

BALANCING THE PARADOX: DELIVERING TRANSFORMATIVE LASALLIAN EDUCATION ONLINE IN A CULTURE OF COMMODITY

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ABSTRACT

Higher education faces growing expectations for transactional education: quick throughput programs, education for employment, technical coursework, inflated grades, etc. In this environment, how do Lasallian Educators balance a desire to provide transformative education with student demands for transactional education? This paper examines the commodification of education, Lasallian transformative roots, and the potential of online education to expand access to transformative Lasallian learning communities.

Key words: High education, commodification in education, Lasallian education, transformative education, community of inquiry, online learning communities.

Introduction

According to the news article “Wall of Shame” (2015, March 28), U.S. American higher education exports high-quality education to countries abroad; however, the system needs to expand access beyond elite students. This is not news. Lasallian educators opened doors to underserved populations centuries ago. Despite the efforts of many educational systems, the need to expand educational access persists. In the face of growing need, Lasallian educators must explore new opportunities to advance the Lasallian mission. Brothers of the Christian Schools (2015) state, “There is an urgent need to find new roadmaps that encourage creativity and innovation in the pursuit of the common good,” (p. 11). To that end, this paper examines the potential of online education to extend the reach of transformative Lasallian learning communities.

Commodification of Education

The debate on the purpose, outcomes, assessment, and mission of higher education rages on in our homes, classrooms, legislatures, and in the media. Is “education for employment” the driving force behind academic inquiry and education? Are universities and colleges financial hostages to offering popular, quick throughput, high-revenue producing programs? Can we find a balance of offering specialized training while teaching to the common good, the holistic development of the student as a transformed and educated person?

To understand the paradox of transformative and transactional education, one must examine its underlying assumptions. Classically defined, education is a process of growth and change, ultimately benefitting both society and the individual as new knowledge and truth are discovered

(Benezet, 1971). However, in many cases, the focus of education changed from a search for truth, to a search for a job, which fundamentally altered the higher educational landscape. As Apple (1995) warned, education fueled by the free-market as a means of perceived social and economic advancement will lead to the replication of dominant hegemonies and established extrinsic reward systems.

Movement towards transactional education pressured universities to “dispense higher education more quickly, with more flexibility,” (Benezet, 1971, p. 2). Foucault (2008) argued that as vocabulary evolves in an established hegemony, the expectations, motivations, and accepted practices of that system also evolve. Sanders (2014) suggested that the neoliberal movement manifested changes within university operating cultures as a result of free market relationships.

In this context, the relationship between teacher and student becomes service provider and customer. According to Fullerton (2013), students reported that their primary motivation for pursuing a college education was to procure a better paying job than those available to high school students. White (2007) noted that students perceived grades to be the significant product taken from the university, as opposed to learning. In addition, participants reported an adversarial relationship with university administration, often feeling the university was more interested in “efficiency and the bottom line” than providing quality education (White, 2007, p. 597). A student explained this succinctly, “I am a business major. By requiring me take classes in areas like music, theater, literature and so on, the university is just trying to make money off students by requiring additional classes that are not needed in my chosen career field,” (Fullerton, 2013, p. 33). Saunders (2014) suggested that students are sensitive to tuition costs, university revenues, their power as a consumer, and accountability of the university to their consumer sovereignty.

However, in examining the literature, a strong theme of connection shined through the challenges of commodification. Students desired strong and positive relationships with their faculty (Fullerton, 2013; Saunders, 2014; White, 2007). One student mentioned the desire for “teachers to focus on them as people,” (White, 2007, p. 598). Fullerton (2013) also noted that a student desired “teachers who care about their students,” (p. 34). This maxim is as timeless as it was in biblical and ancient times, as well as in the era of De La Salle. The connection between students and teachers is the relational bond of education. Perhaps, as Fullerton (2013) suggested, new technologies, such as cell phones, virtual communities, and social networking could provide enhanced opportunities for faculty to reach out to students. Fundamental to the Lasallian teaching charisma is the ability to adapt and to expand access to education. Using these technologies, Lasallian educators could meet new generations of students where they are and deliver transformative educational experiences in new ways.

