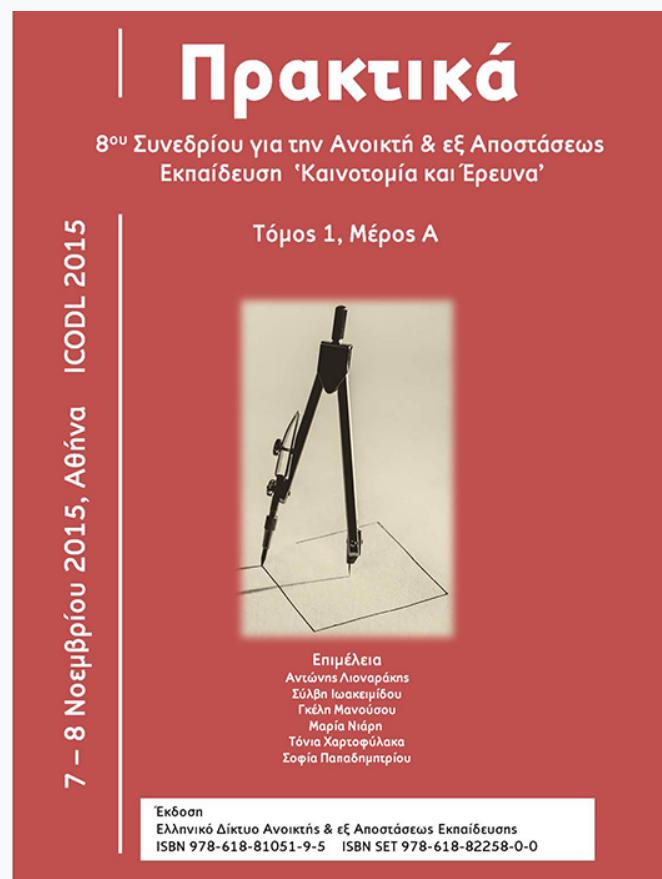


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Utilizing the Face-to-Face Component of i²Flex on Building Rapport: A Counseling Psychologist's Perspective

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Abstract

Individuals today, need more than ever to be equipped with tools that will assist them in being able to cope with the changes they are faced with within multitude domains of their lives. Some of these domains may include, school, work, social and family environments and how each individual progresses as a human being across the life-cycle. As learning is a life- long process that touches and interacts with many domains of one's individual life and overall functioning, individuals must be flexible and able to adapt to the everyday changes around them. More specifically in education, students over the last decade with increased technological advances have opportunities that extend beyond the brick -and- mortar traditional learning environment. They are now interacting with what literature indicates as "blending learning"; a combination of web-based teaching and learning experiences along with structured individual and collaborative interaction among students and teachers. In this chapter, the author will emphasize a particular model of blended learning referred to as i²Flex that has been piloted and utilized at the American Community Schools of Athens, Greece. This model will be examined with the view to illustrating how learning within this framework can assist students in being flexible and adaptive; enhances social-emotional competencies vis- a- vie their face-to-face interactions with their teachers (and online collaboration with teachers and peers), thus facilitating independence as 21st century learners.

Key-words: face-to-face time, i²Flex, Community of Inquiry, blended learning, social and emotional competencies, morfosis educational paradigm, aristeia leadership

1. Introduction

This chapter will explore the effects of i²Flex learning and the overall students' face-to face relationships (and online communication among teachers and students, students and students). Social and emotional competencies and emotional intelligence will also be described. Furthermore, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework designed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000;2001) will be discussed and how the social domain of this model contributes to students' overall academic achievements. Some questions that will be examined are the following: How do the different components of the i²Flex model and the Aristeia leadership model of Gialamas (2009) facilitate the face-to-face relationship between the teacher and learner? How does the face-to-face relationship foster social-emotional well-being and academic success? Based on the CoI survey. How are students rating the social domain of the CoI model with their teachers through i²Flex learning? By emphasizing

the face-to-face relationship as described above, student learning may be enhanced and social-emotional competencies can be further developed, as students continue to progress in advancing technological and globalized environments.

2. Background

In the following discussion some of the above mentioned interrelated facets that coincide with the i²Flex model will be examined in further detail.

2.1. The Global Morfosis Paradigm

Over the years, ACS-Athens has developed an educational framework referred to as the *Global Morfosis Paradigm*. This paradigm encapsulates three fundamental elements that are systemically related: 1) Morfosis, from the Greek word Μόρφωση (ethical, intellectual and social individual characteristics), 2) the educational philosophy, the i²Flex delivery, methodology, and 3) Aristeia (from the Greek word Αριστεία/pursuing excellence under the guidance of ethos) leadership framework (Gialamas & Pelonis, 2009).

