

**[00:00:00] Bonni:** Today on episode number 347 of the Teaching In Higher Ed podcast, Courtney Plotts is back this time to talk about online culture.

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**[00:00:12] Production Credit:** Produced by Innovate Learning, maximizing human potential.

**[00:00:20] Bonni:** Welcome to this episode of Teaching In Higher Ed, I'm Bonni Stachowiak and this is the space where we explore the art and science of being more effective at facilitating learning. We also share ways to improve our productivity approaches so we can have more peace in our lives and be even more present for our students.

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Courtney, welcome back to Teaching In Higher Ed.

**[00:00:51] Courtney:** Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.

**[00:00:54] Bonni:** It's been a while since we've had a chance to talk and I know you've been up to a lot. Can you tell us a little bit about what's been going on in your life and in your work?

**[00:01:03] Courtney:** Oh my gosh. Yes. Same thing as everybody else's life in higher ed just kind of Zoom Sphere has been moving quickly, I'm just trying to figure out new innovative ways to connect with each other and our students. I'm just really trying to improve on the work that has been out there and just some new work, really looking at the cultural aspects of the Community of Inquiry theory and seeing how we can better connect students and how students can have better opportunities to learn in online spaces.

**[00:01:31] Bonni:** I saw the Community of Inquiry framework for the first time. I'm going to guess it was probably about four years ago maybe. I remember it making sense to me in the sense of these things coming together, but I know that from my experience and also from yours, it's hard to put something like that really into

practice. Let's start out just having a conversation about what it is because I know there'll be a lot of people listening who haven't heard of it before, then let's spend a little bit of time talking about maybe some of the challenges that come into play when someone may actually want to incorporate it into their teaching. What might they run into?

**[00:02:10] Courtney:** Sure. The model is about 21 years old. You're looking at the research of Garrison, Archer and Anderson. They basically took online learning and said, look, it's three pieces. There's this teaching piece that is how you're teaching and that's teaching presence and then there's social presence, which is the psychological attribute of being online and feeling connected. Then there's this cognitive presence of how you make meaning out of the content that is being presented. When I started looking at that model, what I realized was that model was associated with a very specific culture, which is online learning.

Then when we look at the culture of online learning, it has very, very specific attributes and a lot of our racialized, minorities and underrepresented students, their culture does not reflect what is there. What I've been doing is looking at what we've been doing with the model that's working and also looking at the pieces of the model that maybe wouldn't work for those groups and what would work for those groups.

**[00:03:11] Bonni:** Now, when you talk about that, it definitely resonates and I understand what you're saying. I do wonder if we couldn't, A, apply the COI model to an in-person class and some of the challenges that you're finding happen in online, we also know are happening there. Am I right about that?

**[00:03:33] Courtney:** Oh, absolutely. Yes. I focus on online, but a lot of it is also just curriculum development and course design. For instance, when we look at types of thinking, you have divergent thinking, which is a narrowing logistics type of thinking and you have convergent thinking, which is more of a creative thinking. When we look at cultural norms, you can look at cultural norms and how people bring their culture to the table to make meaning. Those specific cultures stick to one of those two types of thinking.

I know that for the folks listening a lot of us have had this experience where we've been even face-to-face in a classroom and we're lecturing and it's our day and we're in our moment, then we have a student and the student raises their hand and you call on the student and they say this answer that you really can't-- You're like, "No, that's not what I'm saying." Because we're so fact-based and that's a very divergent type of thinking. We didn't inquire enough. We didn't say, "Tell me how you got there. What is your understanding of this?" Because if you give it time that

convergent thinking will, most of the time bring you to a similar answer, it's just you have to reframe it.

Because a lot of the teaching that has happened across the world is in a Eurocentric vacuum, we've gotten away from those other pieces or we've never had them. We need to look and see, what are these other things that we can look at that enhance our course design, that enhance our teaching practices and enhance connection with our students?

**[00:05:07] Bonni:** Also, I was just having a conversation yesterday with a colleague, she was expressing frustration with students in a master's level program who were just so much seeking the right answer. "I can't get them to think--" She didn't say the word nuance, but that was the realm that she was describing. I thought that's exactly what we've trained our learners to do. That if you get to the point in life where you're earning a master's degree, you probably in some part got it along the way because you were able to discover the "right answers" and that is oftentimes what we're building up in our educational systems. Then, of course, as you're beginning to explain to us, that's leaving some people out.

