

Pedagogical lessons for remote/blended online classrooms

By Karen Englander & Bruce Russell, University of Toronto, Canada

Abstract

An English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Pathway Program of a major Canadian university suddenly pivoted to remote teaching and learning, as did so many other university programs across the country in the 2020–2021 academic year. The Pathway Program, took the opportunity of this “pivot” to research how students and instructors fared with the new technology-mediated curriculum and found key practices as useful for instructors. In this article, we describe the Community of Inquiry framework that underpins our study and the insights gained for instructors who retain at least some remote teaching activities in their classrooms. Implications of this study indicate that there are five ways in which instructors can potentially alter their pedagogy to further student satisfaction for online study. Each activity furthers the social, teaching and/or cognitive presence that students can experience and suggests practices that instructors can consider for their own remote teaching.

Keywords: remote teaching, online learning, Community of Inquiry, pathway programs, EAP

An English for Academic Purposes (EAP) Pathway Program of a major Canadian university suddenly pivoted to remote teaching and learning, as did so many other university programs across the country in the 2020–2021 academic year (CAUT, 2020). The program, referred to here as the Pathway Program, took the opportunity of this “pivot” to research how students and instructors fared with the new technology-



mediated curriculum and found key practices to be useful for instructors. In this article, we describe the Community of Inquiry framework that underpins our study, the research methodology, and the insights gained for instructors who retain at least some remote teaching activities in their classrooms.

The Community of Inquiry framework was first posited by three instructors at Athabasca University in Alberta more than 20 years ago. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) were investigating how students responded to the then new “discussion boards” that were asynchronous message threads being incorporated into some university teaching activities. Since that time, the Community of Inquiry framework has been used for designing curricula and understanding student experiences in many other online teaching settings as reported in the 2010 special issue of *The Internet and Higher Education* and other work (Archer, 2010; Mo & Lee, 2017; Swan & Ice, 2010). In our Pathway Program, it was used to inform both curriculum design and a research study focused on remote teaching and learning in the 2020–2021 academic year.

Three presences comprise the Community of Inquiry framework, and they are identified as central to the student’s experience in online teaching and learning. *Cognitive presence* is the “most basic to success in higher education” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). It focuses on the students’ ability to “construct meaning” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89) from course materials, engage in critical thinking, and be intellectually stimulated.

Social Presence is sometimes characterized as simply a sense of belonging in a community of learners. It is the student’s ability to “project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89). Pedagogies of collaboration through activities of peer teaching and peer review, small and large group discussions, and paired writing are especially affected by the students’ sense of being seen and valued as a “real person” in online-mediated environments.

Teaching presence has a two-fold function: It captures the design of the educational experience through learning activities and assessments and the facilitation of learning through teachers’ discourse. In short, it is the role of the teacher as perceived by the students in their educational experience. These three presences, separately and together, describe the educational experience available to students.

In the Pathway Program research, we used the Community of Inquiry framework to investigate students’ experience and instructors’ experience. The results that we report here are drawn from data collected through student questionnaires (n=178) and 30 hours of instructor meetings and interviews. Data analysis revealed five best practices for instructors to implement that enhance students’ experience as part of an online learning community. These practices and the data that informs them are reported here.



1) **Your presence makes the difference.** The 178 students who participated in our questionnaire study rated their experience of “teaching presence” as the most satisfactory, over cognitive and social presences. They said, for example, “My instructors are so great that I have more passion in the classes.” Students remarked that instructors were “dedicated”, “helpful”, “patient”, “friendly”, and “committed.” For example, “Teachers tried to let us understand and wanted to help improve our English level.”

Despite reports that students’ sense of belonging is the primary criterion for success in online learning (Mo 2021; Richardson et al., 2017; Straythorn, 2020), we found that it was students’ sense of the teachers’ involvement that most highly correlated with their online satisfactory learning experience. Our students rated their sense of social presence—their connecting with other “real” students—as the least satisfactory. They said, for example, that it was “difficult to build connections with the class or the school” and “it is hard to make new friends online.” Given that, overall, the students rated their satisfaction with the Pathway Program as 4.3 out of 5. It was the high engagement of instructors with the students that made for a successful online learning experience.