The *Morfosis* educational framework envelopes holistic, meaningful and harmonious educational experiences that are guided by ethos (Avgerinou, 2014). One way in which this framework has been implemented at ACS-Athens, is via the i²Flex Model of blended learning. This non-traditional learning methodology has been initially developed by the ACS- Athens community of learners and thus follows the principals and values of the Aristeia Leadership (Avgerinou, 2014) (to be described later in this discussion). Avgerinou (2013) further described that the educational experience must be *meaningful* for the learner in that he/she views the experiences as an essential part of his/her life and in relation to individual strengths, hopes and aspirations. Additionally, such educational experiences are *harmonious* in that they highlight all facets of learning and behaving and are in line with one's principles, values and choices that are driven by ethos (Avgerinou, 2013).

2.2. The i²Flex Model

Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia (2014) suggested that the i²FlexModel integrates the independent student learning, the learning guided by a faculty mentor and the face-to-face learning between mentor and student learner. The i²Flex model includes the integration of face-to face learning as well as technology-based teaching and learning which entails two elements of the online component: 1) individual and collaborative interaction (guided by the teacher) and 2) independent online learning (student driven) (Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia, 2014). This approach is flexible in terms of where the learning takes place, the pace and timing of the educational experience and in which format, exchange of information will be delivered. Students who may utilize this model of learning are therefore engaged in a multitude of learning opportunities without the physical limitations of the brick-and-mortar classroom environment (Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia, 2014).

2.3. Schools and the Socio-emotional Development of Children

Social-emotional learning engulfs the process of developing fundamental social and emotional competencies or skills (Zins & Elias, 2006). These skills enable children to manage their emotions, experience empathy, develop positive relationships, make good decisions, and conduct their behavior ethically and responsibly (Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, 2003).

Greenberg et al. (2003) also suggested that children who are socially and emotionally competent tend to be more happy, confident and equipped with strong interpersonal skills across various contexts and roles. Hence, supports the importance of social and emotional learning as an intrinsic aspect of children's academic learning and performance and motivation to achieve.

2.4. Emotional Intelligence/Emotional and Social Skills

Research refers to Emotional Intelligence (EQ) as playing a central role in nurturing personal and professional relationships. Three major clusters of skills are described: 1) individual character skills, 2) emotional skills and 3) social skills. Moreover, the hallmarks of the above mentioned EQ skills are outlined by Goleman (2011) as the following: a) self-awareness; self-confidence, realistic self-assessment, self-deprecating sense of humor, b) self-regulation; trustworthiness and integrity, comfort with ambiguity, openness to change, c) motivation; strong drive to achieve, optimism and commitment to one's organization, d) empathy; expertise in building and retaining talent, sensitivity to cross-cultural issues, service to clients/customers, e) social skill; effectiveness in leading change, persuasive, expertise in leading teams (Goleman, 2011, as cited in the Harvard Business Review On Leadership).

2.5. 21st Century Skills/Meta-Competencies

Meta-competencies or 21st century skills are those that allow each individual (learner) to develop skills of reflection, interpretation of information and communicative, social, creative and cognitive skills (Carroll et al., 2010). Society requires such competencies from individuals, with rapid changes on the rise in order to deal effectively with complex issues that exist (Pink, 2010; Gardner, 2007). Therefore, teachers and students alike will need support in being up-to-date with the necessary tools and skills in order to practice key competencies as described earlier. These meta-competencies, social-emotional competencies if you will, can especially be materialized through a harmonious constructivist approach through methods of blended learning and more specifically the i²Flex model of learning. Furthermore, teaching such metacognitive competencies must go beyond learning in specific subjects, but rather progress towards holistic learning through learning and life experiences and independent work (Scheer, Noweski & Meinel, 2012).

Such models of innovative learning facilitate the transfer of knowledge and the development of individual potentials and gives teachers gained confidence in executing collaborative methods of teaching (and learning for students) which in turn, fosters a positive relationship between students and teachers, thus confirming students' social and metacognitive competencies (Scheer, Noweski & Meinel, 2012).

As the need for new skills for learning in the 21st century will continue to increase, many authors have posited several definitions on what these skills encompass. As Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia (2014) stated, the Partnership for 21st Century Skills framework (2006) is one of the most extensive definitions as it not only highlights core subject knowledge and awareness of current technologies but also refers to communicative, interpersonal and self-directional skills that will assist students to be life-long learners in a continuous evolving society (Avgerinou, Gialamas & Tsoukia, 2014).

