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Teacher presence through the lens of kindness

Tania Aspland ^A	A	<i>Professor & Vice President, Academic, Kaplan Business School, Australia</i>
Jillian Fox ^B	B	<i>Visiting Professor, University of Law, London</i>

Keywords

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Abstract

In March 2020, one Australian higher education provider, like many others, found itself pivoting into fully online teaching as the nation managed the COVID 19 pandemic and campuses closed. Bespoke professional learning workshops were offered to all staff, many of whom demonstrated the professional willingness to change their practices in order to offer students the highest quality learning experience that was possible in the demanding and unexpected conditions inherent in the pandemic. There were many challenges revealed through ongoing discussions amongst staff as a community of learners. Throughout the discussions, the concept of *presence* (Garrison, 2007, 2017) was recurring - teacher and student presence in the newly mandated online teaching context. The centrality of kindness was identified as a second concept that mediated academic discussions and emotions. Both concepts form the focus of this paper. The positioning of kindness within Garrison's framework of inquiry (2017) will be proposed as a proposition that is worthy of further research particularly if higher education in Australia continues to be uncertain and fraught with change.

Correspondence

Vanessa.stafford@kbs.edu.au^A

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Introduction

In March 2020, one Australian higher education provider, like many others, found itself pivoting into fully online teaching as the nation managed the COVID 19 pandemic and campuses closed. This situation was equivalent to a national state of emergency, and this organisation invested in the necessary resources to support staff in working off campus and transitioning their traditional teaching methods into fully online mediums. Bespoke professional learning workshops were offered to all staff, many of whom demonstrated the professional willingness to change their practices to offer students the highest quality learning experience that was possible in the demanding and unexpected conditions inherent in the pandemic. There were many challenges revealed through ongoing discussions amongst staff as a community of learners, one of which was student engagement and their ongoing commitment to classes that were not delivered as face-to-face teaching. Throughout the discussions, the concept of *presence* was recurring - teacher and student presence in the newly mandated online teaching context. On reflection, the centrality of kindness – kindness amongst the community as well as central to student engagement – was identified as a second concept that mediated academic discussions and emotions. Both concepts form the focus of this paper. The positioning of kindness within Garrison's framework of inquiry (2017) will be proposed as a proposition that is worthy of further research particularly if higher education in Australia continues to be uncertain and fraught with change.

The place of kindness

Research evidence (Cassidy & Shaver, 2008; Exline et al., 2012; Rowland, 2018; Tashjiian, 2018) overwhelmingly confirms that being kind and being a recipient of kindness positively influence a person's sense of well-being (Post, 2005) – an important consideration during a crisis. A great number of physical and emotional benefits which support people to be happy, confident, and well-rounded individuals have been identified by researchers from the post positive psychology field, (Carter, 2011; Hamilton, 2017; Layous et al., 2012; Passmore & Oates, 2022). Some of these include the proposition that kindness:

- increases psychological flourishing;
- increases happiness and self-esteem;
- reduces social anxiety;
- increases self-esteem and optimism;
- heightens feelings of self-worth;
- diminishes social anxiety.

Kindness is conceptualised as both a behaviour and an action; therefore, kindness is best experienced by engaging in acts of kindness and exploring the social attributes that support well-being. It can be argued that kindness is a

gesture motivated by genuine, warm feelings for others. It has been proposed (e.g., Otake et al., 2006) that kindness has three main facets:

- considering the feelings of others;
- demonstrating acceptance, courtesy, and love towards others; and
- behaving honourably towards them.

Throughout the pandemic of 2020-2022, the concept of and interest in kindness has surged through social media and the press headlines as a significant factor in individual and community well-being (See for example: [gratefulness.me](https://www.gratefulness.me/); growingwithgratitude.com; kindnessfactory.com; kindness.org; greatergoodberkeley.edu).

The concept of kindness is not necessarily explicitly addressed in the higher education literature. However, the common message across the different forums is best captured by Kath Koschel and her work through the Kindness Factory where she states: "Kindness is the key to human connection... despite the loneliness epidemic" (Koschel, 2021).

