

Matters of the Heart: Supporting from the Office to the Classroom

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Abstract

After the COVID-19 pandemic, we recognized the importance of honoring professors and educators who shifted to online teaching by examining and presenting classroom technology supports we, as professors, provided to our graduate students. As leaders work to design support strategies that motivate and inspire hope, ideas shared can be integrated into daily practice at all levels during regular and emergency times. We convey through our discussions the need to impact future practice in leveraging technology to obtain greater productivity and improve presence (Stachowiak, 2020) by implementing a community of inquiry. Our support systems are indeed matters of the heart.

Keywords: inspire hope, support, community of inquiry

The COVID-19 Pandemic took everyone by surprise. With devastating numbers of friends and family dying daily, people struggled with fear, uncertainty, and lack. Dealing with COVID-19 was one emergency, and while we dealt with that crisis, social media outlets such as our local news indicated mass shootings occurring in schools and large gatherings throughout the nation causing more trauma and stress to educators.

During and after COVID-19, students took their stressors to the classroom. According to Else-Quest, Sathy, & Hogan (2022) professors are trying to find ways to support students by giving grace and being mindful of the situations and current climate. Professors in educational programs continue serving students experiencing burnout and stress while carrying those feelings to class (Carlton, 2023). In the fiscal year of 2022, a Texas Education Agency showed at least 471 reports of teachers abandoning their contracts before the school year was over (Lopez & Beeferman, 2022).

Challenged and exhausted, we survived battles! During the emergency times, what support was provided by university and school administration? We cannot overlook the constant that matters most in the lives of students whether in PK-12 or higher education and that is the educator, teacher, or professor.

The cry for help was heard and felt, thus prompting the presentation of our experiences via a qualitative perspective offering reflections based on the following questions:

Q1: What were the different types of support we offered as professors to our students?

Q2: What support was provided to educators from office administrators, department heads, and administration beyond a department head?

Q3: How was the community engaged in supporting educators during these difficult times?

Background

The world of education quickly shifted at the onset of COVID-19. One day, teachers and professors were teaching at what most would describe as ‘normal’ and the next day everyone was informed school and university buildings would be closing. Within a week’s time, we were told to prepare for online training and to adapt to online environments. This was no small feat. There were teachers and professors who had experienced nothing but face-to-face teaching their entire careers. The three of us had already experienced teaching online; therefore, we were not afraid but there were questions from our entire team. Some new learning of terminology and technology took place for us and faculty who had traditionally taught face-to-face courses (Atchley, S., Pruitt, S., & Ross, S., personal communication, February 11, 2023).

According to Stark and Jones (2021), as the pandemic continued to linger, teachers from across the country felt demoralized and emotionally drained. While teachers worked emotionally drained, many did so with high levels of stress and health concerns because they had to teach in unprecedented and challenging ways (Zamarro et al., 2021). It is important, therefore, to better understand how to support teachers during times of uncertainty such as pandemics and other emergencies.

Sumer and Yuner (2021), examined support services administrative leadership provided in higher education to their faculty in Turkey, using the lack of time for preparation, transition, and support as factors of impact. The researchers utilized a multiple-case design to gain as much evidence as possible to examine the experiences faculty members lived during the pandemic with the resources and training available. Participants included faculty from eight different universities in Turkey and were chosen via purposive sampling (Sumer & Yuner, 2021). The method used for data collection was semi-structured interviews and analyzed through content analysis. From the 16 faculty members interviewed, the researchers saw two themes emerge: support services provided, and support services needed. Both administrative and academic support was provided. Administratively, enrollment, course creation, and preparation and dissemination of user guides for new online systems were listed as supports during the pandemic emergency times (Sumer & Yuner, 2021). Those services listed as academic support were exchanging presentations within peer circles, assistance with online

exams or information on how to administer them, and learning materials to utilize in courses. Technical support was listed by some faculty indicating they were provided with some videos that explained simple ‘how to processes’ and one faculty mentioned having trainers, or representatives, available by phone or email if needed for support rather than waiting on someone from a support center to answer the call. Social support was provided mainly by peers in sharing experiences and lending an ear to each other at the onset of the pandemic during the first weeks of the transition but was no longer popular when each knew what to do within their courses (Sumer & Yuner, 2021).

