

Chapter 5

Humorous Presence in Online Learning: A Useful Tool for Combating Boredom and Boosting Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Online learning is an established and growing segment of higher education. Instructors, instructional designers, and leadership should focus on establishing instructor and social presence to overcome student feelings of isolation and boredom which can lead to disengagement and have negative effects on learning. The use of humor is an effective tool to combine with instructor presence to help improve student engagement, satisfaction, and memory retention. This chapter will review recent literature on the subjects of instructor presence, boredom, and humor and make recommendations for its use.

INTRODUCTION

Online learning has been an established format in higher education since the 1990s (Allen & Seaman, 2007). It has received renewed attention with the rapid turn to fully remote learning in the spring of 2020 due to the Covid 19 pandemic. The average college in the United States transferred over 500 courses from a traditional physical classroom environment to a fully online setting (Garrett, et al., 2020). While the great majority of the rapidly moved courses fit better under the classification of Emergency Remote Learning (EMR) (Andy, et al., 2021) or Emergency Remote Training (ERT) (Doukakis & Alexopoulos, 2021; Fuchs, 2021), all forms of online learning face similar challenges of keeping students engaged. When asked what changes they would like to implement to improve the experience of remote learning, Chief Online Learning Officers indicated that increasing interaction between students and instructors would be one of the main goals (Garrett, et al., 2020).

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Humorous Presence in Online Learning

Students can feel isolated in online courses (Kiriakidis, 2008). Part of the reason some students struggle in online classes could be the isolation and anxiety felt by some students in online classes (Abdous, 2019; Bambara, 2009; Reilly et al., 2012). Research has shown that these feelings of isolation and anxiety or stress at high levels can have a negative effect on learning outcomes (Medina, 2014; Sharkin, 2004).

One of the ways instructors can help to reduce levels of stress and isolation in their classes is to be intentional about creating instructor presence. Recent studies (Abdous, 2019; Dennen et al., 2007; Picciano, 2002) remind us that instructor presence is an important factor that drives improved learning quality, student satisfaction, and reduces student anxiety. The establishment of instructor presence can help to minimize the social isolation students might be feeling. Instructor presence can be described as “instructors facilitating course flow and content, encouraging student participation, directly interacting with students, providing timely responses to questions, and promoting involvement with discussion questions” (Rapp & Anyikwa, 2017, p.3)

The idea of presence has interested researchers for decades. Garrison et al. (2000) defined a Community of Inquiry Model that included the three prerequisites they deemed as “crucial for a successful higher educational experience” (p. 87): Cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is defined by them as “the extent to which participants in any particular configuration of community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication.” (p. 89). Social presence is defined as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’”. (p. 89). Instructor presence is described as having two functions: the design and facilitation of the educational experience.

Arbaugh (2001) found that instructor immediacy, along with student attitude towards learning technology used, was a significant predictor of student learning. Jaggars (2013) found that higher levels of interpersonal interaction were correlated with better student performance in online courses. When students perceive that there is greater social presence in a course, they also perceive that they are learning more (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

There are different ways that instructors can manifest their presence. Oyarzun, et al. (2018) found that “the role of the instructor in online learning environments is important to support students’ learning and establish social presence” (p. 632). It is not always easy or straightforward to establish presence. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found that instructor presence was a key to the effectiveness of online learning, and students especially valued clear expectations from the instructor, timely responses to questions and to see the instructor active in the discussions. Students in a qualitative study done by Kanuka & Garrison (2004) indicated that instructor participation in the forums, especially modeling, was important to build community.

Unlike the traditional face to face class, online classes don’t as easily offer the same casual ways that instructors can establish presence. It’s harder to hang out with students before or after class, talking about last night’s game. There is no body language to gauge how students are reacting. It’s harder to notice distracted students, or those that are actively engaged. An online instructor must find other ways to observe these impressions, and this starts with intentional design to build connections with students.

Any class is a bit of a mystery before the first day of the term, but at least with face to face classes, students can expect the clouds to lift during the first class meeting when they will be in the same room as their teacher and classmates. There are of course more or less effective ways for instructors in a face to face class to establish presence in a physical classroom. An instructor could ask everyone to say something, or better yet use an icebreaker exercise to get students to meet each other and start to build

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