We have learned over the past three years that many modern lives are impacted by increasing feelings of demoralisation, depression, and alienation due to ongoing trauma, uncertainty, and crises. This is true of the broader society, including higher education students and staff, in the context of this paper. Against a backdrop of uncertainty, kindness has been hailed as a powerful concept and tool for addressing negative emotions and feelings and to generate a sense of well-being, or 'psychological flourishing' across all communities, cultures, and countries. What we have learned, in brief, is that acts of kindness, whether they be set in education, business, or cultural situations, share an emphasis on the relational (Noddings, 2005) and assist in embellishing and maintaining personal and professional relationships. Recognising the place of kindness, particularly in education, requires the recognition of differential power and positionality, and a recognition of the positions of other people not just our own (Archer, 2007). It can be argued that in serving the needs of the student, the successful teacher attempts to see things from the student's perspective – an essential prerequisite of kindness. To become a kind teacher involves more than just a teaching tool. What is required is that the act of teaching must be built on a foundation of moral values and personal qualities that embrace kindness. This will be revisited a little later in this paper.

Analysed and discussed in this paper, is the case of one higher education provider and an analysis of how a sample of their teaching staff responded to the challenges of the pandemic and the teaching of international students in the period 2000-2022. The two concepts to be elaborated upon in this paper are presence (Garrison, 2017) and kindness. The interplay and importance of two key concepts will become evident as a way of managing the challenges of the pandemic and, at the same time sustaining quality teaching and enhancing the well-being of staff and students.

Firstly, the context will be presented, then the focus on Garrison's model of presences (2019) will be briefly articulated, and finally, the importance of pedagogical kindness will be proposed as central to new ways of working as the context of higher education undergoes change.

Context

This paper focuses on the actions and outcomes of one higher education provider as it transitioned into fully online teaching as the nation managed the COVID-19 pandemic and campuses closed. Early in 2020, the organisation moved towards establishing a community of learners designed to address what was problematic for academic staff in shifting quickly from face-to-face teaching to online or hybrid learning mediums. The community consisted of a diverse group of academic staff from across all education units of the business, staff who participated voluntarily in a professional learning series provided in-house within the company, facilitated by a team of expert academics. Over three-quarters of the teaching staff participating in the community of learners indicated that they had never taught online or had little experience teaching online prior to this point. In discussions, it was openly shared that only about 10% had limited experience teaching online while only 5% of participants indicated that they had extensive experience teaching online over a period of 6-10 years. As the weeks unfolded, the challenges expressed by teaching staff in moving quickly from face-to-face teaching to online delivery, due to students moving off campus, were many. However, there were three common challenges for most, including:

- technological expertise;
- the use of authentic pedagogy and assessment in the changing learning environments; and
- the challenge of sustaining student engagement as they entered into mandated online learning from places that were no longer the traditional classroom.

Within this context there were some existing, but rather unique features that characterised learning and teaching across the settings. Academic staff, pre-covid 19, were committed to a style of teaching that determined that lecturing is not a preferred pedagogy and preference is given to engaging students in learning as a collaborative and critical community. As a result, many academic staff struggled to imagine how these aspirations could best be achieved in an online context. Further, the staff were purpose-oriented in their teaching and conceptualised the act of teaching as leading learning where active students' involvement was essential. This proved even more challenging as many students left the classroom context for months and years at a time, to isolate themselves in a safe environment; settings which were often in crowded student accommodation or in venues that were located outside of Australia.

Fortunately, the employing organisation was generous in its funding of the necessary resources to support staff in working off campus and transitioning their traditional teaching methods into fully online mediums. The company offered bespoke professional development workshops to all units and businesses across the national corporation, complete with experts in professional development and with the necessary resources and interactive platforms already established. A sense of urgency accompanied the building of an online learning community and required a great deal of intensive professional learning for academics in a quick turnaround time. Not to be limited by funding facilitated a strong response to designing a suite of professional learning activities, which were taken up by a large cohort of academic staff across the national education units within the company.

