

Building community in an online learning environment is an essential component for the learner success. It helps learners feel supported and can help mitigate feelings of isolation due to a lack of in-person instruction. A **Community of Inquiry** is a group of people – instructors and learners - who collaborate with intention and reflection in order to create meaning and mutual understanding. This is important for an online learning environment as it helps learners remain engaged and be active participants toward a common goal. The **Community of Inquiry (Col)** framework ([Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009](#)) is a model of the necessary core elements to both the development of community and the pursuit of inquiry in any educational environment. It revolves around three elements:



## Cognitive Presence.

To encourage students to extend discussions beyond the sharing/brainstorming stage:

- Challenge students to solve problems
- Explicitly facilitate and direct assignments



## Teaching Presence.

Create expectations and encourage open communication to build group commitment. Correct misconceptions, help summarize discussion, provide resources and provide metacognitive awareness.



## Social Presence.

Several studies have shown social presence as a predictor of learner satisfaction with online learning. Encourage:

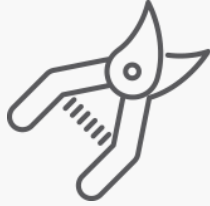
- **Affective expression:** learners share personal expressions of feelings, beliefs and values
- **Open communication:** learners build and sustain a sense of group commitment
- **Group cohesion:** learners interact around common intellectual activities and tasks

#### REFERENCES:

Swan, K., Garrison, D. R., & Richardson, J. C. (2009). A constructivist approach to online learning: The community of inquiry framework. In *Information technology and constructivism in higher education: Progressive learning frameworks* (pp. 43-57). IGI Global.

## Building Community Online

The following strategies can be used to help build a sense of community with and among students ([Berry, 2019](#); [Freeman & Eggart, 2019](#)):



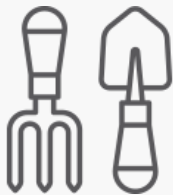
### Reach out early and often.

Create a welcome video, send welcome emails at the beginning of the course, build rapport with students, share personal stories, make regular announcements and weekly updates, etc. Make your presence known in a real and tangible way.



### Limit lecture time and increase discussion.

Cultivating community is also about facilitating discussion/interactions between peers. Use a discussion-based approach or flipped classroom. Promote dialogue among students during lectures.



### Use multiple features of the virtual classroom.

Make use of all features offered in your online platform. This may include using breakout rooms for group discussion or communicating both verbally and through the chat feature. Being inclusive of all types of learners will contribute to improved student engagement.



### Use class time to share personal updates.

Turn the classroom into more of a social and interactive space. For instance, have the first few minutes of class as a chance for students to share any personal updates/stories with peers.

#### REFERENCES:

Berry, S. (2019). Teaching to Connect: Community-Building Strategies for the Virtual Classroom. *Online Learning*, 23(1), 164-183.

Freeman, M. T. M., & Jarvie-Eggart, M. E. (2019). Best Practices in Promoting Faculty-Student Interaction in Online STEM Courses.