Transformative Roots of Lasallian Education

*Do not dare describe anything
in which the internal state of your spirit
is not reflected in some way or other*

Bellow, 2015, p. 115

In contrast to the recent commodification of education, Lasallian education sought to foster transformative education since its inception in 17th century France. Saint John Baptist de La Salle envisioned students entrusted to the care of the Brothers of the Christian Schools and later lay teachers, all of whom would find salvation through education (De La Salle, 1994; Salm, 1996). This

signifies the critical point that Lasallian pedagogy centers on the relationships and community between teachers and students.

Within the context of 17th century French Spirituality, De La Salle's God was a "God marked by two qualities: wisdom and gentleness" (Calligan, 2014). This spirituality rests on well versed scripture, including, "the good shepherd" (John 10:10, New American Bible Revised Edition) and "if we live in the Spirit, let us also follow the Spirit" (Gal. 5:25). Lasallian schools foster holistic development, both intellectually and spirituality so that an abundant life is lived in the known presence of their God. Students come to know the teacher as their "frère" or "brother" and that "this teacher was 'with' the student, not 'over' the student" (Calligan, 2014, p. 52).

Partially in response to the Counter-Reformation and the Council of Trent (1545-1563), educators increasingly recognized the need for inclusive Catholic education. In the educational world of 17th century France, one manifestation of this movement was the systematic style of education, spirituality, and formation of teachers developed by the Brother's of the Christian Schools (De La Salle, 1996; Sauvage, 1999). Early Brothers developed, recorded, and sustained this system of education through community, formal meetings, and careful preservation of written records (Blain, 2000; Hermans & Sauvage, 1999). This attention to history and learned practice within the Institute of the Brothers of the Christian Schools helped establish the critical process of teacher formation. Moving forward to present day, the Lasallian teacher still leans about the transformational nature of education through formation and practice (Mueller, 2008).

Through formation and practice, the Lasallian teacher develops their own identity as a teacher (Botana, 2004). As a result of this development, the teacher may begin to experience teaching as vocation and ministry as opposed to a job and career. This praxis aligns with the meditations written for the Brothers as in this passage:

Consider Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd of the Gospel, who seeks the lost sheep, puts it on his shoulders, and carries it back to the fold. Because you are taking his place, consider that you are obliged to do the same thing. Ask him for the grace needed to procure the conversion of hearts (De La Salle, 1994, p. 439).

Through this lens, Lasallian educators are depicted as transformative partners in a process of ministry that leads to wholeness and/or salvation. These are the core values that Lasallian educators strive to protect.

Lasallian Innovations of Transformative Education

Lasallian education boasts a rich history of reinvention while still maintaining fundamental transformative elements, such as the teacher-student partnership. Early Lasallian education combined content instruction, such as French and mathematics, in concert with catechesis in to help students in the process of learning to make meaning of their world (De La Salle, 1996; Salm, 1996). In later centuries, teachers in Lasallian tertiary education added a liberal arts component to content and specialized technical instruction to provide an education that developed students able to critically analyze and work in their world. De La Salle pushed familial, ecclesiastical, societal, educational, and religious life boundaries and encouraged the development of an adaptable pedagogy (Burkhard, 1994). Mouton (2011) reminded us that De La Salle frequently assumed the role of "mischief maker" in adapting "unconventional and innovative efforts to establish these schools." It is in this very spirit of innovation that Lasallian educators must be willing to reignite in meeting the needs of present day students.

This innovative spirit is crucial to the success of Lasallian institutions, especially in light of recent challenges within higher education. Today's Catholic university must balance fidelity to mission, evolving demands of students, and the external forces perceived from the secular culture in which our schools operate. Mann (1991) suggested, "...what is needed is dialogue in which both religion and culture make their contribution by drawing the best out of one another" (p. 94). Which brings us to the critical juncture of asking, what does transformative education look like in today's Catholic university? Himes (2015) offers a place to start, suggesting that the Catholic intellectual tradition "requires the fullest possible development of the human person in all aspects of his or her being" (p. 24). This modern definition resonates soundly with a Lasallian teaching charism dedicated to the holistic development of students.

In current day, students still view education as a vessel of hope in a search for wholeness (Rose, 1989). Students seek to transcend poverty of class, predicament, position, and spirit through education. Mezirow and Associates (2000) describes transformative education as a framework of how adult learners construe, validate, and reformulate the meaning of their experiences. Ultimately, students are transformed to accept, adapt, and utilize new paradigms of perspectives in their lives (Cranton, 1994).