The importance of presence

Central to the concerns within the diverse community of academics were matters relating to students' engagement in learning while situated in diverse online learning environments; engagement that was impacted technologically, pedagogically, and intellectually as many new challenges emerged on a daily basis. The Garrison Inquiry Framework (2007, 2017) is an apt tool to utilise as a lens to delve deeper into these challenges as it was specifically designed to create a community of learners *where students are fully engaged in collaboratively constructing meaningful and worthwhile knowledge* (Garrison, 2019, p. 25). The model (Garrison, 2007, 2017) was also designed to critique online teaching and learning in higher education, through the interplay of three perspectives: (i) teaching presence that shapes the educational process of learning, (ii) cognitive presence that invites the collaborative construction of knowledge through inquiry learning, and (iii) social presence or the capacity to connect as a community through learning including staff and students, both professionally and personally. In many ways, this is what the academic staff were referring to in using two simple words – student engagement – when on reflection, it was the multifaceted notion of presence that underpinned concerns.

From the perspective of social presence, the academics expressed a desire to examine and learn how they could best maintain social connections and dialogical communication amongst educators and students on both a personal and a professional dimension. The pandemic created a context where disconnections were highly plausible for a number of reasons – poor technology, inept use of technology, locations where students felt disempowered or marginalised, and increasing family, health, and work pressures on students who were displaced from the traditional classroom through no fault of their own. This was even more difficult in this context where student cohorts were characterised by an extensive range of cultural values, gender and social positionings and language capabilities. Building group cohesion was so important, but the academic teams were unsure of how this could be manifested in the online learning community.

It was acknowledged that cognitive presence was a real concern in a new context, whereby learning was being reconstituted to call on greater learner autonomy (Garrison, 2007) in an online space. The community, as well as educators individually, recognised and felt very concerned that the intervention strategies that they had used in the face-to-face space for many years were no longer available, leaving students to their own devices – at times vulnerable. This challenging context required new forms of learner autonomy for which many of the students and the academic staff had not been prepared and were largely alone in their settings. At the same time, based on the ideological positioning as educators within the company, they were committed to purposeful, sustained inquiry-based learning as a scholarly community, interrogating subject matter knowledge through innovative and interactive pedagogies. The common question was, not if, but how such pedagogies could be enacted in an online learning environment.

Teaching presence was the key responsibility of the academic, designed to achieve the designated learning outcomes but also to generate positive student engagement, student satisfaction and a sense of community (Garrison, 2007, pp. 64-67). These themes dominated the professional conversations that were central to the bespoke professional learning series. As Garrison stated some time ago “developing an online experience is a daunting challenge” (2007, p. 26). To do so “on the run” is problematic particularly when the learning moves beyond the transmission of content into a realm where constructivist principles of learning require social and cognitive engagement built on trust, transparency and systematic and sustained critical conversations. These were the challenges that educators were facing; these very challenges are comprehensively expressed in Garrison’s Frame of Inquiry Learning (2007, 2017).

Reflection and discussion

As the months and years unfolded from 2020 until 2022, the teaching academics within the company continued to transition their practices over time and address many of the challenges outlined above. The student evaluations continued to reflect high levels of student satisfaction for, on average, 85% of students. The professional learning continues to this day, with expert appointments continuing to provide the resources and reviews required to ensure quality learning for students throughout Australia’s greatest disruption to higher education. The uncertainty continues as borders open; student visas are allowing students back on campus, and the government reflects an increasing positive interest in higher education providers – albeit new policies abound. However, many lessons have been learned and the academic staff are varied in their views as to their preferred modes of teaching for the future. However, there is no doubt that the academic community is richer educationally, pedagogically, and technologically as teachers and learners. On reflection, there are a couple of significant questions that have arisen since 2020 that go beyond teaching and learning as a professional craft to shift the gaze to the professional educators themselves, namely:

- In this crisis situation, what was it that sustained the professional and personal motivation of academics?
- In times of sheer exhaustion, how did academic educators maintain engagement and enhance pedagogy throughout the crisis period?

