

2

Presence & Engagement: Best Practices for the Online Text-based Classroom

Madeline Crowley, MA

City University of Seattle

Division of Arts and Sciences

Abstract

Instructor presence is vital for students to become engaged in their courses. Literature from distance learning journals, student interviews, and an ethnographic study show that how present and involved an instructor is in a text-based online course influences both student perceptions and the quality of learning. This chapter begins by reviewing the literature in the field that offers support for the ideas on best practices that follow. It also includes student interviews regarding instructor presence that have had the greatest impact on them, both positive and negative, including what has engaged or disengaged them during a course. Also detailed are best practices gleaned from teaching online courses.

Introduction

It is often said that what makes teaching worthwhile is having an impact on students, providing encouragement, and inspiring them to pursue their individual ambitions. This is no less true of online teaching. While this teaching medium may seem to be less involved as there is no required face-time, it is especially important for instructors to impress upon students their presence by being accessible, committed to the material, and interested in the students. It may be even more important to establish this feeling of “presence” than in a traditional classroom. This chapter will share some communicative practices that increased a sense of instructor presence that benefited students.

Background

The confusing thing about online courses is that they seem at first glance to require less time and effort for both students and instructors, seemingly making instructor presence less important. In fact, studies indicate the reverse is true if a course is to be effective and result in deep learning. Literature in the distance education field discussing online learning has focused on “social presence” or the impression a teacher’s input makes upon students in the course. Research by Kehrwald (2008) defines this as social presence which “is an individual’s ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and to signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions” (p. 94). These interpersonal exchanges are how an instructor can provide a tangible social presence in a course which has significant effects not only on student morale and engagement; it creates an atmosphere conducive to involvement and true learning. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes’s (2005) study on the subject states, “It appears that teaching presence contributes to the adoption of a deep approach to learning...” (p. 140). Wu and Hiltz argue that “...the instructor’s role is crucial to effective online discussions and considerable time devotion is required for instructors” (as cited by Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p. 136).

When a considerable time investment is not made by the instructor, student distress often results. This has an impact on learning, on overall satisfaction with the course, and on students’ impression of the education they’re receiving. Due to the traditional power relations between students and teachers, that distress is often not apparent to instructors. Hara & Kling’s (2000) study *Student Distress in Web-based Distance Education* reveals that “Part of the reason for the instructor’s misperception resulted from students’ reluctance to express their anxieties, frustrations and confusions...to the instructor” (p. 22). Instructors may be unaware of how much students require of them, as students often don’t directly communicate their needs or dissatisfactions to instructors, fearing retribution.

Perhaps as important are the effects on the type of learning inspired by competent and constant instructor presence in the online classroom. As Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) note, “There is considerable literature pointing to the relationship between teaching presence and perceived learning” (p. 136). In other words without a strong instructor presence, students can believe they learned yet accomplished little from having taken the course.

In an interview one student clarified the effect this has by stating, “A key thing that has given me tremendous staying power in the online learning atmosphere has been student-instructor communications during Blackboard discussions. Instructor feedback is priceless as far as I’m concerned” (S. Jenny, personal communication, December 2, 2010). Along similar lines a student gives some specifics, saying, “I stay most engaged when I get consistent, constructive, weekly feedback and questions from the instructors. It pushes me to do more than the bare minimum” (K. Spas, personal communication, November 29, 2010). Students seem to require more feedback in the online classroom perhaps because they are operating in comparative isolation in relation to their experience with traditional classrooms. Time is not always available to address all student needs for feedback, but with a greater awareness of the needs, instructors can develop ways to address these efficiently.

Practices—Creating Presence through Availability and Accessibility

Student Introductions

Instructor presence can be enhanced from the start of a course. Many online courses begin with rounds of introductions; this gives instructors two opportunities, first to introduce themselves and second to get to know the students. It is an opportunity to ask “telling” questions that reveal students’ motivations and interests, not just relative to the course but also to their educational goals. Referring back to student introduction pieces periodically allows an instructor to develop familiarity with the students but also to tailor responses to those interests. In so doing the instructor can create a feeling of “being seen”; generally when we believe we’ve been “seen” we feel that we are of interest and therefore of value. From a student interview, “I feel it is conducive to student engagement to have actual honest, interested conversations with the instructor in the discussion forum” (D. Brown, personal communication, November 29, 2010). The perception of instructor presence through the discussion can translate into immediate student engagement and a better classroom experience for the entire class.

Create a Safe Learning Environment

Instructors should strive to establish presence through open and welcoming communications. This is especially important when faced with a discussion forum post with which they disagree. Ideally responses should be moderated in friendly but concrete terms. When a post revolves around an interpretation that can be seen as disagreeable, it is best to express that disagreement in the mildest terms possible, something like, “That’s interesting, I hadn’t thought about it like that. I’d generally regarded this as ____ instead.” Students notice the tenor of the exchange and feel that they too can express perhaps unpopular but honest opinions, which makes for more interesting discussions. One stu-

dent remarked, “I appreciate the even-tempered approach when an instructor negotiates the different attitudes and reactions of students within a class discussion” (S. Williams, personal communication, November 29, 2010).

