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Supporting Learners in the Virtual Classroom through Instructor Presence

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Abstract

The increase in online education in higher education institutions necessitates a shift in the practice of instruction. While teaching online is different from teaching face-to-face classes, the instructor role is still of vital importance. This chapter shares how instructors demonstrate presence before, throughout, and after an online course based on best practice and research.

Overview

Online education continues to grow worldwide, increasing the need for instructors to embrace this new instructional modality (Allen & Seaman,

2015). The growing demand for online courses requires the development of instructors in best practices for online instruction. A key element of effective online instruction is instructor presence. Instructor presence is a combination of instructional design, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). The following chapter presents research, which supports the importance of the instructor's online presence and strategies for developing one's teaching presence in online courses.

Review of the Literature

The Babson Survey Research Group (Allen & Seaman, 2015) reported that in 2013 over 70.7 percent of active degree-granting institutions offered some form of distance learning to over 2.25 million learners. These numbers have steadily increased since the advent of distance education as more learners seek flexible pathways to earning a degree. While the opinions of academic leadership on the effectiveness of online instruction are progressively improving, instructor acceptance of this modality has decreased since 2007 (Allen & Seaman, 2015).

Fish and Gill (2009) asserted that instructors' perceptions of online learning correlate to their experiences teaching online; those with less experience had more negative perceptions of online instruction, while those with more experience were more likely to believe that online instruction was equal in quality to traditional classroom instruction. The authors stated that "quality online instruction is dependent upon faculty not subscribing to the myths of online learning" (Fish & Gill, 2009, p. 2) that may color their perceptions.

Li and Akins (2005) discussed several myths about online learning, including the concerns that it will make the teacher redundant, promote isolation and lack of community, and be limited to content learning. However, research has shown the opposite to be true. Courses with high learner and instructor satisfaction scores promote interaction between learner, instructor, and content (Bolliger & Wasilik, 2009). Furthermore, instructor presence has been shown to be the catalyst for social presence within online courses and is essential to creating opportunities for interaction within an online class (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010).

Anderson et al. (2001) defined instructor presence as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (p. 5). The authors asserted that there are three components to teaching presence: design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Course design and organization that bolsters instructor presence is consistent and easy to navigate, has clear expectations, delivers content and activities which scaffold and support goals, and provides opportunities to practice and interact with the instructor and peers. How instructors establish and maintain a community of inquiry is reflective of their skills in facilitating discourse. The instructor is responsible for creating a safe environment for discourse, which is supportive of various points of view and enables each learner the opportunity to participate. Direct instruction encompasses the techniques used by instructors to provide learning leadership by directing class attention and diagnosing misconceptions. Instructors may provide direct instruction by presenting content, sharing personal experiences, directing specific questions at learners or groups of learners, confirming understanding, and providing specific feedback to learners on assessments.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Instructor presence in online courses begins before the start, continues during the facilitation, and carries on beyond the conclusion of the course. The following section explores these areas of instructor presence in online courses.

Build Instructor Presence into the Course from the Start

Being present in an online course starts before learners even log in to class. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) asserted that cognitive presence and social presence are founded on thoughtful course design. Course design is also a pillar of instructor presence (Anderson et al., 2001). Creating strong instructor presence begins with the elements the instructor builds into a course's design; these elements humanize the instructor, support learning activities, and provide opportunities for interaction and collaboration.

Build an online persona. Learners may feel isolated or disconnected from instructors in online courses (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Instructors can help combat feelings of isolation by creating opportunities for learners to connect with and know them on a more personal level. Personal connections help establish trust within the class, which is an essential component of a healthy learning community (Garrison et al., 1999). Instructors might begin by sharing biographic information and experiences that are relevant to the course and reflective of their interests within and beyond the classroom. Instructors can share a biography along with contact and communication preferences within the course. Relevant information can be reinforced in a welcome announcement or an introductory class discussion.

When creating course communications, instructors should consider writing strategies that capture their unique personalities and speech patterns as a means of humanizing themselves that will help build their presence in the course (Garrison et al., 1999). Emoticons and popular acronyms play a role in social presence and can compensate for missing expressions and voice inflections (Cobb, 2009). However, keep in mind that learners may not be native speakers and will likely have other cultural differences, so the instructor must balance social communication strategies with thoughtful, considerate, and clear writing.

Instructors may choose to create video or audio course communications. Research has shown that thoughtfully incorporating rich media—such as podcast, video, and images—into online courses can increase learner engagement, satisfaction, and feelings of connectedness (Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010; Griffiths & Graham, 2009). To be effective, incorporated media must be accessible to all learners (clear, concise, and transcribed) and should not introduce technological barriers (large downloads or proprietary software, for example).