Such questions require formal, ethically approved research. However, two initial propositions are outlined forthwith.

Proposition one: What was evident, particularly when the professional development was instigated, was the presence of a strong community of inquiry across academics from the different business units within the organisation.

The sustained engagement of the academic community across the organisation was enhanced through the bespoke professional learning series that effectively sustained a community of professional educators as the various phases of the crisis unfolded. Many staff continued to struggle with connectivity issues, bandwidth, recording lectures and workshops, accessing resources, and the broader issue of understanding the technology they were required to use. Further a number of staff found it difficult to manage multiple windows and different software packages concurrently. Many lacked expertise with Zoom and were “learning on the go” which sometimes threatened their status as experts.

In the first instance, while the sessions ostensibly focused on a range of teaching topics, (e.g., How to use Zoom and Off2 classes; Open forums for discussion: online interactions; Work-arounds on a day-to-day basis), the dynamics of the sessions reflected the principles of constructivist learning and the building of collaborative learning communities. The facilitator would initiate a session which would often be overtaken by a problem-solving session led by the participants based on experiential knowledge. This often resulted in one of the academic staff being elected to run the next session where demonstrations and active learning were the dominant discourses. Leadership was distributed amongst the community membership of academics; conversations were critical but respectful and the focus of learning was based on the extant, expressed needs of that community. Membership was fluid based on open and transparent communication, self-auditing, and limited surveillance by authorities. Experienced staff with years of employment in the company were comfortable as neophyte learners, while in contrast, newly appointed staff often became the leaders of learning alongside the expert facilitators.

What became evident within and across the academic teaching staff who attended the professional learning series were the principles central to the interplay of teaching, cognitive, and social presences (Garrison, 2019) that replicated what the staff were wanting to create with their own students in the online learning environment in this context. Teaching presence occurs wherever educators integrate the cognitive and social environment in the pursuit of learning goals. Cognitive presence describes the extent to which participants in a learning community manage

to construct and assert meaning through reflection and discourse (Garrison, 2017), as depicted in Figure 1 below.

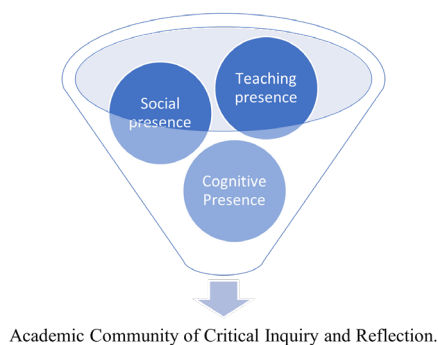


Figure 1: Academic Community of Inquiry formulated through bespoke professional development across business units.

The principles of delivery of the bespoke professional learning series led by the expert facilitators and adopted by the academic community as it evolved reflected the work of Garrison (2007, 2017) and are implicit in the Framework of Inquiry instrument for online teaching. Some of these principles utilised in this context include:

1. Each participant should establish professional and purposeful relationships with colleagues within the learning community in safe and risk-averse ways that respect the range of cultural, political, and educational positioning of all members.
2. Communication between all participants should be open, transparent, respectful, and egalitarian in order to sustain the viability and health of the community.
3. Conversations should be critically reconstructive and aligned with the purposes of the learning community.
4. Intellectual engagement should be encouraged for all, and the responsibility of all, through active participation and demonstration, debate and discussion, exploration of new ideas and how they can be applied differently across contexts, and above all, through meaningful inquiry and the generation of evidence of viable resolutions.
5. Personal and professional meaning-making are valued as open, shared, and dignified processes, and they are central to learning as a professional community
6. Reflection and reconstruction of practices are both personal, professional, and communal.