When an answer is wrong, this too can be handled diplomatically with a gentle correction along the lines of, “That’s a common misconception; research shows that...” This can de-personalize the answer so that the student doesn’t feel singled out and allows the entire class to feel exchanges can be enjoyed without fear of embarrassment.

This constant demonstration of presence by respectful openness allows for more frank discussion from all participants. In rare instances when a student is aggressive to another student in a post, the instructor needs to respond in two ways, one private and one public. First a private e-mail sent to the aggressor, and another to the victim addressing the problem clearly. In the discussion forum, the issue should be addressed very diplomatically and in terms of appropriate discussion “etiquette.” A relatively neutral posture here is generally effective. Instructors could use something like: “Written communications are easily misunderstood and while you probably only meant to state your position clearly, it could have been misinterpreted as aggressive.” Acknowledging the ambiguities in written communication allows the saving of face and ideally creates less resistance to change. From a student interview, “I became disengaged in a course when the instructor used the Discussion area of Blackboard as a “public whipping post” to tear apart a student for views held or a misplaced punctuation. This is antithetical to the mission of building engaged and critically thinking students” (D. Larsen, personal communication, December 10, 2010).

Framing Communications

Instructor presence can continually be asserted whenever there may be questions about a topic, procedure, or assignment; it takes only a moment to append a statement asking for questions. Students are sometimes reluctant to appear uncomprehending,

and this allows them to ask rather than to stew or complain to their classmates.

The instructor could send private e-mails to students to provide additional clarification when there seems to be confusion; this is generally greatly appreciated. Using e-mail to expand further on topics a student brings up in the discussion or to mention what they're doing well also assists in establishing a strong presence.

Establishing Connection

Presence is best established by creating connections to the students. When possible, instructors can look for opportunities in the Discussion forums to open avenues for further discovering students' interests and ambitions. "It is important to relate material to real life. Theory is well and fine but being able to relate it to something within our experience is crucial to online students" (D. Brown, personal communication, November 29, 2010). E-mail in response to posts allows instructors to reinforce presence by reaching out to students individually by encouraging, offering advice (when appropriate), and by providing clarification or corrections. Taking advantage of all means of communication available in the online environment allows instructors to draw students out or to note how specific skills bode well for their goals and/or ambitions. "If an instructor forces me to look at things deeper (I tend to skim the surface) or from a different angle, critically, I appreciate it very much and tend to learn a lot that way. It also stays with me" (K. Spas, personal communication, November 29, 2010).

Create a Challenging Environment

The presentation of challenging material is another way to enhance instructor presence. Generally students respond well to intellectual stimulation. Certainly instructors can easily increase the level of challenge by changing discussion questions from

text-based answers to answers requiring thought and application of concepts. One student explains the profound effect of instructor presence: "What engaged me was a competent, enthusiastic and engaged instructor. Competency was important, obviously, because it helped instructors to inform and guide discussions and pose probing questions that forced students to think beyond their sphere of influence" (D. Larsen, personal communication, December 10, 2010). Another asserts, "The best courses were the ones where the instructor would respond to posts with additional questions and thoughts for us to really think through the concepts" (J. Upegui, personal communication, December 3, 2010).

One method to engage key performers is to e-mail and let them know early in the course that their efforts are appreciated, and that they seem to be "raising the bar" for the discourse in the Discussion Forum. This not only gives them their due; it helps keep them engaged and encourages them to provide leadership throughout the course.

When practical, instructors should include discussion questions in the Forum as much as possible in terms of application of the material or interpretation of the material rather than finding an answer in the text. One student shares, "I realize that part of our weekly assignments must be regurgitating information from the text, but it's difficult to comment when everyone is saying the same thing in the discussion. I really appreciate it when we have to take that information and apply it somehow" (K. Spas, personal communication, November 29, 2010). Asking about ramifications or implications of course concepts creates a deeper level of thinking about the material and a higher level of engagement from the students while reinforcing instructor presence as an authority.

Once initial posts are made by students, it is often helpful to ask questions about their posts to encourage deeper, more complex thinking about the material. On occasion it is helpful for the instructor to use student posts to jump into deeper levels or implications of the material from their broader knowledge of the material. "Anytime an instructor can display their expertise and knowledge rather than just facilitate the course, I feel I learn more and tend to be more involved in the class" (K. Spas, personal communication, November 29, 2010). When an instructor shares

his/her extensive knowledge of the subject and related issues, it reveals instructor competence and reassures the students that they're receiving a quality education.