2.6. CoI Framework

The Community of Inquiry theoretical framework, developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000;2001) aims to illuminate a process of learning experiences that are

collaborative, constructivist and meaningful, through the development of three interdependent rudiments in blended learning. These rudiments are the social, cognitive and teaching domains (<https://coi.athabascau.ca/coi-model/coi-survey/>).

Social Domain

According to Garrison (2001) social presence is “the ability of participants to identify with the community, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities”. Learning independently through computer conferencing brings about high levels of student-student and student-teacher interaction.

Cognitive Domain

Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2001) stated that cognitive presence is the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication. The above researchers also suggested that cognitive presence (i.e., critical, practical inquiry) can be created and supported in a computer conference environment with appropriate teaching and social presence.

Teaching Domain

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer (2001) stated that teaching presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001).

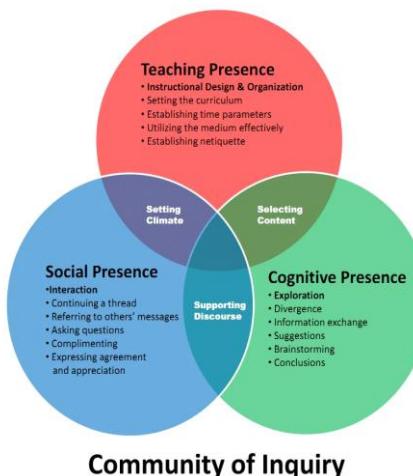


Figure 1. Community of Inquiry Framework (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

3. Reflections

In lieu of the gMp (global morfosis paradigm), i²Flex, school and the socio-emotional development of children, emotional intelligence (EQ), 21st century skills and the CoI (Community of Inquiry), all elements are interrelated as the author's interest in the positive connection between students and teachers and how it encourages learning that takes place face-to face within the human bond, further develops emotional intelligence and the skills necessary to survive both in and out of the classroom. Under this premise, the pilot study described below was carried out with the aim to explore if a close and trusting relationship between students and teachers thus motivates students to become more autonomous and independent learners within the online component of the i²Flex model. Each of the elements stated above, have the common link of social-emotional development and growth; whether it be for a student, teacher or any true leader of any kind.

4. Methodology

In the spring of 2015, the counseling psychologist of ACS-Athens (the author), distributed a survey electronically to students and teachers of the Middle and High Schools, at the American community Schools of Athens, Greece utilizing the i²Flex model of teaching and learning. It must be noted that the model used was in a pilot phase for both students and teachers and both populations were experiencing i²Flex methodology and practice for the first time. Based on the original CoI Survey (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2000; CoI Model) responses were collected merely on the social domain, as the face-face relationship and online experiences were examined in relationship to students overall learning experiences and connection to their teachers (as well as other students). During four weeks of data collection, sixty-six students responded to a student-teacher questionnaire that included thirteen questions. Four of fifteen teachers surveyed, responded to a twelve question instrument. Both surveys were representative of the face-to-face relationship component of the i²Flex model (See Appendix). Both students and teachers were asked to rate their responses on a five point likert-type scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Student and teacher responses have been grouped in the following themes:

- Sense of Belonging and Being Connected
- Motivated to Improve Class Performance
- Online Communication Outside of the Classroom/Medium for Becoming Independent Learners
- Online Medium Utilized/ Communication Outside of the Classroom for Becoming Independent Learners/ Students and Teachers
- Comfort Interacting with Teachers/Students Face-to-Face Time
- Comfort Communicating with Teachers/Students Online
- Online Medium Utilized/Comfort Communicating with Teachers/Students Online
- Comfort Interacting with Class during Class Discussion /Teachers
- Comfort Participation in Class Discussion/Students
- Comfort Interacting with Class Participants/Students
- Comfort Expressing Individual Point of View/Maintaining Trust in Students/Teachers
- Point of View Acknowledged by Students/Teachers
- Online Communication Developed Sense of Collaboration with Students/Teachers
- Online Medium Utilized/Communication Developed Sense of Collaboration with Student/Teachers

5. Data: Collection and Results

Overall, based on the responses of the teachers, all teachers (4 of 4) expressed that face-to-face time gave them a sense of being connected to their students and are more motivated to assist in improving their students' performance in their classes. Most teachers were comfortable with this component of teaching. Additionally, nearly half of the teachers surveyed reported that they are comfortable with the online component of collaborating and teaching their students. The most common medium utilized by teachers for the online teaching and collaborating components were: Email, Google Drive, Moodle, TedEd Videos, Gloster, Discussion Forum and VoiceThread.