**[00:05:50] Courtney:** Yes. There are certain things that are just fact. If you teach math two plus two is always four. You're not going to get around that concept. We can't change and be like, well, it can be five sometimes. Like, no, it's always four. I think we have to recognize that for sure. We also have to recognize that when we look at online culture, if we look at it, and this is just a rough estimate from some of our data, but we look at it in thirds. A third of your students are going to be able to come into an online space or come into your classroom and completely, for lack of a better term, assimilate to the classroom and what's required.

There's another group that might be separated from that culture, but eventually, they'll be able to make that jump. There's a third of the students from all races, from all socio-economic backgrounds that cannot make that leap. The question is why, why is that happening? Why is this one group of students not able to make that leap? It's because when we look at the culture of learning and we look at whether it's in the online space or the classroom space, is that a lot of the students experienced marginalization. It's really important to understand that marginalization, there's two ways that it can happen, there's what we've been talking about all summer, which is the systemic racism and how that can marginalize people.

The American Psychological Association and tons of other research says that marginalization is also a self-selected way to deal with the acculturative stress. People select it because they can't function, they can't bridge the gap. When we look at how we've been doing class orientation, when we look at how we've been

doing these things, we never address that. We just say, "You're here and this is what you're supposed to do." We have a welcome, and I'm using finger quotes, I know you all can't see me, but we have a welcome, but we don't help people navigate what it's supposed to feel like or what we want them to do.

Janae Cohn and I have been working on an article and that's one of the things like we were talking about. She said, "Courtney, it was a light bulb moment for me because I realized that you can't have student engagement without a sense of community and you can't have a sense of community if you don't understand the culture of what you're trying to do." Just putting those pieces together.

**[00:08:12] Bonni:** We have been exploring the COI model and so this just to review if it's new to people. It's looking at the interaction between teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence. Could you speak a little bit about where that model breaks down when it comes to cultural responsive teaching in an online environment?

**[00:08:34] Courtney:** If you look at the COI model, it has those three pieces. What we found is through those three pieces there's five other areas that can help decrease a sense of marginalization and increase the cultural responsiveness. One is-- I say intentionality, but a lot of people say intentional-- how do they say, just being intentional, but I like intentionality. I just like it. If I make up words, then I make it work. To be intentional with things and really focus and saying, "What am I trying to do with my students?" That's number one.

Number two is collaborative and contextual learning. We know that communal ethnic groups favor collaborative and contextual experiences. There's also the divergent and the convergent thinking where, again, if you look at online learning, it's a lot of task, it's a lot of complete this, do that. We don't make room for exploration. We just say, "Here's the information, do what you will." There's also that transactional versus relational piece that I know I've talked about before, where, again, taking that down, taking down that you're going to click here and do that. There's also, again, that interdependence versus independence.

When we look at the literature, everything is self-efficacy, self-motivation. Those are very Eurocentric concepts and when we look at how other cultures take in information and how the framework of that, it's done in a very interdependent way. I've said this before, but when we look at what successful students do, they are not independent, they are interdependent, they rely on the network of their friends, they rely on the professor, they rely on the internet. They are interdependent, they do not sit alone in a vacuum and are just successful.

Yes, they may have a better network, they may have better resources, they may have a quicker understanding, but if they were fully independent, they would

actually be marginalized because they would not have a network, they would just be stuck. Just running that thread through. For instance, when you're looking at making groups, I'm just using an example and I've used this before, a lot of people think that a piece of culturally responsive teaching is being transparent as far as, "This is what I'm doing for my Black students and this is what I'm doing for my Latino students," but what it really is, is looking at what you're doing and saying, "How could I do this differently?"

Again, we put students in groups randomly and that's fine sometimes, but we can make a list of values that are associated with Black students, or LatinX students, or Indian students, or Asian American students, or whatever culture you want to pick and we pick those four qualities to make a group and we just present them and we say, "Here are four ways that you can work in a group. Which way would you prefer?" and they select it. Now, they don't know that you're putting up the, you don't randomly pick one.

They don't know that you're putting up the LatinX values that align with culture, but it's a different way to group students and have them start thinking differently. At the end of the semester is when you tell them, "I want you to know that I wasn't doing those things randomly, I was doing it because I wanted to demonstrate that everyone can benefit from everyone's culture and that's how I did it in my classroom."

**[00:12:01] Bonni:** You were talking about the divergent and convergent thinking. I keep stressing that so much of the time so many of us grew up in a more individualistic educational environment, such that I have had exercises and I do like to have there be-- I've never quite thought of it as explicitly as what you just described, but I'm realizing that's what you're describing is, rather than linear, "Do this, do this, do this," then it's like, "Oh, here's a whole list of things you could do." I do it twice in a doctoral class that I teach, "Here's a list of people's websites that I'd just like you to go check out, ones that look interesting to you," and they do a reflection on their digital identity.

