Chapter 6
Instructor Presence

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ABSTRACT

Student isolation and retention rates are persistent issues in online learning. Research has shown that an important component of student performance and satisfaction is instructor presence (Picciano, 2002). Instructor presence includes three elements: 1) Teaching presence, 2) Instructor immediacy, and 3) Social presence (Mandemach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006). This chapter will use this definition of instructor presence to outline best pedagogical practices with concrete examples to increase instructor presence in asynchronous online courses. Each section will begin with a definition and research on that construct followed by best practices with concrete examples.

INTRODUCTION

Online education is an area that continues to grow, especially in higher education settings. The number of students taking at least one online course has increased by over five million to a new total of 6.7 million students (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Still, student isolation and retention rates are persistent issues in online learning. Research has shown that an important component of student performance and satisfaction is instructor presence (Borup, West, Graham, 2012; Griffiths & Graham, 2009; Picciano, 2002). Instructor presence includes three elements:

1. Teaching presence,
2. Instructor immediacy, and
3. Social presence (Mandemach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006).

This chapter will use these elements of instructor presence to outline research based best pedagogical practices with concrete examples to increase instructor presence in asynchronous online courses.

Teaching and social presence are both constructs of the popular Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010). This framework is designed to assist instructors in designing online courses to ensure that transactional distance, which refers to the separation of teacher and learner in online educational programs (Moore, 2007), is lessened and that deep meaningful learning occurs. There are three interdependent elements associated with CoI framework that foster deep and meaningful learning experiences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. Even though a considerable number of studies investigating the CoI framework has been conducted, few studies reported any objective measures of learning to support the claims that application of the CoI framework leads to deeper levels of learning (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). Still, the research does connect the CoI framework with increased learner satisfaction and perceived learning (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005).

Learner satisfaction and motivation is often influenced by the interactions that happen in the online environment, which leads us to the topic of instructor immediacy. Instructor immediacy is a concept defined from two communication theories: Moore's (1973) transactional distance theory and Mehrabian's (1971) communication immediacy theory. Transactional distance is defined as the psychological distance between online learners and instructors. Moore's theory proposes that more interaction between instructors and learners lessens transactional distance. Communication immediacy refers to the physical and verbal behaviors that reduce psychological and physical distance between individuals. The verbal behaviors can be translated into online learning. In this case, instructor immediacy involves communication strategies that reduce social and psychological distance between learners and instructors in online learning (Arbaugh, 2001). A level of instructor immediacy has been shown to increase retention and achievement (Bodie & Bober-Michel, 2014).

This chapter will discuss research and provide examples of the best practices for teaching presence, instructor immediacy, and social presence. Each section will begin with the definition and research on the concept followed by discussion and best practices with concrete examples.

TEACHING PRESENCE

The concept of teaching presence evolved from social presence research. Garrison and colleagues (2000) differentiated teaching presence from social presence as part of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. While social presence is the ability to project or perceive others as real, teaching presence is conceptualized as the design and facilitation of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing intended outcomes. Teaching presence begins at the design phase with course design and organization and continues into the implementation of the course through facilitation of discourse. The central focus of teaching presence is to increase social presence and student learning (Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008).

According to the CoI framework, teaching presence is directly related to both social and cognitive presence through the following categories:

1. Design and organization,
2. Materials and learning activities, and
3. Facilitation and encouragement.

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