners learn) and the selfishness (and emerging professionalism) of learners (Dewey's "egotistic specialists," 1916, p. 9), an avenue is opened for the selfishness in teachers and altruism in learners. When participants have more ways to contribute and are motivated in more ways to make contributions, educational activities will be more successful. Reconceiving discussions in this way also increases the chances of success by increasing the control participants have over a wider range of teaching and learning. In the old modes of practice, with the possible exception of drilled teaching and rote learning of facts and skills, what learners learn from teachers cannot be predicted in advance. Given the range of beliefs learners bring to new topics and the number of associations they make with them, what they actually learn might be almost anything. In the new modes of practice, teacher teaching is just the first step. The additional steps—learners assessing teacher teaching, etc.—give participants greater control over a wider range of teaching and learning.

Focusing online discussions on current issues or problems is possible in any field. And because they *are* issues teachers as well as learners can potentially learn something from the discussions. I teach an action research course for teachers online, focusing in the discussions on the role of the teacher-researcher and the reliability of their quasi-experimental research. Students consistently conflate the roles of teacher and teacher-researcher. They have experience of the former but not the latter and have difficulty seeing teachers, seeing themselves, as researchers. I can help. I have experience of both. On the other hand, most of my students have more PK-12 teaching experience than I do; and while my background is mainly in the social sciences, some of the students have a stronger background in the natural sciences. I know the arguments pro and con, know the

weaknesses as well as the strengths, but I have never seriously doubted the reliability of action research. Or at least I hadn't. Since teaching this course I have learned from my students that in classroom research there are many more uncontrollable variables than I had previously imagined, and whenever I begin to think I have mastered this topic a student will introduce me to one more.

Learner teaching is important even in discussions where it seems teachers know "everything" and learners know "nothing." The relevant experience learners have may be limited and fragmented, but it is the only context they have for understanding new material. What's true for them is what's true to their experience; everything else seems, at least at first, to be false. Dewey taught us that learners never learn exactly what teachers teach, because the experience they bring to it is unique to them. The implication is that learners sharing their learning with teachers will test teacher knowledge in ways it has not been tested before, and the group will take one step closer to a shared solution to the problem being investigated. Participants are people, people with different backgrounds, different life experiences. The knowledge they possess is uniquely theirs. Participants can and should teach each other. They have something unique to contribute, something which, as participants, they should contribute. And participants can and should learn from each other. Others have something unique to contribute, something they should have the opportunity to contribute.

I also teach an online course on the history of American education. The general issue the course addresses is how little we know about that history, and how what we do know is focused on the people—mostly white males—and the events that have had national impact. I tell students that I see American PK-12 education from the perspective of a white male observer, having immigrated from Canada as an adult. Almost all of my diverse students say they are native born Americans and received all of their education here. I teach what I have observed from a distance and what I have read in the literature. I am more familiar than my students with the people and events that have had national impact, because they tell me they can't remember having learned much if anything about educational history in school. The course is structured so that students research people and events in their home states and in their own family histories, and compare them with the national history I teach. The rationale is that the most important issue we face in our professional field is that research and scholarship is narrowly focused. We need to learn more about the history of education at the state level, and we need to hear the voices of more female, LGBTQ+, Native American, African American and LatinX historians. The students could be the scholars we need.

Conclusion

Dewey developed his philosophy of education during a period of rapid social change: American history's Progressive Era. We live in another period of rapid social change, now on a global scale. Our homes and classrooms are changing, driven largely by new technologies, with even young children having direct access to information on the internet and a seeming need to share it on social media. The CoI approach is nowhere more important than in our emerging global classrooms, where the need to collapse

distances between participants is great and working towards a common goal can be effective. Now that learners know more and, when compared with what there is to know, teachers know less, learners have as much to teach teachers as teachers have to teach them; and just as teachers challenge learner knowledge, learners can be expected to challenge teacher knowledge. The surprise here would be if learners' doubts were *not* new to teachers and did *not* have the potential to test and strengthen teacher knowledge. Living in a connected world with urgent issues in front of them 24 hours a day, the surprise would be if they were not concerned, did not want to help, and did not have ideas of their own.

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