Then, a second exercise that we do is around visual literacy. I forget, some kind of resources around visualization and it's that same idea. That's more akin to how we learn informally on our own in many cases, but I find those to be so much resistance that I had to learn through a lot of bad experiences to go, "Oh, you'll notice that this is a giant list I do not intend for you to go through," because otherwise a lot of them will think I literally mean to go through every single one of those websites, every single page unless I explicitly help us in a community way unlearn that.

Some people feel perfectly comfortable with just that exploration, but I found that for me it does help to be more transparent about, "This is what we're doing. This is

why. You'll notice it was different than the last assignment where I did have you working in a sequence because we're building up to a skill that will tend to be learned easier by doing it in a more linear way."

**[00:13:45] Courtney:** Yes, absolutely. There's certain things that lend themselves to linear pieces. It's part of teaching. Some of it is linear and needs to be, but there's a whole piece of it that we can work more efficiently and effectively with. I just explain it to people like this, every building has multiple entrances and exits. Your students come to your classroom through multiple doors. When you're on campus, you have your students sitting in your classroom, but you don't know how they got there, you don't know if they skateboarded there, you don't know if they walked there, were dropped off, you don't know if they slept in the quad, you don't know how they got there, but they got there.

It wasn't your responsibility or part of your job description to say, "Today everyone's going to get here on a skateboard and tomorrow everyone has to get here walking." If we teach faculty how to design and we teach instructional designers how to design in a way that includes this thread-- Again, it's not throwing everything out that we're doing either. I think that's really overwhelming for people when you start to talk about this stuff. People think, "Oh my gosh, great, now I have to start from the beginning."

I don't think that that's true either. I think there's a whole dimension of what we've been doing or what we haven't been doing that we can look at to say, "Wow, I can keep the academic rigor, I can engage my students, I can create a sense of community and I can also honor the other aspects of people's lives in this course that are going to help them be successful."

**[00:15:19] Bonni:** I was thinking about another aspect that you shared and that would be the transactional versus relational. In some reading that I've been doing and I do this in my own practice, where try to have, not everything has to be assessed, not everything has to be graded, but with so much now of the emphasis, and I would say in a good way, to try to build our collective skills around building asynchronous online experiences, that a lot of our learners-- I shouldn't say a lot. I'm just going to go and say all of our learning management systems are built for the transactional.

If I want to put in there a placeholder because I think it's important to have clear expectations, because I think it's, in the example I keep giving you today, this eight-week doctoral class, they really do want and need from me really specific about, "This is due, this." I resist it and I recognize it. I was there too. "I'll put a date to this thing," and I'm making this up, "talk to this other person about this." It's more on the relational side, it's not worth points, but the LMS makes me put something in there. I

can say that it's not graded, but in the particular one I'm referring to, even though it's not graded, the grade book is like, "But I must have something to put in the score." That kind of thing.

I'm sure it's because I don't know that LMS as well as I know the primary one that I used. It could very well be user error, but I also know those people who know LMS' back and forth, that is' oftentimes that they really do stress that transactional. I find that I can do the relational ones a lot better in synchronism environment, so it's harder to do an asynchronous-- I'm sure because I still need room for growth and I'm sure also because our tools are built for transactional. [laughs] I don't know if you have any thoughts, I guess people experiencing those kinds of challenges specifically on the asynchronous front?

**[00:17:11] Courtney:** Sure. That's a great point. Thank you for sharing that. Everything doesn't have to be synchronous, #Everything doesn't have to be in Zoom. [laughs] One of the things is, you can have an asynchronous class and promote communal learning. You can still give suggestions to your students to connect with each other or connect with a specific document. They can connect in other ways, or just share a way that they have connected with someone so that there's some element of community in there. Also, I think that when we look back at 2020, I think we really paid the price for the design that we've been designing.

I'd never seen so much on faculty health and wellness as I have this last year. That tells me something. As a clinician, that tells me something. It tells me that faculty were feeling disconnected, it tells me that students were feeling disconnected and we designed for that and we paid the price. Now, the question is, moving forward, how can we equip faculty, how can we equip students. Again, for the faculty who were moving and shaking and they were strong and online and they're comfortable with it, some of them became a department of one overnight. We have to be honest about that.

There was a grief process because culture was removed and that's acculturative stress, is when you take one element and you remove it and replace it with something else and that's what happened. All of those transactional systems came into people's homes and they were expected to function the same. It was a long haul for a lot of faculty and a lot of students. My goal this year is to focus on how we can improve that for the future. Hopefully, when more people are getting vaccinated, we'll be back to some semblance of normal, but that online piece is still going to be there. I want healthy students, I want healthy faculty and I want people learning. I think that that's a big piece of it.

