



Virtual Educators: Instructor Presence in Online Courses

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Abstract

Online instructors play a principal role in designing and facilitating the learning environments. A sense of instructor presence in online courses is imperative to improve student satisfaction and retention rates. This paper focuses on different strategies online faculty can employ to develop consistent patterns of interaction with students, offer learning materials and activities promoting higher levels of cognitive engagement, and provide students with in-depth feedback to facilitate their growth and development. The current technology allows for real-time interaction between students and instructors in online courses. The video platforms integrated with learning management systems offer instructors the opportunity to produce effortlessly high-quality video lectures. The rapid development of 3D virtual worlds creates new possibilities for supporting immersive learning environments for knowledge acquisition and social interaction. 3D online learning environments provide not only new levels of spatial awareness, engagement, and interactivity, but also, offer established online collaborative and communication tools, like whiteboards, audio, video, text, messaging, and web pages. The pervasive nature of mobile technology poses distinct requirements on instructional design in online courses and allows immediate access to the learning material at any time and place. Online learning environments transcend the need for the real classroom but increase demand for the innovative instructional design strategies to create a sense of instructor presence in online courses.

New robust technologies allow educators to design reliable interactive learning environments that attract students and encourage institutions to expand online programs. However, a high dropout rate remains challenging for online courses. Strong faculty presence has been viewed as a primary factor in student success and satisfaction in online courses [1]. This paper focuses on exploring effective strategies for instructor presence in online courses and provides an overview of different strategies online faculty can employ to develop consistent patterns of interaction with students by offering learning materials and activities promoting higher levels of cognitive engagement and delivering in-depth feedback to facilitate student growth and development.

A lack of immediacy of face-to-face interactions between students and the instructor is considered one of the main reasons for feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with online courses indicating that a sense of instructor presence is crucial for asynchronous courses [2, 3]. The instructor participation level in online courses ranges between minimalistic approach when instructors are not present in discussions, not responding promptly to students' inquiries, and not providing feedback on assignments and highly engaged teaching style when online educators design collaborative learning activities, exchange ideas with students and provide valuable feedback that encourages growth mindset [4].

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer propose the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework [5] with a goal to "define, describe and measure the elements of a collaborative and worthwhile educational experience" by outlining three core elements (cognitive, social, and teaching presence) and exploring the dynamics of an online educational experience. Cognitive presence helps participants to construct meaning through sustained communication. Cognitive presence is operationalized through the practical inquiry (PI) model. By designing learning activities and providing facilitation and direction, instructors ensure that students move through all four phases of the PI model: triggering event, exploration, integration, and resolution. Social presence allows participants to project their personal characteristics into the community and present themselves as individuals. Teaching presence consists of three components (Instructional Design and Organization, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction) and can be expressed in designing course content, learning activities and assessment, facilitating the successful realization of educational outcomes, and ensuring a meaningful educational experience [6].

It is essential to develop consistent patterns of interaction with students, offer to learn materials and activities promoting higher levels of cognitive engagement, effectively moderate discussions and provide students with in-depth feedback to facilitate their growth and development [7].

The SUNY Learning Network study emphasizes establishment of teaching presence based on several of the categories identified by Anderson et al.: setting the curriculum, establishing time parameters,

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utilizing the medium effectively, developing netiquette, and designing methods [8, 9]. Another component of teaching presence is facilitating discourse to maintain learner engagement by identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging, acknowledging, and reinforcing student contributions, setting the climate for learning, drawing in participants and prompting discussion, and assessing the efficacy of the process [10].

The research results suggest that meaningful communication channels and active learning assignments (in which students can apply what they learned) are in direct correlation with higher student engagement in the online learning community despite the lack of a physical presence of an instructor or other students [11].

Farmingdale State College, the State University of New York (SUNY) developed the Faculty Best Practices for Distance Learning and Best Practices Checklist for Setting Up Distance Learning Classes based on the Quality Matters Higher Education Rubric and the Open SUNY Center for Online Teaching Excellence Quality Review Rubric (OSCQR). Teaching presence begins when instructors plan, prepare and design an online course material. Instructors set learning goals, develop course content, discussions, assignments and assessments. The instructor presence is also revealed through the facilitation of online discourse. Palloff and Prat (2011) state that experienced facilitators allow students to interact with one another and the instructor at a high level [12].

