

# Online Course Design Reflections

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## Introduction to Theoretical Approach

While we drew on techniques from several learning theories during this project, at the very beginning, we were all firm in our preference for a learner-centered, social constructivist approach to online course design. We agree with the strong opinions of both Palloff & Pratt (2007) and Lehman & Conceição (2010) that the establishment of a sense of online presence and community is key to truly effective online learning experiences. We felt that a social constructivist approach would provide a strong foundation for designing activities that fostered online community and presence.

A key element in constructivist learning theory is the importance of real-world contexts to foster transfer of learning (Larson & Lockee, 2014). This element greatly influenced our choice of audience, context and outcomes for this project and course. We, as educators, wished to provide training for educators, and at the same time, wished to make that training immediately relevant to their own instructional needs. In addition, all three of us felt comfortable designing a course for voluntary professional development, feeling that it was more applicable to our own future goals. Often, however, professional development for educators is short-term and somewhat shallow in scope. Thus, we decided to design a more in-depth professional development online course to assist educators in learning about and applying a topic of importance to themselves and their own instruction.

Drawing on Angela's assistance and insight, we chose to design the course for her workplace (a REAL real-world context), providing us with authentic time constraints, learner motivation issues and development framework. Given the recent changes in technology integration at her school, a technology-based topic seemed appropriate. The somewhat unsatisfactory implementation of a digital citizenship curriculum for students and our own interest in issues of online learning ethics assisted us in choosing the content for our project. This content and the choice to deliver course content via the newly implemented learning management system (LMS) are both grounded in situated learning theory - providing learners with an authentic context for learning new technology skills (Larson & Lockee, 2014). Aforementioned time constraints, as well as an overwhelming amount of content-area resources available online, almost immediately led us to the realization that we must also draw on Instructivist methodologies for some course structure and activities.

Based on these initial decisions, our team worked collaboratively via Google Docs to design specific course activities — unconsciously mirroring behaviors planned for our learners.

## Theoretical Basis for Course Activities

Vail (2013) suggests that successful training relates new knowledge and experience to existing knowledge allowing the learner to transfer it to long-term memory. In addition, he suggests that training for this topic requires effective instructional cues, prompts, and feedback. Cognitivist

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learning theory is based on the assumption that learning is the process of building mental structures that link prior information to new knowledge, while behaviorism presents learning in terms of proper cues and reinforcement for behaviors. The instructivist approach (or direct instruction) draws on both behaviorism and cognitivism to organize and present information for effective student learning (Larson & Lockee, 2014). Therefore, we used an instructivist approach in designing how we would initially convey topic content to the learner. Presentations during face-to-face meetings, assigned readings and videos, and self-assessment activities (goals, surveys, quizzes) are all designed to present knowledge objectively. This allows the learner to more efficiently and effectively commit the information presented to memory and then retrieve it for the assignments, discussion, assessment, and most importantly, use in the workplace.

At the same time, however, the weekly discussion prompts request learners to construct their own meaning about digital citizenship topics based on the provided materials. This element of course design aligns with the theory of cognitive constructivism, which is based on the assumption that knowledge is subjective, and that meaning is constructed through individual experiences and interactions (Larson & Lockee, 2014). Learners are asked to put their own understanding of each topic together with peers' ideas to form even deeper meaning, which would be considered more social constructivist in nature (Larson & Lockee, 2014). Focused on supporting the construction of meaning by groups, social constructivism underlies the design decision to have learners share their understandings of each topic via discussion board posts with other learners and to collaborate in small groups using Google Docs to complete the course activities. These opportunities allow the learner to be exposed to multiple perspectives from other learners, to question themselves, and to reflect on their experiences (Educational Broadcasting Corporation, 2004). In addition, the use of pre- and post-assessments reflect a constructivist assessment method. According to Larson and Lockee (2014), "...peer and self-assessments are particularly helpful in fostering the reflection typically emphasized in constructivist outcomes since they prompt learners to examine and measure their learning progress" (p. 141).