**[00:19:21] Bonni:** When we look at the Community of Inquiry, we look at these five ways that we might enhance it to be more culturally responsive. What do you see

as another area that's a common challenge that people might run into? Taking these theories, putting them into practice, you're going out and doing so much speaking and writing on this, where do you see another barrier that people hit upon when they try to put it into practice?

**[00:19:47] Courtney:** This year, in particular, I think faculty were feeling so disconnected in some instances that they couldn't even make the psychological leap into, "How am I going to get these people on board?" Meaning my students. I'm at home, I'm used to-- One thing that I love about faculty the most is that they are creatures of habit. That morning routine is crucial to their well-being. That saying hi to their coworker is crucial to their well-being. That was all taken away. To try to feel connected, the biggest thing I heard last year, which I'm sure you heard too, Bonni, and for the listeners is, the cameras aren't on.

Again, for people who've been working in the virtual environment for a while, that's been something that we've adopted too, but that's 10, 15 years of adapting. For faculty who are used to seeing their students every day face-to-face and coming in the online space, it was a multi-layer issue because it was, one, I need to see them. I need my normal, a piece of mind normal. Our students were a lot more acclimated in some ways to be like, "Yes, I talk to my friends all the time with my camera off." That's social behavior from Facebook and Snapchat and Instagram was blowing into academia. That was that big piece and that's because everyone was ripped away from their culture and thrust into another culture with no scaffolding. When we did that, we all worked backwards.

**[00:21:24] Bonni:** The other thing that I saw happening too, that we were just making the assumption that everything was rosy in the first place. [laughs] It's kind of like, I want them to have their cameras on, then they need to do this, need to do that and it's like, well, if I had gone into your classroom, would I have seen the exact percentage, 100% of the kind of civil attention that you're requiring or hoping you could require in your classes? I try to be empathetic because I feel it too. I'm going, "I can't get to you." That kind of thing. I've taught online for a long time, but I tend to teach a mix.

We've established those foundations of trust and those relationships such that when you turn your camera off, there's not a signal to me that I've lost something with you in terms of relationship or credibility or ego or whatever it is that is concerning me about that. Since those foundations can't be established in the same way as previously, so much more gets written into that. Then so often people don't understand when the same thing happens to them. I was just on yesterday and the internet connection wasn't great on a particular web conferencing platform, so a bunch of us were turning off our video for that reason.

Everybody knew it, well, she's normally on video and she's not and actually put it in the chat, just so no one thought it was weird. We have already our own social norms that when we break them, they don't think I'm trying to cheat the system by turning my off because they know me. The other thing I was thinking about a lot too, Courtney, is then I think that we presume everyone is going to have the same comfort level of seeing themselves and hearing themselves in that up-close and personal way. I did read, I'm sure you read too, some articles about some of the trauma that actually is exasperated from people who have maybe experienced sexual trauma, those kinds of things.

There is a way in most web conferencing platforms to not see yourself. That could be made available as an option to students. Nonetheless, the default setting is a way of viewing one's self and others in a much more close-up yet distant way, it's hard to explain, both of those things can be true at the same time, than we were accustomed to.

**[00:23:52] Courtney:** Yes, that's awesome. You just made me think of two things that I wanted to share as well. When we're talking about this camera issue, I just want people to be aware of that, one, obviously ditto everything you just said, but two is that sometimes it's for legal reasons that are environmental. For instance, people who have foster children in their home, they're not supposed to be on camera. If my camera is off and I have to watch my child, who I'm fostering, and I am in class, I literally by law cannot do that. There are all these peripheral things and a lot of that information-- I used to work in child protection so I'm familiar with those other pieces, as a faculty member.

It's also just that we have to, for those people listening who are just those old school, like cameras need to go on and people-- I totally respect that and I totally get it. What I think I'm trying to get at is, we have to be honest that campus culture is not the online culture. It's an extension, but it's not the same thing. Because it's not the same thing, we have to look at alternatives to what we can require and assess. Just to go back on what you were saying about assessment, culturally responsive rubrics are something that we've been looking at for about three years. They're included in some of our diversity training and international cert. It's just a way of writing rubrics with cultural pieces in mind.