While this is only a sample of the principles adopted by the academic learning community central to this paper, they can also be easily transposed to a community of student learners engaging in online learning. The principles adopted here closely reflect those of Garrison (2019) used in establishing online collaborative communities; principles that underpin the interplay of teaching, and social and cognitive presences. But there is more to be learned from this educational experience as can be witnessed in Proposition Two below. Proposition two: Within the complexities and dimensions of the interplay of teaching, cognitive and social presences of teaching and learning transitions, a component of kindness is identifiable that:

- (i) kept the academics and students engaged and active as a community; and
- (ii) generated bonds and a deep sense of connectedness amongst staff and the leaders of the professional learning team.

Interestingly the concept of *kindness is singularly silent* in accounts of teaching excellence (Skelton, 2007) and reports on higher education. In the current auditing culture that shapes higher education in Australia, we witness the importance of accountability and the privileging of the regulatory and standards discourses. In many higher education contexts, as Clegg and Rowland (2010) point out, human attributes such as kindness are subverted by the neoliberal discourse that forms the hegemonic modes of communication of compliance within higher education in Australia. References to attributes such as respect, care, and humility are seen by some to be “soft” and may be perceived as less rigorous qualities inherent in the act of teaching; qualities that lead to the downfall of academic standards. However, throughout the pandemic, within the organisation that is the focus of this paper, this was not the case. In contrast, academics called on and demonstrated kindness to each other and towards students when times became tough. In fact, it is our contention that as times got tougher, many academics and leaders became kinder, despite the continuation and even expansion of the regulatory discourse and government intervention into higher education. What became evident was that academic staff were very kind to one another across the community, helping each other solve personal problems, pedagogical challenges, especially technological problems, and organisational encounters. The following discussion focuses on what we have termed pedagogical kindness, a quality that influenced not only the existing teaching presence within the community, but became imbued across the cognitive and social presences as well.

“The nature of the connection between kindness and teaching rests not only in that both behaviours are innately human, but that both kindly acts and pedagogical acts require the actor to identify with the concerns of the other” (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, p. 724). In this context, the boundaries between kindly acts and pedagogical acts became blurred creating a new practice referred to as pedagogical kindness. In this sense, actions of academic staff in this report engaged in work that was irreducibly social (Ashworth,

2004), intellectual, and pedagogical and it was underpinned by the attributes of kindness throughout and across the presences. Clegg and Rowland (2010) shed some light on the complexities of kindness in the context of teaching and learning, by emphasising that human attributes such as kindness are central to teaching presence and should not be deemed anti-intellectual or lacking in rigour. The authors reiterate that kindness enhances human flourishing, surely the objective of quality teaching and learning, and should not be considered *out of place* (Douglas, 1966) in the deeply intellectual environment of higher education. In fact, what we witnessed was the infusion of kindness values and attributes across teaching, cognitive and social presences within academic staff teams and throughout the teaching and learning episodes and interactions during this time, albeit in very difficult online conditions. This reflects Clegg & Rowlands' argument that:

An act is kind in an academic setting in as much as it is pedagogically sound but thinking from the perspective of kindness involves more than instrumentality. To be a kind teacher involves more than just a technical judgement of utility. It imbues the act of teaching with qualities and values (Clegg & Rowland, 2010, p. 724)

This is a somewhat difficult task in the context of compliance and regulation in Australia. However, within this context, the organisational culture and the constructs of the community of inquiry facilitated the possibilities of kind teaching, learning and intellectual development that was strangely powerful throughout the pandemic, when many teachers and students were at their worst physically and emotionally. What was also evident was that acts of pedagogical kindness did not dissolve the presence of cognitive engagement but alternatively enhanced the quality of learning, increased the degree of student engagement in many cases and may have led to very positive student feedback regarding the student experience. This contrasts to many competitors and higher education institutions who experienced plummeting scores throughout 2021, while this organisation maintained its good rankings regarding student engagement during that same period.

