

Instructor Presence in Online Distance Classes

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INTRODUCTION

Instructor presence are words that call to mind a professor at the front of a classroom lecturing to a room full of students. Today the image associated with instructor presence is quite different. The vision is one of an individual engaged with the student, leading, and mentoring students, and facilitating classes either visibly in the classroom or invisibly in the online environment. Instructor presence is a broad phrase that refers to the instructor's jobs of structuring and presenting the materials as well as providing feedback and engaging with the student academically through e-mail, by telephone, or by instant messaging either text or video.

The roles are different but the outcome is the same, student learning. Gone are the days where the instructor was the center of the class, lecturing and passing along knowledge to students. Because today's learner is actively involved in the building of new knowledge, learning is more student-focused. As the environment changes, the instructor assumes a variety of roles from designer to facilitator to mentor. The new roles are the same for both instructors in the face-to-face classroom and instructors in the online environment. Instructors for classes in the online environment cannot just compile a site for the class with materials available to the students. Instructors need to have an online presence as they facilitate the class mentoring students, providing activities, encouraging students, and communicating with student on a regular basis.

Online instructors should be willing to provide the leadership and mentoring necessary for students to become engaged and flourish. Distance education literature discusses the importance of both interaction and sense of community to student learning and the part that the instructor plays in creating the learner-centered environment. Developing a classroom community online, then, is a process that begins with social interactions among individuals and progresses to developing a sense of belonging and trust so that learners will engage with the instructor, their peers, and the subject matter in an active way. In the beginning the instructor is the common

denominator, and the instructor's ability to be present without being visible holds the class together while the students become acquainted. As the class progresses, the instructor's presence keeps the conversation moving and the subject matter interaction on track.

BACKGROUND

As early as 1997, Sherron and Boettcher (1997) discussed the changing role of the instructor. Later Morris, Xu, and Finnegan (2005) reviewed the literature and found the roles included managing online communications and encouraging and providing activities to build community. Because instructors in the online environment play an important role in online learning through the structure they provide as well as their interaction with students, their presence in an online environment is just as essential to the online classroom as it is to the face-to-face classroom.

The various roles are defined in the literature for online learning. Students may do the learning, but teachers are at the center of this process as they provide instructional leadership fostering motivation, creating activities, and creating the supportive and encouraging environment agreed Hoy & Hoy (2003). If students are to grow as independent learners in the online environment, instructors should provide structure, leadership, and a respectful environment (McLoughlin & Luca, 2002; Jiang, Parent, & Eastmond, 2006; Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, & Varonis, 2006). Lewis & Abdul-Hamid (2006) interviewed faculty members teaching in an online environment and found fostering interaction, providing feedback, facilitating learning, and maintaining enthusiasm and providing organization were all important functions. They concluded that the role of the online instructor "is neither static nor one dimensional" (96).

Instructor now have several tasks including creating the online classroom, providing the interaction, and motivating students to become active participants in their own learning. In addition, instructors must also

energize students “when the going is tough” (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, 7). Palloff and Pratt (2003) also encourage instructor presence in their principles of good practice with four suggestions—encouraging student-faculty contact, encouraging student cooperation, giving prompt feedback, and communicating high expectations.

Moore defined three levels of interaction for online education—learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction, all of which relate to the instructor in some form. The instructor facilitates the learner/content interaction through assignments and presentation of material. The instructor is directly involved in the interaction with the student through synchronous and asynchronous communication providing feedback and motivation. The instructor plays a significant role in the learner/learner interaction through group projects, discussion board opportunities, and the virtual group responsibility for helping their peers (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE

If the role of instructors is changing as the literature suggests, what is the role of the instructor in online courses? Is instructor presence important as distance education writers suggest or should an online instructor just make the material available and wait for the students to ask questions? These questions and many others occur to online instructors because the time commitment for teaching online will definitely be more than in other classes if all the literature available is correct.

Instructors in the online environment play an important role in online learning. They design courses that allow flexibility for today’s always-on student (Baird & Fisher, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Feedback from the instructor is an important ingredient to the process because it lets students know when their thinking is on track and when it needs revised or redirected. Instructors provide support, feedback, encouragement, subject matter, assignments, and opportunities for interaction just as the literature suggests, but is this important to students?

Students have been surveyed for their perceptions of the importance of instructor presence. Shea, Pickett, and Pelz (2003) found that satisfaction and learning took place when instructors provided high levels of instructional design, organization, and teacher pres-

ence. Other researchers including Thiele (2003) and Swan (2002) reported similar findings stressing that communication, prompt feedback, encouragement, and discussion were important to students.

In an effort to explore this concept of instructor presence, this author went to students and asked both quantitative and qualitative questions to discover the answer. During Phase 1 of the mixed methods study, all instructor-controlled elements from Roblyer’s Rubric for Assessing Interactive Qualities of Distance Classes (social/rapport-building design, instructional design, technology resources, and evidence of instructor engagement) were correlated with learner engagement and found to be significant. Students perceived that the instructor elements studied did contribute to learner engagement. Instructional design and instructor engagement, however, were found to have the highest correlation (Lear, 2007).

For Phase 2 of the study, a sampling of the students participating in the initial quantitative study who volunteered to be interviewed was asked about the importance of the instructor. For those students participating in the interview process, 81% indicated the instructor alone or in conjunction with the content and other students was important to the student’s participation in the class (Lear, 2007). One participant felt that “instructors need to understand the amount of work and responsibility . . . and give feedback on a regular basis to provide structure and consistency. The tone is set by the instructor.” Another participant expressed isolation during her class with little instructor presence and compared her class to another online class of a friend: “They have really active, thought-provoking discussions, and the instructor would weigh in with, ‘you know I look at it this way, what do you think’ and a whole new thread was sparked.”

This study supported the findings of Jiang, et al. (2006) who found that student-instructor interaction increased satisfaction. It also supported the findings of Waltonen-Moore, et al. (2006), Thiele (2003), and McLoughlin and Luca (2002) all of whom highlighted the importance of instructor presence to the online environment.

Instructor presence as evidenced by instructional and social/rapport design and instructor engagement highlighted by instructor feedback and comments including responding to students quickly, and being a participant in the ongoing online discussions as well does make a difference to the active learner.

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