Therefore, best practice indicates that instructors need to engage with the students through synchronous classes, one-on-one feedback, and patience with the students’ navigation of the online learning experience.

2) **Keep cameras on.** Promoting students’ sense of social presence is facilitated by seeing each other. Students and instructors reported that participating in synchronous activities was much more satisfying when everyone kept their cameras on. Not all instructors in the Pathway Program required students to have their cameras on, and they described this as wanting to protect the students’ privacy. They said that some students seemed embarrassed when other family members entered the view, or they did not like having others see their home. This was particularly relevant for students who did not have a private study space.

However, the anonymity of only a voice, or the microphone muted and no picture, seemed to foment student disengagement. One instructor reported calling on a student during a synchronous class only to find out that she was not even there. Students lamented the difficulty of “making friends” with classmates, and the absence of the faces of their classmates exacerbated this. One student said that in the synchronous “break out” rooms, sometimes students would have no face, and this seemed to lead to no discussion. Cognitive presence—the intellectual interaction with course content—was enhanced when students brought their faces and their voices to synchronous learning activities.

3) **Create “lecturettes”.** Our Pathway Program classes are usually three hours long, twice a week, and take place in the classroom. That had to be transformed for online delivery. The new learning cycle for our language-focused courses became (i) a 70-minute synchronous class, (ii) asynchronous independent tasks intended for approximately 50 minutes, and (iii) a one-hour pre-recorded lecture that students watched

prior to the synchronous “live” class. Much like a flipped classroom, the pre-recorded video lectures were the means for presenting most of the curricular content.

We quickly learned that students found watching the one-hour lectures was, at best, tedious. Instructors then began experimenting with shorter lectures, breaking the content into smaller chunks. These became known as “lecturettes”. Instead of 60 continuous minutes, there was a series of 5-, 10-, or even 20-minute lecturettes. They would be numbered as Number 1, Number 2, etc., so students knew the order for watching them. This method allowed students to stop, pause, rewind if necessary, and take a break, without losing the continuity of the content, as each became complete in itself.

Some instructors asked the students to perform an asynchronous task at the end of the lecturette (e.g., complete a worksheet, look up information, write a reflection) to reinforce the content before opening the next lecturette in the series. Students’ cognitive presence was stimulated in this manner, without being oversaturated and disengaged.

By using lecturettes, the curricular content was more easily integrated and more readily welcomed into their learning activities.

4) **Make learning affordances explicit.** As described above, the learning cycle we designed at the Pathway Program had three elements: synchronous “live” class, asynchronous independent tasks, and flipped lesson lecturettes. We assumed that all the students would recognize the importance of all these elements and give them equal weight, but instructors found that they did not. Some students thought that they only really needed to attend the live classes. Others thought the real content was in the lectures, so the live class was just for socializing. Some felt that the asynchronous tasks were simply optional extra work. Because online learning with this learning cycle was new to the students, the affordances of each was not necessarily clear.

As a result, instructors found that it was important to make the affordances of each element in the cycle explicit to the students. Not only did each element contribute to the students’ mastery of the course content, each one facilitated the different presences that comprise the Community of Inquiry framework; for example:

- The lecturettes supported students’ cognitive presence. They could watch, learn, study, review, and consider the content for cognitive engagement with the course content.
- Similarly, the asynchronous tasks supported cognitive presence. If students decided to collaborate with a classmate on the tasks, their social presence was enhanced. For the activities where instructors provided personal feedback, students gained teaching presence through that interaction.
- The synchronous classes involved all three presences. The instructor made his/her teaching style overt and engaged with students, which provided teaching presence to the students. Cognitive presence was

stimulated through the content. Students were able to make their social presence known through large group discussions and small group activities within breakout rooms.

While instructors did not necessarily discuss the three presences with the students, the affordances of each type of activity was discussed. By being explicit about the affordances, instructors guided the students to take advantage of all the elements of the curriculum.

5) Reconsider assessment. Assessment activities were affected by the remote platforms in ways that we did not expect. Happily, the number of academic integrity violations was lower than previous years in our Pathway Program, and this runs contrary to many reports in the mainstream press (Roberts, 2021; Sonoran, 2020) which discussed widespread “cheating” in university courses. However, we did find the manner of academic integrity violations was different than in the past.