Expanding on this social constructivist core approach, we also drew upon both situated and distributed cognition learning theories in course design. Course groupings, based on existing team structures, are designed to foster a local community of practice, allowing learners more knowledgeable in specific topics or skills to mentor others in discussions and collaborative work. Note that situated learning theory, like the constructivist approach, also stresses the need for knowledge to be applied and presented in real-world situations (Larson & Lockee, 2014). The community of practice concept is also key in distributed cognition theories, which relates to course activities where we ask subject-area teams to independently seek out topic-related resources, and then collaboratively evaluate and select specific resources for sharing with the larger community. This type of curation activity supports "...learners in building a network of relevant information sources to consult as needed for daily tasks and learning" (p. 79) and assists learners in making connections with ideas and resources related to digital citizenship on a more global scale (Larson & Lockee, 2014).

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Just as an array of learning theories centered around a constructivist approach influenced course design, so did the importance of creating a sense of online community and presence for our learners, which we know is paramount for a successful learning environment whether it be face-to-face or online. Palloff and Pratt (2007) elaborate:

The principles involved in the delivery of distance education are basically those attributed to a more active, constructivist form of learning - with one difference: *in distance education, attention needs to be paid to the developing sense of community within the group of participants in order for the process to be successful*. The learning community is the vehicle through which learning occurs online. Members depend on each other to achieve the learning outcomes for the course. If a participant logs on to a course site and there has been no activity for several days, he or she may become discouraged or feel a sense of abandonment - like being the only student to show up for class when even the instructor is absent. Without the support and participation of a learning community, there is no online course (p. 40).

As these instructors work together in the same physical space on a daily basis, we felt it was important to base the process of building the online community on the existing face-to-face relationships. Incorporating an initial face-to-face course meeting helps to ease and accelerate the community-building process both among learners and between learners and course facilitators. Course facilitators will also work to foster a supportive online environment by introducing a course ground rules document for participants to modify at the initial meeting, providing feedback on discussion posts, and encouraging participants to engage in meaningful dialogue through questioning. Note that firm deadlines for discussion posts and the statement of no partial credit for the course are a non-negotiable part of course rules in order to help ensure effective online discussion.

After the first face-to-face meeting, a sense of community is further developed by having participants and facilitators compose an introductory post regarding personal experiences in smaller groups. Even though the participants work with each other on a daily basis, it does not necessarily mean they all *know* each other, especially teachers on different teams and/or who teach different subjects. Building on relationships and perceptions established in the first week, facilitators will support participants to build their social presence within the online community in order to enhance open discussions in cross disciplinary and whole group collaborations. A solid social presence facilitates the sharing of thoughts, ideas, and feelings in an online environment (Lehman and Conceição, 2010). Choices in the overall course design, such as a process approach to content learning, a focus on group collaboration, and the sharing of personal experiences and ideas all support the development of social presence. In addition, course design includes facilitation of asynchronous activities (discussions, collaborations), guiding learners in their use of the discussion board and Google Docs collaboration by asking clarifying questions and encouraging deeper discourse among peers.

While both the course evaluation survey and the final face-to-face meeting provide opportunities for learners to offer feedback about their experiences with course content and design, expert facilitators will also monitor learner discussions, solicit feedback, and evaluate course design

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elements throughout implementation. This formative approach to course evaluation is part of a learner-centered learning-teaching process, and is designed to support the development of both a sense of online community and a sense of the instructor’s online presence (Palloff & Pratt, 2007). Course evaluation (both formative and summative) will also provide stakeholders and course designers information for both immediate and future course revisions. In particular, we wish to reflect on the activities and materials used to create a sense of online presence and community so that we can better meet the needs of future learners. As Lehman and Conceição (2010) point out, “online courses that intentionally incorporate learning activities that create a sense of presence are more likely to be effective than other online courses” (p. 88).

Also during this final face-to-face meeting, course design brings South-Doyle High School (SDHS) instructors together to formally summarize their collaborative work on digital citizenship integration into the Freshman Academy (FA) curriculum and to share their personal reflections on the experience of creating these recommendations. This activity, along with goal-setting and the design of personal learning plans at course end, reflect not only our social constructivist core, but also a transformational learning approach. Thus allowing the learner to recognize and acknowledge personal transformations due to the course work (Conrad and Donaldson, 2012).

In the table below is an overview of our course design — linking outcomes, specific course activities, and their underlying theoretical basis.