While students desire a transformative education, higher education institutions face numerous challenges in its delivery. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) highlight the challenge of delivering a transformative process in a transactional culture, by stating:

The current challenge for administrators, policymakers, and faculty of higher education institutions is to acknowledge and accept that there have been significant and irreversible changes in societal demands, funding shortfalls, competition, technological innovations, and student demographics. As a result, there is a critical need to move creatively and assertively to confront and adapt to those changes (p. 102).

In this climate, higher education institutions must strategize effectively to attract students who desire a transactional experience while simultaneously engaging them in a transformative education.

Expansion of Lasallian Education through Online Learning Communities

To advance the holistic development of students, it is crucial that Lasallian institutions embrace new opportunities for fostering transformative education. One promising opportunity is online education. While on the surface online learning may seem impersonal and far from transformative, this platform possesses the capacity for high levels of interaction unavailable within face-to-face programs. This interactive environment may be leveraged to build learning communities, foster transformative learning, and expand Lasallian reach far beyond the bounds of the traditional classroom.

With pluralistic forces of religion, culture, and educational pedagogies in heated conversation, the holistic development of students must welcome the integration of technology, online and blended delivery modalities, and an expanded definition of "learning community" as described by De Thomas (2013):

The Catholic school must identify itself to all as a true community of learners seeking information, knowledge, truth, and wisdom. In such a community there can be no prohibition or curtailment of inquiry that would inhibit the truly free and reasonable academic pursuit of knowledge and understanding (p.19).

Redefining learning communities resonates with the original teaching charism of the Institute, which aspired to increase access to education for those who sought it.

Undoubtedly, online education possesses substantial potential for cultivating transformative learning communities. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) commented on the transformative potency of online education, stating “A source of this transformation stems from the ability of online learners to be both together and apart [...] and to be connected to a community of learners anytime and anywhere, without being time, place, or situation bound” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 96).

Online education also benefits from the transformative power of written communication. Most online communication is text-based, which enables students to engage in more discourse, craft messages carefully, think critically about subject matter, and to substantiate their thoughts with facts (Meyers, 2008). Online discourse becomes democratized, providing equal opportunity for each student to express one’s thoughts without interruption, which is particularly important for participating members of marginalized populations (Bender, 2003; Meyers, 2008). Through written communication, “participants can confront questionable ideas and faulty thinking in more objective and reflective ways than might be possible in a face-to-face context” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 99). Learning management system records all content, which further incentivizes thoughtful communication (Meyers, 2008). With these advantages, it is not surprising that many students feel more comfortable communicating online (Meyers, 2008).

Through online communication, students learn in community, alongside peers and faculty. Effective online learning communities create a sense of belonging, which develops trust and grounds open communication (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004). Trust and sense of belonging balance the vulnerability required for “free and open dialogue, critical debate, negotiation and agreement the hallmark of higher education” (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004, p. 97). Ultimately, learning together (and by association) enables online students and faculty to develop communities of inquiry.

A Model for Transformative Online Learning Communities

Over the last decade, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) developed the community of inquiry (CoI) model, one of the most prominent models explaining the creation of online learning communities:

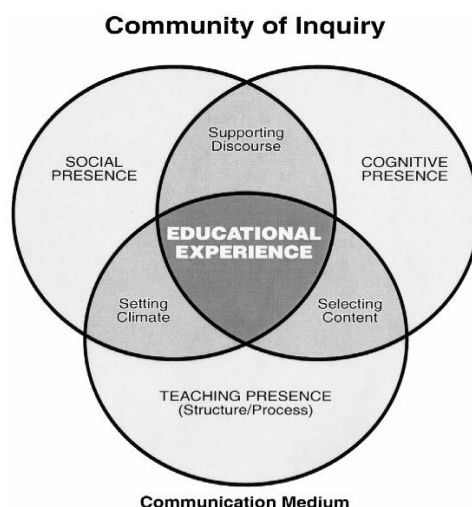


Figure 1. Elements of an educational experience. Reprinted from "Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education," by D. R. Garrison, T. Anderson, and W. Archer, 2000, *The Internet and Higher Education*, 2(2-3), p. 88. Copyright 2000 by Elsevier.