Make expectations clear. Learners who participated in a survey on instructor presence in online courses at two large universities indicated that making course requirements clear had the greatest impact (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). To make course requirements clear, instructors need to define their expectations. What is the instructor's policy on attendance, participation in activities, or "learner presence" within the course? Will the instructor accept late assignments? What communication methods should the learner use for questions or personal concerns? And when should the learner expect to hear back from the instructor?

Online courses present a great opportunity for inclusive learning where all learners get the opportunity to share their experiences with the class. However, online environments can also enable anonymity that can manifest itself in trolling or other negative behaviors that can be damaging to a learning community (Shea & Shea, 1994).

Instructors are responsible for setting the guidelines for engagement in their courses and ensuring a safe, respectful, and supportive environment for all learners. Instructors should define their course policies and share them with learners in the virtual classroom. Instructors might prompt learners to review policies before the class starts; perhaps even quiz learners on key points as part of participation requirements in the first week of class. Furthermore, instructors should model the behaviors they expect of learners in class and provide additional examples to clarify expectations.

Support learners with effective course design. Instructors can also make their presence known through the design of the course and the content, activities, and assessments therein. While variety in course content can help keep learners stay engaged, consistency in course navigation and organization will reduce cognitive load related to the technology used to deliver the course (Swan, 2003). Instructors should develop a consistent rhythm for the course learning units (whether weekly, thematic, or something other), orient learners to the course design approach, and stick to it. If the institution has a master organizational strategy, instructors should follow it as learners will likely be familiar with this structure.

Build in support for learners within each learning unit. Moss and Brookhart (2010) asserted that "once students understand where they are headed, they are more likely to feel that they can be successful, can actually reach the goal" (p. 30). Make learning goals transparent to learners by outlining how content, activities, and assessments align to course or program learning outcomes. Provide a learning unit checklist to empower learners to take control of time management and learning.

Content within the course units should be chunked into manageable portions that work within the limitations of the learners' working memory (Mayer, 2001). Build opportunities for learners to apply what they have learned and receive feedback on their understanding through formative assessment and collaboration or discussion with the instructor and peers.

The result of effective course design is a supportive, personalized learning environment that sets up learners and instructors for success. Instructors

who prepare courses early can welcome learners to class a few days before it starts. Instructors should give learners a few pointers for getting started in a welcome message, such as visiting every page listed on the course navigation, readings to get started on, discussions to prepare for, and where to find help. This way, learners can get to know the instructor from all that is built into the course design before the course gets under way and the instructor can focus on facilitating learning after the course begins.

Enjoy Connection to Learners throughout the Course

Many opportunities for increasing instructor presence exist during the course when the instructor has the attention of the learners. Because of transactional distance in online courses, instructor presence can be difficult; instructors may miss the immediacy behaviors of traditional face-to-face courses. The following are ways to increase instructor presence in the online classroom:

Communication. Communication from the instructor was found to be one of the highest contributors to learner satisfaction in courses (Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). Instructors reported that the more they made themselves available, responded quickly, and monitored learner engagement in the beginning weeks of the course, the less work they had to do later as it set the tone for the course (Casey & Kroth, 2013). In the same study, every single learner responded that "ongoing and consistent communication" (p. 107) was important to them. Another study found that learners highly appreciated when instructors made them feel like they were the priority, were interested in the learner's success, and came across as human (Hodges & McGuinness, 2014). Communication in an online course entails many components, including instructor social presence and immediacy behaviors, modeling appropriate behaviors, using media, and timely responses.

Traditional classrooms report higher learner motivation, satisfaction, and outcome achievement as a direct result of teacher immediacy behaviors, and online courses are following that trend (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009). Immediacy behaviors refer to "actions that simultaneously communicate warmth, involvement, psychological closeness, [and] availability for communication" (Littlejohn & Foss, 2009, p. 501). These behaviors in a course context include using gestures, addressing learners by their first names, soliciting viewpoints or opinions, praising learners' comments, showing emotion, and using inclusive language ("we," "us"). Other examples include using personal stories from experience and getting into discussions based on learner questions that were not a part of the instructional plan (Schutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009).

Immediacy behaviors look different online and depend on the communication media, with additional behaviors available via audio and video. Synchronous communication tools are one way to communicate with students; use of a synchronous tool may help lessen the isolation some students may feel online.

E-mails from learners are like a raised hand in the traditional classroom, and learners expect an immediate response from instructors. Instructors should clearly communicate their communication policy. As part of this policy, instructors can create a question discussion forum that allows learners to post questions so that all learners can benefit from answers. This will reduce e-mail communications and the need to answer the same question repeatedly.

Discussion boards. An important part of instructor presence in online courses is facilitating discourse, which in many courses occurs on discussion boards (Mandernach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). Discussion boards allow learners to interact with classmates and their instructor, which can increase learning if the content is relevant and the instructor has made efforts to help learners become comfortable in online discussions (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009).

