

The Vital Importance of Faculty Presence in an Online Learning Environment



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INTRODUCTION

One of the instructional methods, which is clamored by students and which could arguably provide high quality educational opportunities, is faculty presence, as it makes possible the interaction between instructor and students and between students and students in a virtual learning environment (O'Reilly, 2009). Online instructors and academic administrators in higher education cannot simply hold an assumption that quality online courses or student learning could largely depend upon good Internet connectivity, high quality equipment, solid content knowledge of instructors (Welch & Napoleon, 2015), and beautifully designed online courses. The presence of an online instructor cannot ever be neglected or marginalized in online students' learning success. Therefore, highly significant is to address roles that instructors play in an online learning environment in order to underscore the crucial importance of faculty presence in the success of student learning.

BACKGROUND

The Paradigm Shift

An ever increasing number of colleges and universities are transferring courses from face-to-face (F2F) classroom meetings to online learning environments, as students seek out different sources for their educational experience (Welch & Napoleon, 2015). More than 6.7 million students

reportedly took at least one online course during the fall semester of 2011, 570,000 more students enrolled themselves in distance education than those in the previous year (Welch & Napoleon, 2015). Recently, more than 60% of administrators primarily in charge of academics at more than 2,800 colleges and universities in the United States made clear that shifting courses from F2F meetings to online was critical to their long-term strategies (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

With the ever expanding online education and given that online instruction differs distinctively from the traditional F2F instruction (Roman, Kelsey, & Lin, 2010), roles that an online instructor play in a virtual learning environment deserve a great deal of attention, as they underline the necessity of teacher presence in an online learning environment.

Hernández et al.'s (2010) study focused on the roles an instructor played in both e- and traditional learning environments. The researchers performed a comparative analysis of students' perceptions with 33 participants involved in a F2F traditional teaching while 23 students engaged in an online environment. Both of the groups taught by the same instructor. Hernández et al found students' perceptions varied regarding the roles that the instructor played in the F2F and online contexts. Generally, F2F group valued the instructor's role in the learning process more highly than the online group. The findings suggest online instructors ought to make additional efforts to better student learning.

reported that students of distance education classes performed poorly and some even were not able to complete online courses. Furthermore,

there seems to have higher dropout rates within online courses than F2F settings, which might be due to a lack of support from instructor and peers and which might be due to students feeling emotionally isolated (Artino & Jones, 2012; Dabbagh & Kitsantas, 2012). The reported findings offer a strong indication that online instructors need to meet the needs of students (Orso & Doolittle, 2012; Welch, Napoleon, Hill, & Rommell, 2014) by playing a variety of roles in online learning classrooms. Hence, in the paradigm shift, a crucial need is to understand roles that online instructors play in a virtual learning environment (Dennen, Darabi, & Smith, 2007) in order to highlight the paramount importance of faculty presence in an online learning environment.

Faculty Presence in Online Learning Environment

Faculty presence originates from. These researchers termed teacher presence as “teaching presence” and explained, “The concept of teaching presence is constitutively defined as having three categories – design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction” (p. 1). This explanation makes it clear that the presence of an online instructor embraces more than just answering emails and making announcements. With the presence of an online instructor, students would not feel like that they are situated in a “ghost town” (Online Learning Insight, 2012).

According to (O'Reilly (2009)), there are five interaction points, through which online instructors could connect or interact with students. These five interaction points are announcements, email, discussion forums, feedback summaries, and chat sessions. Roles online instructors play through these avenues could also reflect the online instructors' professional teaching dispositions, comprised of instructors' beliefs, values, and attitudes (Welch & Napoleon, 2015).

noted, “[D]ispositions have also been discussed as affective qualities including empathy,” which means that online instructors should make an effort

to know students and to motivate them to learn. Motivation is closely related to students' affect for learning, comprised of students' attitudes, beliefs, and values toward learning (McCroskey, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2006). Students' affective learning is inseparable from teacher presence governed by instructors' beliefs, values, and attitudes.

Students' Affective Learning

Instructors' beliefs, values, and attitudes also affect their verbal and non-verbal immediacy. Verbal immediacy is primarily concerned with ways instructors talk and facilitate student learning in the traditional classroom (Chang, 2011a), whereas nonverbal immediacy involves behaviors that are only observable to receivers or communicators, such as smile, “eye contact, body position, physical proximity, body movement” (Richmond, Gorham, & McCroskey, 1987 in Velez & Cano, 2008, p. 77). Instructor immediacy behaviors communicate positive relational affect (Velez & Cano, 2008): when there exist instructor immediacy behaviors, students feel close to their instructor (Christophel, 1990) and feel motivated to learn (Christophel, 1990; Velez & Cano, 2008). Students have a propensity to take satisfaction responding to questions and actively conceptualize and internalize knowledge (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964).

However, when instructor verbal and non-verbal immediacy are only shown through video lectures, motivation may not be as powerful as when there is an interaction between instructor and student. In a text-based teaching and learning environment, such as discussion asynchronous forums, non-verbal immediacy is non-existent, so is verbal. Then, if instructors are “hiding” from students, a sense of insecurity and overwhelming feeling arises, which could be detrimental to otherwise enthusiastic learning desires.

It is apparent that in an online learning environment, an instructor should make an effort to increase students' affect for learning (McCroskey et al., 2006). noted that learning not only is emo-

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