Online Methods of Teaching

Online methods of teaching existed long before COVID-19; however, some professors as well as some PK-12 teachers were not experts in online teaching. Raaper and Brown (2020) provided ‘food for thought’ to university leaders when seeking to understand, create, and provide support for students during critical times. In their essay, Raaper and Brown (2020) drew from the theoretical ideas of Hannah Arendt (1954) in looking at the analysis of societal crises. From the exploration of social network analysis, the researchers offered recommendations for university leaders to review and promote as support networks for students and faculty. Social support networks, as defined by Raaper and Brown, are the actors or groups connected to each other by functions, ties, or relations. Identified points of student support included social interactions of capable professors with which engagement could occur, defined as professional learning networks, and services that offer new and updated technological tools and support for utilization to ensure access due to existing inequalities.

Demanding challenges during disruptive situations magnifies transitions while calling for a different preparedness. Vielma and Brey (2020) found numerous support and training opportunities that other universities and schools could adopt for successful transitions during emergency times such as offering multiple modes of course delivery, faculty availability, flexibility, empathy, and socio-emotional support during the transition to online learning.

In *Small Teaching*, Darby and Lang (2019) suggested using the approach of simply paying attention to small decisions we make in providing the best strategies and learning opportunities for success. Teachers are encouraged to take small approaches to making changes to enhance students' online experiences.

The overall challenges of COVID-19 and the transition to online learning created opportunities for school and university leaders to better understand the support needed during these times. Students, teachers, and professors were challenged to implement new modes of instruction, use new software platforms, and work from different locations. Organizational stress was coupled with stressors of unprecedented change.

This contribution adds to the scholarly work from the practitioner's professional perspective providing teachers and professors with support systems and ideas in which to inspire hope, motivate students, and remove organizational stress.

Framework

Providing an adult-centered instructional design reflecting best practices of andragogy, the study of how

adults learn, and implementing effective teaching strategies in online environments is essential for the *21st century and beyond* classroom. Making small changes can result in great impacts and motivation for teachers and students alike. Darby and Lang (2019) reinforce teacher support for students by referencing the need to show up for class which increases engagement and student satisfaction. Darby and Lang suggested motivating and supporting by creating an energizing learning atmosphere. To create these lessons and further support students, we must be willing as professors and leaders, to avoid being stagnate and learn new theories and strategies to make our online instruction stimulating.

Picciano (2017) examined several theories for online education and of those relevant to supporting teachers and students, Gagne's (1985) Nine Events of Instruction and the Community of Inquiry models are presented as integrated models of consideration.

Robert Gagne (1985), an educational psychologist, built upon Bloom's work and further developed the model of the nine events of instruction shown in Figure 1. Successfully implemented, these nine events of instruction can be the changing factor in creatively designing meaningful and engaging lessons.

Figure 1.

Gagne's Nine Events of Instruction

	Instructional Event	Description
1.	Gain Attention	Use media relevant to topic
2.	Describe the goal	Provide clear objectives for the overall course goals
3.	Stimulate prior knowledge	Review previously presented material and concepts and connect them to the material to be addressed in the current module
4.	Present the material to be learned	Readings, presentations, demonstrations, multimedia, graphics, audio files, animations, etc.
5.	Provide guidance for learning	Discussions to enable learners to actively reflect on new information in order to check their knowledge and understanding of content.
6.	Elicit performance	Activity-based learning such as group research projects, discussion, homework, etc...

7.	Provide feedback	Immediate, specific, and constructive feedback is provided to students.
8.	Assess performance	Assessment activity such as a test, research project, essay, or presentation.
9.	Enhance retention and transfer	Provide opportunities for additional guided practice or projects that might relate learning to other real-life activities.