**Overarching Course Objective:** Digital citizenship will be an integrated and important component within all subject areas at South-Doyle High School enabling students to have the skills necessary to think critically, behave safely, and participate ethically in digital environments throughout their lives.

Learning Outcomes	Course Activities Supporting Outcomes	Theoretical basis
1.0 Increase participant knowledge and understanding of digital citizenship issues presented in CMS materials	1.1 Pre- and post-assessment of personal digital citizenship knowledge (independent) 1.2 Per topic responses to discussion questions based on readings, videos, and personal experiences 1.3 Pre and post course facilitated peer discussions in A/B Teams re: definition and importance of Digital Citizenship via asynchronous discussion boards (DB). 1.4 Per topic readings & videos (independent). 1.5 Per topic facilitated peer discussions in A/B Teams via DB	1.1 Instructivist & constructivist learning  1.2 Cognitive constructivist  1.3 Social constructivist  1.4 Instructivist  1.5 Social constructivist, creating online presence

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Learning Outcomes	Course Activities Supporting Outcomes	Theoretical basis
2.0 Collaboratively curate resources and ideas for integrating digital citizenship topics/skills into subject-area instruction within the Freshman Academy (FA)	2.1 Per topic collaborative creation of “integration ideas” list in subject-area teams via Google Docs (Gd) 2.2 Locating and evaluating additional topic resources (independent) 2.3 Per topic asynchronous collaborative creation of additional resources list in subject area teams via Gd 2.4 Collaborative creation of curated resources & ideas list via Gd in Academy-wide teams (per topic pairs)	2.1 Social constructivist, distributed learning  2.2 Distributed learning 2.3 Social constructivist, distributed learning 2.4 Social constructivist, distributed learning
3.0 Create plans to build their professional and personal digital citizenship skills	3.1 Per topic readings & videos (independent). 3.2 Per topic facilitated peer discussions in A/B Teams via DB. 3.3 Pre- and post-assessment of personal digital citizenship knowledge (independent) 3.4 Facilitated peer discussions (Academy-wide) re: individual professional development goals/plans re: digital citizenship skills via DB	3.1 Instructivist  3.2 Social constructivist, creating online presence  3.3 Instructivist, constructivist  3.4 Social constructivist, creating online presence
4.0 Strengthen individual skills in navigating the Canvas LMS and increase their understanding of the learning and collaboration opportunities it can provide	4.1 Hands-on orientation to Canvas (face to face, guided group demonstration) 4.2 Weekly usage of Canvas to complete course activities. 4.3 Independent observations of online facilitation methods by expert consultants (during asynchronous collaborations) 4.4 Face-to-face discussion of effective online collaboration, ground rules, etc.	4.1 Instructivist  4.2 Situated learning  4.3 Situated learning  4.4 Creating online presence, situated learning
5.0 Create an Academy-wide plan to collaboratively integrate digital citizenship practices and instruction into content area instruction	5.1 Topic-based facilitated peer discussions on key issues for FA in Academy-wide team (per topic pairs). 5.2 Face-to-face discussion & plan creation in Academy-wide team (based on collaborative documents from course).	5.1 Social constructivist, creating online presence  5.2 Distributed learning, social constructivist
6.0 Evaluate the online course effectiveness as a tool for teacher professional	6.1 Participate in formative evaluation processes throughout course activities. 6.2 Complete course evaluation,	6.1 Creating online presence, constructivist

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Learning Outcomes	Course Activities Supporting Outcomes	Theoretical basis
development within SDHS	providing written feedback (independent, online) 6.3 Face-to-face discussion in Academy-wide team: course revisions, and suggestions for integration of digital citizenship into other SDHS grades/subjects	6.2 Instructivist, situated learning 6.3 Social constructivist

### Conclusion

Reflecting on the course design process, we feel that it is important to draw on an array of theories and approaches in order to effectively support learners in achieving desired outcomes. While we wished to create a course from strong social constructivist perspective, we found that it was also necessary to incorporate instructivist approaches in order to accommodate limitations inherent in our chosen real-world context. We were also interested to discover, after the fact, that several activities in our course design incorporated distributed learning elements. In completing this project, we feel we have succeeded in challenging ourselves to work with both an unfamiliar content area and design context (in-depth K-12 professional development) as well as creating a course well-grounded in effective design of online learning environments.

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