Instructors should consistently participate in discussion boards by sharing their expertise and personal experience. They should also keep the discussions focused on learning goals by asking engaging questions and modeling desired behaviors. Swan and Shih (2005) found that in discussion boards with higher social presence, learners reported significant learning from their peers and instructor.

Feedback. Varnhagen, Wilson, Krupa, Kasprzak, and Hunting (2005) found that one of the major complaints by learners in many areas of online course evaluations was a lack of quality instructor feedback. Learners want confirmation that submitted work is on track. Learner frustration comes from insufficient in-depth feedback. Another study also found that learners wanted more detailed feedback, the type of feedback that identified specific issues to inform work on future assignments (Moore & Wallace, 2012).

There are a variety of ways to give feedback to students online. Written assignments lend themselves to in-text annotation, which allows for detailed feedback in context. LMS testing tools often provide the option to give students immediate feedback, which is valuable for formative assessment. Video or audio feedback is another option made possible in many cases. Moore and Wallace (2012) found that instructors enjoyed giving audio feedback because it was quicker to give detailed feedback than in writing. Borup, West, and Thomas (2015) found that video feedback tended to be longer and more supportive while text-based feedback was more specific and organized. Whatever approach the instructor may choose, the key is to provide detailed feedback that students can use to deepen their understanding and improve work (Sull, 2010). Give praise where it is due to motivate students to continue to apply themselves.

Use available tools. Many learning management systems (LMS) have built-in tools to support instructor presence. A few of the tools in Blackboard (an LMS) are surveys and announcements. Whatever the institution's LMS is, instructors should seek out the tools that are available and use them where appropriate.

Many learners believe that end-of-course evaluations are of no benefit to them, possibly because they never see the direct benefits. This could be one reason end-of-course evaluations often get low response rates. Crews and Curtis (2011) suggested that gathering in-course formative feedback will increase response rates in the end-of-course evaluations and demonstrate to learners that the instructor is engaged in the course. One of the ways to collect in-course formative feedback is through a midterm survey. Instructors can make changes or adjust courses during the term based on learner feedback.

A simple way to increase instructor presence in an online course is to use the Announcements tool. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) pointed out that part of instructor presence is posting regularly and being visible as the instructor. Posting announcements that are e-mailed to learners can do at least three things. First, it gives the learner an opportunity outside of the class to digest course content. Second, it brings the learner into the course more often. These e-mails improve learning as the more times students engage with content, the more likely they are to retain it (Roediger & Pyc, 2012). Finally, announcements show the learners that the instructor is involved in the course.

There are many ways to use announcements. At the start of the week, summarize the content to be learned, assessments to complete, or

discussions to participate in. Near the end of the week, summarize content or clarify anything misunderstood or unclear. Consider using humor, images, or a personal story to break up stressful weeks and make messages more memorable. Avoid excessively long announcements and posting too often, as learners may be overwhelmed. Learners also benefit from reminders of upcoming deadlines.

Let learners leave an imprint. The learner's experience can influence the instructor's practice. Instructors should take time throughout the course to reflect on what's working well and what could be improved. Ko and Rossen (2010) recommended keeping a course journal with notes on the course and ideas for future improvements. At the end of the course, the journal notes can be combined with feedback from learners' end-of course evaluations to create a plan for course and instructional improvements.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

There are many ways to infuse instructor presence into online courses; so many, that it can be a little overwhelming. However, the methods presented in this chapter do not have to be implemented all at once. Even small efforts can make a big impact. To get started, consider the following strategies:

- **Before:** The instructors can work on developing their online persona that will help build social presence and connection with learners. For example, instructors might share a photograph along with personal experience and enthusiasm for the field of study in an instructor bio.
- **During:** Instructors should focus on learner support through prompt and meaningful feedback in discussions, on assignments, and through e-mail. Communications should acknowledge learners' experiences and interests and provide individualized feedback to support their unique learning goals.
- **After:** End-of-course evaluation feedback should be reviewed by the instructor so that necessary changes can be made to the course before it is taught again. Instructors can let learners in the

revised course know how the end-of-course feedback was used to improve the current course as a way to encourage learner feedback when the time comes.

With each new teaching experience, an instructor can incorporate another strategy to further develop teaching presence in online courses. Increased teaching presence will boost learner satisfaction and learning within online courses.

Conclusion

Research shows that instructor presence plays a large role in the effectiveness of the online classroom. Instructor presence can be incorporated in a variety of ways. The instructor's presence should be visible to learners in the design of the course, its facilitation, and learners' direct interactions with the instructor. Hopefully, this chapter has provided accessible strategies for incorporating instructor presence in online courses.

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