Community of Inquiry

Picciano (2017) shared the work of Garrison and colleagues (2000) who developed the community of inquiry (CoI). Garrison et al.'s (2000) theory was designed to be interactive with strategies used by students and teachers such as various types of videoconferencing and discussion boards. Within the model, the idea of 'presence' (social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence) throughout the learning experience is prevalent and suggests interactions of all parties. Martin et al. (2022) analyzed 19 studies on the community of inquiry presences. In their study, the researchers drew attention to the teaching presence, cognitive presence, and social presence. How these presences interact in providing learning environments that are blended, online, or hybrid is crucial in analysis of the heart work.

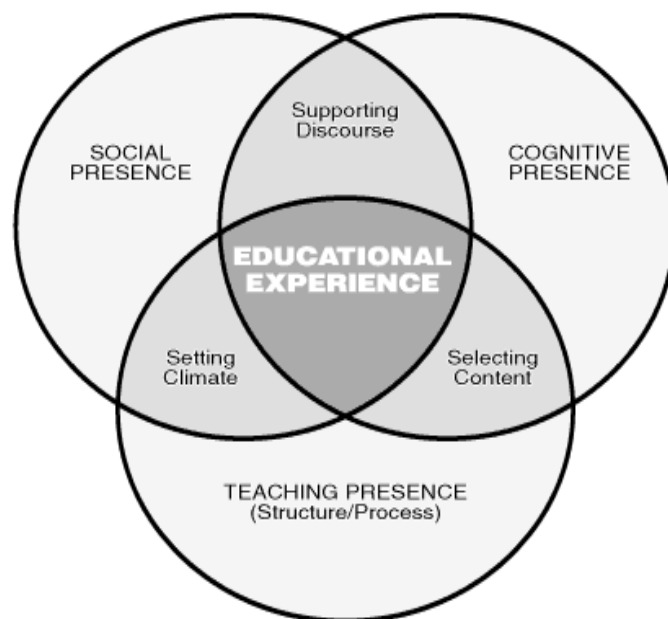
Teacher presence is defined as the teacher's interactions with students combined with taught curriculum and content. Luzeckyj (2020) posited activities that are active rather than passive to encourage interaction and engagement with others throughout lesson modules. Cognitive presence is defined as the art of students constructing meaning as they collaborate, explore, resolve, and integrate from a critical and higher-order thinking process (Martin et al., 2022). Social presence takes a close look at the interactions of all stakeholders with each other and the community being intentional in trusting and developing positive relationships (Martin, et al., 2022).

Conclusively, CoI is the act of creating a learning environment in which all students leave the course feeling a sense of belonging or connection with their instructor and peers, and the students will have engaged in lessons and coursework designed to foster collaborative learning throughout their experiences.

The CoI framework provides a basis for supporting teachers and leaders offering online environments.

Figure 2

Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI Framework, 2020)



To understand the professional perspectives based on our own personal narratives, the activities discussed have been categorized in each of the types of CoI presences. In the presentation, attendees were shown elements of presence (without the labels) which are discussed further in detail particularly how they were used in online, blended, or hybrid courses with graduate students.

Discussion: Correlation of CoI and University Practices

Part 1: The Classroom - Professors Supporting Graduate Educational Leadership Students

Q1: What were the different types of support we offered as professors to our students?

'Our job as leaders is to inspire hope through challenging times, to let people know that we will not just survive but can and will thrive.' Jill Siler, 2020

The year is 2023, and as we leave the 2020 COVID-19 era and move forward, the support we give must continue to carry Siler's message of inspiring hope. Reviewing individual practices of our presentation, there were notable actions that supported graduate-level students. These practices were labeled (see bold titles) to show a correlation to the Community of Inquiry framework. The correlation to Gagne's framework, the nine events of instruction, is shown at the end of the event in parentheses.