As depicted in *Figure 1*, CoI consists of three components: cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence. The CoI components interact with each other to varying degrees, depending on the subject matter, communications technology, and learners (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Altogether, cognitive, teaching, and social presence constitute the online educational experience (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010). Fundamentally, this model assumes that learners construct knowledge in community (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009a).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) defined cognitive presence as the degree to which CoI participants can “construct meaning through sustained communication” (p. 89). Cognitive presence consists of four phases: triggering event, exploration, integration, and solution (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Initial findings indicated that students did not reach the integration and solution phases (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). However, in a more recent study, students reported having achieved all four practical inquiry model phases (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009a). Due to contradictory findings, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) questioned the validity of the four stages, but ultimately, the authors attributed the low completion rates to poor instructional design given that the assignments did not require students to reach the integration and solution phases.

Social presence constitutes interpersonal interactions between students and teachers and is reflected in open communication, group cohesion, and emotional expression (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), social presence enables CoI members to “project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as real people” (p. 89). Student to student communication builds trust (Cranton, 2006). Moreover, social presence contributes to student persistence. Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, and Swan (2010) reported that, “analysis of over 28,000 student records and survey data demonstrate a significant amount of variance in re-enrollment can be accounted for by indicators of Social Presence” (p. 3). Social presence factors, such as peer support and a sense of belonging, contribute to student persistence (Hart, 2012). Faculty can cultivate social presence by introducing themselves, requiring students to introduce themselves to each other, detailing expectations for student participation in the syllabus, and fostering critical reflection and discourse (Meyers, 2008).

Teaching presence sets the tone for meaningful discourse. According to CoI, the teacher performs a tutoring role, providing guidance, feedback, validation, attention to emotions, and conflict mediation (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Menchaca & Abate Bekele, 2008; Taylor, 1998). The CoI teacher is not authoritative (Belenky & Stanton, 2000; Durrington, Berryhill, & Swafford, 2006). Responsibilities include instructional management, building understanding, and direct instruction (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Instructors may enhance cognitive presence through the use of problem-based, reflective, or collaborative learning (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004; Cummins & Sayers, 1997; Meyers, 2008; Yukselturk & Yildirim, 2008). Instructors may also promote community through the use of technology. Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007) reported that using audio rather than text feedback enhanced student satisfaction, nuance, content retention, and perceptions that the faculty cared about the student.

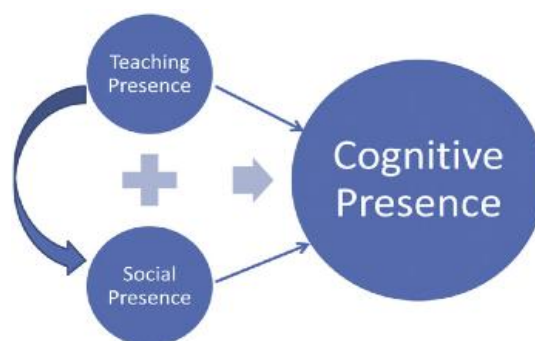


Figure 2. Relationships between teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Reprinted from "Learning presence: Towards a theory of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the development of a communities of inquiry in online and blended learning environments," by P. Shea and T. Bidjerano, 2010, *Computers & Education*, 55(4), p. 1723. Copyright 2010 by Elsevier.

As illustrated in *Figure 2*, the CoI presences interact with each other. Both social and teaching presence are associated with cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2009a). Shea and Bidjerano (2009a) reported that the "highest levels of cognitive presence are evident when students rate both teaching and social presence most highly" (p. 213).

However, cognitive, social, and teaching presence differs in the degree and nature to which they interact (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010). Teaching presence is clearly the most influential of the three CoI components (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009b). Shea and Bidjerano (2009b) reported that "70% of the variation in students' levels of cognitive presence can be modeled based on their reports of their instructors' skills in fostering teaching and social presence" (p. 551). As illustrated in *Figure 2*, development of social presence depends upon teaching presence (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009a). Garrison and Arbaugh (2007) elaborate, stating that teaching presence is "a significant determinant of student satisfaction, perceived learning, and sense of community" (p. 163). Likewise, Richardson and Swan (2003) found a correlation between high social presence ratings and satisfaction with the instructor. Teaching presence bears even greater influence on online students. Shea and Bidjerano (2009a) reported that students enrolled in online courses with high teaching presence have higher cognitive presence than those enrolled in blended courses.