The majority of the students (57 of 66) also expressed that they felt a sense of belonging and being connected with their teachers during the face-to face time. They

also were more motivated to improve their performance in their classes (55 of 66). Most of the students (56 of 66) were comfortable with this component of learning. Additionally, more than half of the students (42 of 66) surveyed reported they were comfortable with the online component of collaborating and learning. The most common medium utilized by students for the online learning and collaboration components were: Email, Google Docs, Moodle, Skyward and VoiceThread.

Below are several statements from students that exemplify their experiences with the blended learning model (i²Flex).

“Online communication helps me to develop a sense of collaboration. It persuades me to participate in class and this helps me learn the material studied (or clarify for me something that was misunderstood), by expressing my ideas and this at the same time is making me keep a sense of trust with my teacher”.

“Although face-to-face collaboration is important, online communication allows us to further enhance collaboration beyond the school hours”.

“When we work online, it feels as if the class is whole and we all work together to achieve something”.

6. Recommendations & Future Research Directions

With technology changing all the time and being on the rise, students and teachers try to adapt to learning and living, while maintaining a sense of harmony between the two. Even though for some, transforming into digital experts becomes second nature to them. However, understanding and fully integrating new methods of blended learning (i²Flex) is a task that takes time and full acceptance of this magical wonder. Every individual involved in this new approach to learning needs their own time, space and room to fully integrate every aspect of its' fullest potential, rewards and outcomes.

The teachers and students at ACS-Athens will continue to take part in the research described in this paper over the next academic year. Additionally all age groups from the Elementary, Middle and High Schools will be pooled in order to investigate similarities and differences in aforementioned meta-skills. 21st century skills will be continuously examined, as the tools to acquire such skills will need to be offered through teacher/student training workshops. As the i²Flex model has only been currently implemented over the last two academic school years at the American Community Schools of Athens, Greece, future prospects appear hopeful. Both students and faculty appear to be comfortable with this innovative educational paradigm and are eager to advance in the years to come. It will take continuous effort to train and educate all parties involved in this educational journey; as the i²flex model progressively becomes more and more familiar to all it personally touches, as a prerequisite for 21st century skills in learning.

7. Conclusion

Within the holistic (emotional, social, cognitive and physical) approach to learning and being and having the i²Flex model at the fingertips of our students, growth in educational opportunities are becoming more and more promising. Thus, professional relationships among administrators, school leaders, faculty, parents and students must be authentic and provided with genuine care and love. By providing firm boundaries with care and appropriate guidance, students may not only develop meaningful interpersonal relationships but also meaningful results in their academic progress.

As Christensen confirmed (2011) students who took all or part of their class online performed better on average, than those taking the same course through traditional

face-to-face instruction. Students who mix online learning with traditional coursework do even better (Department of Education, 2009). Gialamas (2014) stated that if educational institutions are to teach and inspire students , developing wisdom to transform static academic knowledge into social, ethical, economic, environmental intelligence must occur. Only then can the sustainability of quality of life be greatly improved for people all around the globe.

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Appendix

A. Extract from Student Survey

***1. Getting to know my teacher during face-to-face time gave me a sense of belonging and being connected.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***2. By answering agree/strongly agree to the Question #1, I can also say that I am more motivated to improve my performance in my class(es).**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***3. Online communication with my teacher outside of class is an excellent medium for me to become a more independent learner.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***4. Keeping in mind your response to Question #3 above, please provide in the space below a specific example of the medium you utilized with your teacher (e.g. email, Moodle forum, etc.).**

***5. I felt comfortable interacting with my teacher during face-to-face time in class.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

B. Extract from Teacher Survey

***1. Getting to know my students during face-to-face time gave me a sense of being connected.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***2. By answering agree/strongly agree to the Question #1, I can also say that I am more motivated to assist my students improve their performance in my class(es).**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***3. Online communication with my students outside of class is an excellent medium for assisting them to become more independent learners.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree

***4. Keeping in mind your response to Question #3 above, please provide in the space below a specific example of the medium you utilized with your students (e.g. email, Moodle forum, etc.).**

***5. I felt comfortable interacting with my students during face-to-face time in class.**

strongly disagree disagree neutral agree strongly agree