The VoiceThread application integrated with Blackboard learning management system allows instructors and students to introduce themselves with video, voice, and text commenting, interact with other students and get a sense of immersion into learning community. Instructors establish a netiquette policy in a syllabus, course information documents and model online behavior by participating in introductory discussions, greeting individual students and establishing strong teaching presence by helping students to understand expectations for online discussions. According to Anderson, et al. (2001), it is critical to facilitate discourse to maintaining engagement and motivation of students in online courses [9].

An instructor should be present in online discussions, but overly active instructor involvement may have an adverse impact on student participation [13]. It is important for instructors to summarize discussions to demonstrate a connection to the course content and to fill the gaps if information is missing. Instructors should offer students opportunity to communicate with them privately indicating openness and willingness to support students and address their individual needs as they arise [14].

When students submit their assignments online, it is imperative to offer them both qualitative and quantitative feedback about their performance in a timely manner [13]. The instructor expectations should be clearly posted in syllabus and course information documents. It is a good practice to provide examples for assignments and set expected behavior in discussions. It is better to maintain contact with the whole class and reach out to the individual students occasionally in the response of the particular needs [13]. The course information documents should clearly state the instructor's availability and provide students with contact information and forums for discussions about general issues and also for casual non-course related discussions. Instructors should monitor how often students log into the online course and reach out to students if they have been absent for over a week to confirm that they are not experiencing any technical difficulties or problems with course content.

The web conferencing tools promote real-time interaction between students and instructors and enhance teacher presence in online courses. Blackboard Learn recently released a new version of Collaborate. The updated version Ultra offers a modern interface, interaction with students through chat, webcam, and microphone, option to add files, share applications, and use a virtual whiteboard. Collaborate Ultra provides improved audio and video quality, the group display of participant videos, and it opens directly in a browser without any software installation requirements.

The pervasive nature of mobile technology poses distinct requirements on instructional design in online courses and allows students immediate access to the learning material. The 2015 survey documented that 84 percent of the participating institutions have offered mobile apps to their students. Students use smartphones and tablets and expect to have mobile apps available to access campus resources and services [15]. Mobile technology allows instant access to synchronous and asynchronous communication tools, disrupts traditional classroom boundaries and provides limitless possibilities for education and networking [16].

The new robust video platforms integrated with learning management systems revolutionized online education and offered instructors the opportunity to increase teaching presence in online courses, effortlessly produce high-quality video lectures, stream them from a secure server and share them with students. The inclusion of videos in an online course allows to create the instructor presence, to reproduce demonstrations usually available in a traditional face-to-face classroom within the online course environment, and to provide students with a more dynamic presentation [17]. However, many video resources in online courses are not as effective because they do not



appropriately use the strengths of the medium. Instructors often ignore the main strength of the video format to “show not tell.” Video lectures with lengthy straight-to-camera presentations accompanied with text-based PowerPoint presentations can be considered a relatively poor use of the video medium [18].

The rapid development of 3D virtual worlds creates new possibilities for supporting immersive learning environments for knowledge acquisition and social interaction. A virtual world can be defined as a synchronous network of people represented by avatars and facilitated by networked computers [19]. Avatars can move around the virtual world, teleport from one location to another, and interact with other avatars. Users of virtual worlds develop emotional bonds to their avatars and often transfer their personalities to them. In virtual reality, students can engage in activities that would be too dangerous or difficult in the real world. Students in virtual worlds learn by exploring, experimenting, and building new objects, and they spend less time listening and reading. Hartley et al. (2015) describe creating and implementing learning activities in Second Life, a virtual world, in a teacher education program that serves prospective and practicing teachers in many rural communities [20]. Second Life provides options for multimodality in communication (voice, chat, gestures, space) that make learning fun and could serve as an excellent addition to other more traditional methods of education [21]. 3D online learning environments provide not only new levels of teaching presence, spatial awareness, engagement, and interactivity, but also offer established online collaborative and communication tools, like virtual whiteboards, audio, video, text, messaging, and web pages.

In conclusion, online learning environments transcend the need for the real classroom but increase demand for innovative instructional design strategies and the effective use of interactive technologies to establish a sense of meaningful instructor presence in online courses.

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