While the CoI model addresses key constructs, such as teaching, social, and cognitive presence, it fails to acknowledge the critical contribution of learner self-efficacy. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) examined the relationship between the CoI model and self-efficacy, finding a strong correlation between teaching presence, social presence, and self-efficacy. Therefore, Shea and Bidjerano (2010) proposed a revised model, which incorporated a new construct called learner presence as depicted in *Figure 3*. Learner presence involves self-regulated learning and acknowledges that the "extent to which students believe that they achieve significant learning and the effort that they expend depends partly on their sense of efficacy" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2010, p. 1727).

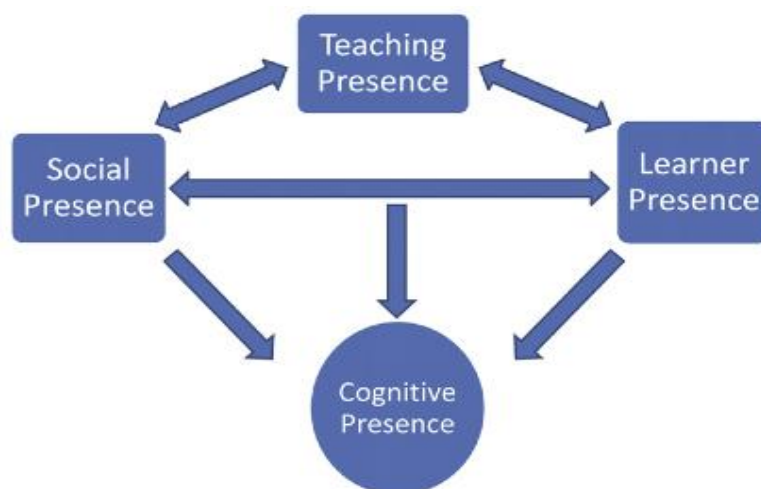


Figure 3. Revised community of inquiry model including “learner presence.” Reprinted from “Learning presence: Towards a theory of self-efficacy, self-regulation, and the development of a communities of inquiry in online and blended learning environments,” by P. Shea and T. Bidjerano, 2010, *Computers & Education*, 55(4), p. 1727. Copyright 2010 by Elsevier.

Alignment of the CoI Model with Lasallian Education

The CoI model described by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) resonates with core Lasallian values, particularly transformation and inclusion. De La Salle founded Lasallian education “upon the conviction that no youngster and no family no matter how economically, affectively, intellectually, or spiritually in need should ever think that they have been forgotten or should ever have to wonder whether or not they’ve been passed over by God or by the rest of us” (Mann, 2012, p. 103). Both approaches describe a co-created educational experience, with the associative presence of teacher and learner working together in community to study, question, and discover.

The CoI model also aligns with Lasallian educational practices. Teaching presence and the relationship between brother (lay) teacher and student are key parts of Lasallian education. De La Salle (1996) expected instructors to deliver frequent feedback, participative lessons, and structured assessments as regular components of the Lasallian classroom. As Mueller (2008) and Calligan (2014) suggest, Brother Teachers were instructed to be reflective, patient, and caring when addressing issues with students. Online and blended learning environments offer a similar immediacy of feedback and communication between teachers and students, enabling faculty to make adjustments to the teaching, cognitive, or social components of the educational experience.

Social presence has also been a fundamental component in Lasallian education since its inception. Lasallian schools offered the boys of 17th century France structure, acceptance, and faith (Blain, 2000). Repetitive classroom prayer, procedures, songs, and traditions served to reinforce feelings of belonging and acceptance (Hermans & Sauvage, 1999; Lasalle, 1996). Transformative online pedagogy offers students these opportunities to develop social presence as well, through interactive group work, engaging classroom traditions, such as forums, debates, and blogs, and synchronous video meetings and chats.

Early Lasallian educators promoted self-efficacy (i.e. learner presence) by assigning students additional leadership roles, such as door keeper, monitor, prayer reciter, and supervisor (De La Salle, 1996). These roles engaged students in the community, building a sense of belonging and rewarding students for participation. In online communities today, Lasallian educators could assign students additional roles of debate leader, group facilitator, and team leader to develop and encourage social presence. 66

Cognitive presence requires learners to construct meaning in community, a key component of transformative learning (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Likewise, Lasallian educators helped students construct meaning of their world and the presence of their God through person-centered instruction, frequent feedback, and peer to peer learning. Together these elements fostered a holistic and transformative education, dependent on relationships and community, inspired by a gentle, wise, and present God.