In rationalising the experiences that surrounded pedagogical kindness within this community, we suggest that we have captured Garrison's notions of "being there" through authentic well-intentioned professionalism (MacFarlane, 2004; Clegg & Rowland, 2010). Further, we argue that the act of pedagogical kindness became infused into and mediated across the three presences of a community inquiry facilitating the "boundary crossing" (Cramp & Lamond, 2016) experienced by both academics and students as they transitioned into an online environment. It is too early to suggest a reconceptualization of Garrison's inquiry framework for online teaching (see Figure 2 below). However, the infusion of the pedagogy of kindness across Garrison's three presences has enabled the academics to strengthen their community of learning not only through professional learning but to find a place for kindness in their presence as teachers interacting closely with their students in respectful, inclusive, engaging, and kind pedagogies.

We have also witnessed that through considering the feelings of others and encouraging students to do the same throughout the pandemic, kind academics have reduced the anxiety of online teaching for themselves, their peers and their students. Concurrently, it appears that the presence of kindness from a social and cultural perspective has enhanced human flourishing across staff and students and has generated evolving forms of group cohesion through stressing the importance of both staff and students "being there". This has been achieved through strategic and deliberate action by academics with a view to enhancing the social, cultural, and cognitive dimensions of learning online.

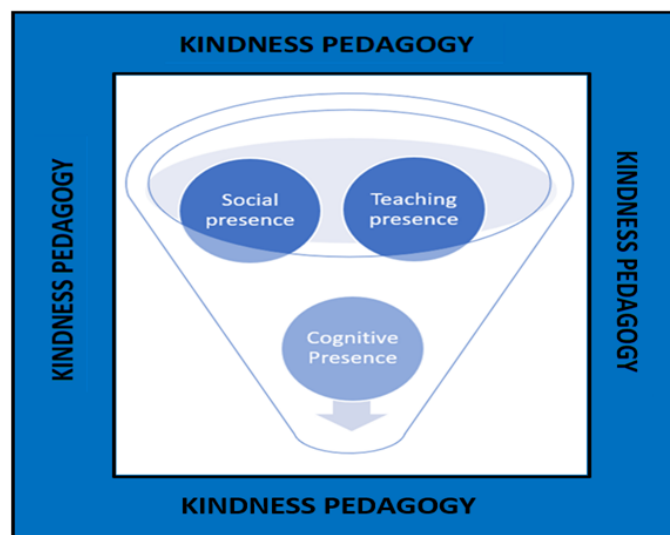


Figure 2. Academic Community of Inquiry reflecting the infusion of the pedagogy of kindness.

While research evidence is yet to be generated to support these claims, the strength of the narrative across the community warranted the propositions to be posted for a broader audience and as a catalyst for further professional conversations as well as future investigative research. However, in the world of higher education, this is a good news story and should be celebrated as such. Amidst a context of trauma, change, and uncertainty like never before, we witness here an organisation, a community of academics and individual teachers adopting the power of kindness to address the unique challenges that accompanied the pandemic in higher education. They did so in order to be present for each other and their students, to remain connected throughout the transitions pedagogically, socially, and cognitively and to generate resolutions "on the run" despite personal and professional exhaustion, isolation and demoralisation.

The paper has shared the case of one higher education provider and an analysis of how a sample of their teaching staff responded to the challenges of the pandemic and the teaching of international students in the period 2020-2022. The interplay and importance of two key concepts, kindness, and presence, in managing the challenges of the pandemic and, at the same time sustaining quality teaching and enhancing the well-being of staff and students, has

been analysed. The proposition that *pedagogical kindness was central to new ways of working in higher education as it experienced a rapid transition to online mediums* has been presented. Such a proposition offers deeper insights into how one group of academics built an inquiry-based professional learning community that focused on the accelerated reinvention of pedagogy in ways that were collaborative, critical and kind. Further with concerns about student engagement as a priority, the lens of Garrison's inquiry-based framework has been useful to reflect on how academics maintained quality intellectual engagement and group cohesion through the place of presence which was imbued with kindness over the two-year period. Further research will be generated as higher education continues to undergo change and uncertainty and the place of kindness and presence will be more deeply investigated particularly in relation to pedagogy, academic identity and the impact on the viability of sustaining a professional learning community in tough times.

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