- **Social/Cognitive Presence:** Saturday morning Coffee with an author of a required textbook - after reading and reviewing chapters, students were able to meet with the author on Zoom (stimulate prior knowledge/enhance retention/transfer)
- **Teaching Presence:** Professors scheduled additional zooms at the beginning of and throughout the semester to clarify assignments listed in the learning management system of online programs (describe the goal/provide feedback/provide guidance for learning)
- **Social Presence:** Professors opened chats allowing students opportunities to share best practices with peers during practicums and observations (provide guidance for learning)
- **Cognitive/Teaching Presence:** Professors offered and participated in mini-intensive, professional development sessions to improve skills by selecting skilled guest speakers (Elicit performance/enhance retention and transfer)
- **Cognitive/Teaching Presence:** Department offered a one-on-one research assistant to assist with article Publications for conference presentations (provide feedback)
- **Teaching//Social Presence:** Mentoring for students in graduate programs. Mentoring for professors needing help with technology. (provide feedback)
- **Social/Teaching Presence:** Real talk in which the instructor shared real-world experiences and

scenarios that occur in schools to give students an opportunity to explore how they would handle situations. (Enhance retention and transfer)

- **Social/Teaching Presence:** Organized feedback - Students and professors provide feedback to each other. (provide feedback)
- **Cognitive/Teaching Presence:** First and Third Thursday Zoom meetings to clarify questions and concerns and review lessons when needed (stimulate prior knowledge)
- **Social Presence:** What type of leader would I be talk (Enhance retention and transfer)
- **Cognitive/Teaching Presence:** MVP - focused on specific academic points or whatever professor chose for Most Valuable Principal. This was a newsletter filled with course and profession-relevant information housed inside the student learning management system of D2L. (Enhance retention and transfer/Present the material to be learned)

SEL Practices Supporting Graduate-Level Educational Leadership Students

- **Social/Teaching Presence:** Showing grace and understanding throughout emergencies, birth of children, deaths, job loss, divorce, mental fatigue (Enhance retention and transfer)
- **Teaching Presence:** Allowing additional time to complete assignments even when there is no written disability (Assess performance)
- **Social Presence:** Showcasing student presentations or working in groups on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook (Elicit performance/present the material to be learned)
- **Social/Teaching/Cognitive Presence:** Scheduled well checks throughout the semester using GIFs. This was an easy way to earn bonus points. All a student had to do was inform the professor of his or her wellness by posting a GIF that symbolized good, not so good, hanging on by a thread, or even being awesome. This type of support system can be utilized by presidents, deans, faculty, and public

school administrators supporting their staff and students.

Message Review of Student Comments

We looked at a few of our personal messages to determine how they would be categorized using the community of inquiry model. The results are shared.

Social/Cognitive/Teaching Presence: “OMG, I couldn’t have made it without you guys. You had so much patience when I had that bad semester of problems. When I pass my PASL, it will be because of your teaching and mentoring and I will tell them (University officials) it was the three of you who helped me.” -Student A (Gain attention/Stimulate prior knowledge)

Social/Cognitive/Teaching Presence: “I have thoroughly enjoyed the course. The workload was very manageable as I continue to work throughout the summer. Additionally, I found inspiration in the materials you presented from various thought leaders. The online components were very organized and easy to follow. I also appreciate the zoom meetings you held as they helped to have insight to the course and assignments. I have no critiques to offer! Thank you for helping me along this journey.” -Student B (present the material to be learned)

Social/Cognitive/Teaching Presence: “Oh, I love this leaderboard! I am in first place and I’m going to try and stay there.” -Student C (Enhance retention and transfer)

Cognitive/Teaching Presence: “Dr. ___, will you be able to hear me present? I was accepted to that conference. Thanks for all of your help.” -Student D (provide guidance for learning)

The professor is more than a teacher. He or she is mentoring constantly. Siler (2020) contends when we seek mentorship, we must go the distance. we must create opportunities and put in the effort to make it happen. These supporting practices inspire students to continue attending classes. They inspire students to reach further in their studies to finish the journey. Siler asserts, “It’s not so much the what, because anyone can know what to do. It’s all about the how. How will you lead in a way that inspires hope?”