Preliminary Empirical Support for the CoI Model at a Lasallian University

The CoI model presents a promising theoretical framework for delivering transformative Lasallian education online. Preliminary research confirms the potential of the CoI model for Lasallian institutions.

McClure and Wise (2014) used the CoI model to explore how students at a Midwestern Lasallian university experienced learning in a blended online community. Study participants included nine adult students enrolled in a blended doctoral program at a Midwestern Lasallian university (McClure & Wise, 2014). As part of the program, the participants attended a two week residency and then completed the remaining coursework online (McClure & Wise, 2014). Throughout the program, the participants engaged in collaborative learning fostered by group work, presentations, and various technologies, such as learning management systems, high-speed microphones, speakers, discussion boards, wikis, blogs, collaborative web documents, video conferencing, lecture capture software, webinars, which were employed asynchronously and synchronously (McClure & Wise, 2014).

McClure and Wise (2014) elicited lived experiences through phenomenological interviews, which averaged fifteen minutes, included six questions, and focused on aspects of the educational experience that helped participants to learn. Five themes emerged, which represented factors that enhanced student learning during an online blended community experience (McClure & Wise, 2014). As illustrated in Table 1, the McClure and Wise (2014) themes overlap considerably with the CoI model.

<i>Related CoI Model Component</i>	<i>McClure and Wise (2014) Themes</i>
Teaching presence	1.“Design and structure processes that result in deeper understanding through challenging work, reasonable pacing and scaffolding of learning.”
	2.“Faculty responsiveness to students that includes consistent rapid feedback for clarification as well as pushing thinking to go deeper.”
Social Presence	3.“Everyone has a voice-we all can see it, and we can all contribute together and this grows the learning.”
	4.“Face to Face: the relationship base is built and deepens, including celebrations of accomplishments AND Online: the depth of dialogue, inclusiveness, and diverse perspectives help to grow the community.”
Learner Presence	5.“What you bring as an individual: You need a level of independence, personal initiative and excitement for facing the challenges, BUT you also need to be able to step out of your comfort zone, reach out and sometimes make yourself vulnerable.”

Table 1. CoI Model and McClure and Wise (2014) Themes

Together these elements foster a community of inquiry that enhances collaborative learning. According to McClure and Wise (2014), “The warm digital habitat, that grows deeper in person, offers a deep learning context to which each must bring their own commitment, initiative, and vulnerability.” Likewise, Shea and Bidjerano (2010) argue that teacher, learner, and social presence are all fundamental to cultivating a community of inquiry, which in turn fosters cognitive presence.

The Future of Lasallian Education and Online Learning Communities

How online education is perceived and approached is critical in understanding and developing strategies to deliver a transformative Lasallian education. Is online simply a new delivery modality, or is online delivery the new core of the education? Arguably, the former aligns with fundamental Lasallian educational values.

Extending transformative educational opportunities to students, regardless of academic preparation, level, or attainment, continues to be a keystone of Lasallian transformative education. With the growth of online, blended, and technology-enhanced delivery modalities comes great opportunity and unique challenges for Lasallian institutions. Reaching out through the “virtual world” vastly increases the number of students Lasallian institutions can reach.

To extend this “institutional reach,” Lasallian institutions must consider how they will maintain fidelity to mission and the person-centered teaching charism of the Institute. To that end, theoretical models, such as CoI, may be leveraged to deploy transformative Lasallian education online. Care

must be given to social presence, to ensure that proper cognitive, social, psychological, and spiritual development occurs for the student. Moreover, special attention needs to be paid to teaching presence. De La Salle established sophisticated systems for developing faculty, which remain highly relevant (Hines, 2012). These systems could be further developed and deployed for online faculty formation. Furthermore, open door enrollment policies require Lasallian educators to scaffold online learning, building necessary supports for students with wide-ranging academic experiences, aptitudes, and skills. Attention to instructional design may enhance learner presence and self-efficacy. Finally, practical technical challenges, such as availability of computer hardware, software, bandwidth, and technical support services, need to also be considered.

Moving forward, significant research is needed regarding the efficacy, efficiency, and metrics of Lasallian transformative education delivered online. Further research will enable Lasallian educators to continue discerning and developing transformative Lasallian pedagogy, within the paradox of a culture of commodity.

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