Students seemed to be able to use technological applications for remote assessment activities in ways that are not possible in the classroom. For example, students were able to use an app that provided transcripts of the lectures used for listening assessments, eliminating the need to listen. They also found apps that translated text from English to Chinese so that they were able to read in their L1 rather than in English. Written answers could be first written in Chinese and then translated by an app into English. In one case, a student who used this strategy even submitted their original Chinese answer. It was also possible for students to communicate with each other through a social media app (e.g., WeChat) at the same time that an individualized assessment was taking place. We note that this last strategy reveals a positive social presence among the students. In other words, some did rely on classmates as a sign of a social bond. However, as one instructor wryly noted, “they didn’t always know who was the smart one”. This manner of connection also excluded the students who did not speak Mandarin, although they were only 9 of the 220 students.

Assessment activities are now being reconsidered, especially as online learning is continuing in some form in our Pathway Program. We are exploring speaking assessments that involve several students simultaneously where they record themselves and then submit the audio/video to the instructor. Multimedia assessment that requires students to use video, PowerPoint, Padlets, and other technologies are possible. Students providing individual voice responses to exam questions rather than written ones could limit the academic integrity violations of their classmates. In addition, by considering the affordances of applications, new and more meaningful assessments could be possible.



Conclusion

Remote teaching and learning in English for Academic Purposes has motivated a sudden transformation of curricula and pedagogy, and this was certainly true of the Pathway Program at a major Canadian university. To inform that transformation, we took advantage of a well-documented framework called the Community of Inquiry, which posits three presences that contribute to students' satisfaction: social, cognitive, and teaching. We note that authors have critiqued the original Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999, 2010) framework for not considering other presences. Neither learning presence or learning outcomes are accounted for in the framework (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Shea et al., 2012). However, we agree with the argument made by Akyol et al. (2009) that it is the “nature of the educational transaction” which is of interest in the framework, and in our study. Because our interest is in the nature of the educational transaction, we did not correlate student grades with the presences. Neither did we compare grades in this 2020–2021 cohort to students' grades in prior years when the Pathway Program provided face-to-face classroom pedagogy.

While we transformed our curriculum of the Pathway Program for remote teaching and learning, we simultaneously undertook a research study of its efficacy using the same Community of Inquiry framework. Combining student questionnaires and analysis of instructor discourse, we were able to determine, most importantly, that students were largely pleased with the program. They rated it as 4.3 “stars” out of 5.

Our analysis of the student and instructor data using the Community of Inquiry framework did allow us to identify five best practices for remote teaching and learning. Those five best practices are:

1. Your presence makes the difference.
2. Keep cameras on.
3. Create lecturettes.
4. Make learning affordances explicit.
5. Reconsider assessment.

Indications are that some form of remote teaching and learning will continue in higher education. This may be required by public health policy or adopted as part of blended delivery going forward. The best practices described here can help instructors to make research-informed decisions about their own pedagogy as they continue to explore the affordances and difficulties of online EAP curricula.



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Author Bios



Karen Englander, PhD, is the Research Officer at the International Foundation Program of the University of Toronto. She is an established scholar in the sub-discipline of English for Research Publication Purposes with two recent books: *English for Research Publication Purposes: Critical-Pragmatic Approaches* (co-author James Corcoran) and *Pedagogies and Policies for Publishing Research in English* (co-editors James Corcoran and Laura Muresan). She has published two dozen peer-reviewed articles in English and Spanish. Karen is a former professor at the Universidad Autónoma de Baja California, Mexico, and York University, Canada, teaching EAP, TESL/TEFL, and applied linguistics.



Bruce Russell has been Director (Academic) of International Programs at the University of Toronto since 2004 where he oversees programming and instruction. Bruce is interested in how language support can be tailored to meet the needs of both international and domestic English language learners in post-secondary contexts. His research interests include specific purposes language assessment, content language integrated learning, translanguaging, and reliability and validity issues in language assessment. Bruce is pursuing his PhD at OISE with an emphasis on language assessment.