Create a Coherent Learning Environment

It is very important that instructors prepare a clear organization of the online course. Without this clear organization, the perception by students of the instructor and his/her presence suffers dramatically. "Organization in course structure and correspondences between students and instructor was grease in the bearings of the online classroom. Without organization the entire operation would melt down and the entire class would be less motivated to participate in a meaningful way" (D. Larsen, personal communication, November 29, 2010). Another student is even more specific: "To enable and facilitate the students' learning is to ensure the syllabi and assignments are synced. When a course is poorly organized, it is obviously distracting to the student and distressing as well. In one badly organized course I no longer gave a damn and just wanted to finish the course" (D. Brown, personal communication, November 29, 2010). Hara and Kling (2000) noted that student distress due to ambiguous or confusing course instructions impeded learning and led to a feeling that expectations for the course were not being adequately met.

Convey Enthusiasm and Interest in the Subject Matter

Perhaps the best way to enhance instructor presence is in the attitude to the material and to the course itself. Instructors have to dig deep to inject fresh appreciation for a subject taught over a long period of time. Still, it is possible to convey presence and interest by giving further details on facets of the subject or topic, especially in relation to student posts. Sometimes a simple question like, "That's interesting, how did you arrive at that answer or conclusion?" can elicit some very interesting discussions not only

from the queried student but also from the cohort. Students long for a commitment and passion from their instructors regarding the subject: "I felt unengaged in courses when an instructor demonstrated a lack of interest in the subject matter or in the success of students" (D. Larsen, personal communication, December 10, 2010). Students experience distress when they believe they don't have an involved instructor presence.

Comments on Papers

An ideal way to establish a strong, useful instructor presence is in the comments given on student papers. First, if at all possible, students should submit papers to Smarthinking.com or the University's Writing Center to catch small errors. That frees the instructor to focus on logical flaws, fallacies, and other significant problems in student writing. If time allows, rather than simply attaching a short comment like, "logical flaw", explain what the student has gotten wrong and briefly explain how to fix it so that the student feels guided or led rather than "wrong." When possible comments are a chance to offer needed personal tutoring on writing (however, it must be said that in very large classes this may be more difficult). Students do consider comments absolutely vital to their learning and are deeply disappointed when they get routine, short comments or none at all: "The most tarnishing experience was when an instructor gave zero feedback on a paper. Without that priceless feedback I had nothing to base my learning or progress on; I need to see my errors to correct myself" (S. Jenny, personal communication, December 2, 2010). In addition to offering more extensive comments, when possible give students a general idea of how they're doing relative to others, and if there's a sufficient display of skills or ability, encourage the student to consider further education.

Future Research

Information for this paper came from an informal study involving a small sample of students (six) who were contacted via e-mail.

Students were selected from prior courses in two departments due to their general availability and willingness to speak freely. Many are still enrolled at the university while a few have graduated.

Further research could include a much broader sample, using either ethnographic or experimental methodologies, in order to test individual best practices. Also it would be ideal to have more formal qualitative research performed in a variety of ways, including observation, ethnography, teacher interviews, etc. This sample was very small—six students—and a larger sample would give much more information.

Conclusion

This essay has used distance learning literature, personal experience, and student interviews to argue for a set of distance-learning best practices to enhance instructor presence in online courses. While instructor presence cannot always be precisely quantified, it is viewed as indispensable and valuable by students.

One unspoken benefit of online courses is the participation requirement. Unlike in a traditional classroom, no one can silently hang back and simply listen. Every student is generally required to participate in online courses that have a Discussion Forum, giving them a presence in the classroom that may be unique. Sometimes the most silent students are the most interesting thinkers, and often for the first time in a classroom setting, they have the chance to shine before their peers. In many traditional classrooms, shy students will not ask questions or directly communicate with the instructor; in an online venue instructors have the chance to connect and communicate with students in a variety of ways.

In just that one sense, online classrooms can be transformational to students. Students remember and value classes from an instructor who is in command of the material and communicates a true interest in individual students. An inspiring teacher presence can encourage ambitions and dreams in ways that might not be available in a traditional classroom. It is a time investment worth making both for instructor satisfaction and for better student learning outcomes.

References

- Garrison, R., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2005). Facilitating cognitive presence in online learning: Interaction is not enough. *American Journal of Distance Education*, 19(3), 133-148. Retrieved from <http://www.informaworld.com/smpp/content~db=all~content=a783721031~frm=abslink>
- Hara, N., & Kling, R. (2000). *Students' distress with a web-based distance education course: An ethnographic study of participants' experiences* (No. WP 00-01-B1). Bloomington, IN: Center for Social Informatics. Retrieved from <http://rkcsi.indiana.edu/archive/CSI/WP/wp00-01B.html>
- Kehrwald, B. (2008). Understanding social presence in text-based online learning environments. *Distance Education*, 29(1), 89-106. Retrieved from www.eric.ed.gov/ERICWebPortal/recordDetail?accno=EJ799371