Again, people always think it's ethnic culture. It's not always ethnic culture, it's whatever culture you're trying to create that keeps people safe. Sometimes you want to focus on ethnicity and sometimes you want to focus on collaboration and sometimes you want to focus on learning, but regardless, even if, for those people who are resistant to the ethnic-cultural piece, it's all important. If you want that connection, that's the key to that piece. I'm not saying that ethnic culture shouldn't

be important, obviously it's all important, but you have to look at the psychological piece of culture because that's what frames how we learn and how we teach.

**[00:26:13] Bonni:** This is the part in the show where we each get to share our recommendations.

**[00:26:17] Courtney:** Awesome.

**[00:26:19] Bonni:** Mine is actually somewhat related to the overarching things we've been talking about in a way. I listened to a podcast that's called *With Friends Like These*, that's the name of the podcast itself and the name of the episode was called *When Denouncing White Nationalism Isn't Enough*. It was actually an episode that was re-aired. It originally aired in June of 2020. I listened to it toward the end of 2020, beginning of 2021. I'm going to actually read the description from the episode because it says it better than I could.

Derek Black thought he was done with the white nationalist movement when he wrote a public letter renouncing the ideology he grew up in.

Then he realized that white nationalism wasn't just the racist that used to listen to his white nationalist radio show and read his white nationalist website. White supremacy was everywhere. People just weren't talking about it. I really liked it. I didn't know anything about this man and still all I know about him is what I heard on the interview. He kept stressing over and over again that he was reluctant to ever have any kind of a public face after he just denounced it and then thought that he would be able to live a regular life. He realized that that wasn't possible, but he very much resists that this is a story about him.

He'll always educate the reporters who he's talking to. Someone wrote a book about him and it was always his attempts to de-center himself so that at the center of the story is people who have been subjugated for generations. I found that interesting. The thing that struck me the most about the episode that I'll be taking away because I've shared on the podcast many times before, my own failures and some of my own responses to things that happen in a classroom is being afraid of my own rage. I know that that's a common thing and I could be embarrassed about it and never talk about it, but it is something that can happen that may not bring about the best responses.

What I take hope from his story is that he told the story about being in college and that he didn't have his mind changed about white supremacy because he went in there with such an open mind and, "Oh, it's the marketplace of ideas and I can't wait for what college is going to do to me to expand my thinking." He went to college with a mindset of changing other people's minds and he was dead set on what his objective was. He was right everyone else was wrong and so any

classroom interaction he would have, or an interaction with the professor was all of a mindset of changing their minds.

He shares that it wasn't that someone made this great argument with all the logic in the world that changed his mind, what changed his mind was through relationship. He shares in there, he says, "All these people that hate gay people and all of a sudden they meet one or hate Black people and all sudden they become friends with one." That is through relationship that we can change our most deeply rooted beliefs. To me, I thought I'm going to be carrying that with me the next time that I feel that sense of anger, that if I ever wanted to be a part of changing people's minds and helping them be more inclusive in their own lives, it's going to come out of a relationship.

It's not going to come out of my anger or because I have the perfect words or because I have the perfect way to try to help them think through some of their own racist or sexist ideas. Yes, it was a good interview. I'd recommend that people check it out and, Courtney, I'm going to pass it over to you for whatever you'd like to recommend.

**[00:29:57] Courtney:** Now I feel like I need to say ditto because I'm super excited to listen to that. I did *Skim, Dive, Surface* by Janae Cohn because it's all about reading strategies and I really hope that-- I know this is Teaching In Higher Ed, but I really hope that the K-12 folks will get a hold of that book as well. I think that there's a lot of things that can be beneficial to the K-12 that could prepare students for college. She's just a phenomenal writer. I just wanted to give her a shout-out. As always, if you're interested in our training, just go to [uscaseps.org](http://uscaseps.org) and click register and you can register.

**[00:30:33] Bonni:** Courtney, I'm so glad to get to have this follow-up conversation with you. I know that as fast as you're going with all the stuff that you're doing, [laughs] we'll have a chance to talk again soon. Thank you so much for joining me on today's episode.

**[00:30:44] Courtney:** Absolutely. Thanks for having me. It was great to be here.

[music]

**[00:30:50] Bonni:** Thanks to Dr. Courtney Plotts once again for joining me for today's episode. If you'd like to visit the show notes, there over at [teachinginhighered.com/347](http://teachinginhighered.com/347). I also revamped the Teaching In Higher Ed weekly update at the start of 2021. If you haven't subscribed yet, I think you'll find it to be a helpful resource. You can subscribe over at [teachinginhighered.com/subscribe](http://teachinginhighered.com/subscribe). Thank you so much for listening. I'll see you next time on Teaching In Higher Ed.

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**[00:31:50] [END OF AUDIO]**

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