Part 2: The Office - Leadership Supporting Teachers and Professors

Q2: What support was provided to educators from office administrators, department heads, and administration beyond a department head?

Throughout the COVID 19 experience, faculty shared experiences of burnout, fatigue, lack of support, and some support depending on the university.

A review of several studies provides information regarding support made available to faculty members. Kezar and DePaola (2018) published a study, Why non-tenure track faculty needs support to create quality classrooms. In this study, several questions were raised. Are we giving any thought to how we could be preventing faculty from performing at full capacity? Are we providing them with appropriate orientation, socialization interests, mentoring, professional development, feedback, opportunities for governance collaboration, and other forms of professional interactions? Higher education administration, listen up. There is a challenge with creating appropriate support. The Delphi Project, on Change the Faculty and Student Success, has taken on the challenge of identifying the appropriate supports to help non-tenure track faculty, however, this information is good for all leaders. Once an organization tastes an elite level of success, as argued by Siler (2020), every part of that organization will want to rise to that level. The three of us experienced various supports during the emergency shutdown. We discussed having academic technology training, alternate work locations, and grace regarding family illnesses and deaths.

Professors supporting each other

According to Dufour and Marzano (2011), the best leaders in education are ‘in love with the work they do’ and that passion perseveres in difficult times and situations. Thus, leadership or even mentorship is a matter of the heart as the actions of the leader or mentor connects one closer to his or her dreams. Some of us learned different technical skills and volunteered to teach others during the pandemic. We attended a class and were given certificates that identified us as an ‘expert’ others could contact if they needed assistance. While working together on this project, we were reminded that informal faculty-to-faculty chat sessions were supportive. Helping each other is another form of support. We are reminded to celebrate the talents

each faculty member brings to the table. In the following comment, teaching presence is prevalent.

Teaching Presence. “I cannot believe you're sharing your outline to your tenure packet and web page design! This is unbelievable! Dr. ____.” (describe the goal, gain attention, present the material to be learned)

Part 3: Engaging the Community

Q3: How was the community engaged in supporting educators during these difficult times?

School-University-Community Partnership initiatives are designed to connect schools, universities, and communities with the purpose of sharing knowledge and information to build capacity. Chittum et al., (2022) concluded that higher education and campuses would benefit from community contributions in the learning process. Results of contributions have shown positive outcomes in increased career-related skills, learning gains, and improved graduation rates (Chittum et al., 2022). A few university-community engagement activities included those listed below.

- **Cognitive/Teaching Presence:** Hosting guest speakers in the classroom (zoom) We used experienced principals, central office staff, board members, and superintendents to speak to our classes. (Enhance retention and transfer)
- **Social Presence:** Opening welcome on the first day of class to inform students we're glad they chose us as their professor. Professors tell about

themselves as students share information about their personal and work life if they chose to do so. (gain attention)

- **Social Presence:** Sending personal email invites to class members (gain attention)
- **Social Presence:** Meet and greet zooms. What do you do, where do you work, camera is on to see you for at least one day (gain attention)

Conclusion

Stachowiak (2020) wrote on the cover of her book in a special message to a colleague, “May we all find more ways to be present.” Only when we recognize the challenges of different emergencies and crises and bring collaborative voices to the conversation will we have the knowledge and capacity to provide varied support systems to our professors and educators who teach a diversified population of students who live with situational learning needs. Leaders must take into consideration support provided and support needed as both are crucial to the success of the learner and educator. It takes an enormous amount of committed attention and intentional work from leaders to ensure support systems are designed and delivered across learning institutions. Institutions of higher learning and public schools can benefit when each begins the intentional focus on integrating all principles of the CoI model into educational instructional experiences, thus forging a more successful and effective framework for teaching online courses as recommended by Cooper and Scriven (2017).

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