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Students' Perspectives on Humanizing and Establishing Teacher Presence in an Online Course

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Abstract

When learning is moved to an online environment, students report that they feel isolated and alone in their learning experience. From the student's perspective, communicating instructions and student learning may be more difficult to accomplish in an online learning environment as compared to taking a face to face class. Actually, establishing an instructional relationship between the instructors and the students in an online course is more difficult as well. Therefore, the challenge in designing and developing online courses is for faculty members to establish their teaching presence by humanizing the online classroom experience for their students. The authors use the community of inquiry model developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) to examine the attributes of teaching presence in an online course. This study then evaluates students' perceptions relating to the significance of producing a video for an online course that introduces the instructor to students and see if a specific introductory video will help to establish the instructor's teaching presence for the students. The data collected from this study states that students valued the online introductory video and the students prefer the use of an introductory video because of the teacher immediacy behaviors that were perceived. The students reported that with the introductory video used in this course, they were able to establish a foundation of the teacher/student relationship early in the course and their attitudes (affective learning) about the course were improved.

Many things change when instruction and information are moved from a face-to-face classroom setting into an online course delivery system. Some faculty may find it difficult, if not impossible, to provide a similar classroom experience online as is provided typically in a face to face class. In addition, faculty members can find it even more difficult to establish an instructional relationship with students in an online environment. Online learning is known to be more solitary and students report that they feel somewhat disconnected from the class when they take a course online (Rowntree, 2000).

Literature

The very origin of online instruction is built upon technology-mediated learning. The challenge in planning and designing online courses is in *humanizing* the online learning experience. Humanizing the online learning environment increases the student's comfort level and reduces the psychological distance between the instructors and students (DuCharme-Hansen, Dupin-Bryant, 2005). Humanizing is the action of providing immediacy behaviors creating a situation or environment that is people-focused and that will help to increase learner's investment in the process (DuCharme-Hansen, Dupin-Bryant). Instructor immediacy is a theory of affective learning based on the idea that instructor verbal and nonverbal behaviors are related to student attitudes and instructional outcomes (Rodriguez, Plax, & Kearney, 1996). Immediacy is also related to course design or how a teacher deliberately arranges a set of external events to support the learner's internal learning process. In 2001, Swan reported that students felt they had increased interaction with the instructor when they had interacted with the course regardless if they had direct access to the instructor, be it a real contact or a virtual contact.

Instructor immediacy behaviors have been found to create a positive affect toward the instructor and the subject matter and to be positive predictors of student learning and satisfaction in distance education courses. Therefore, immediacy behaviors should be planned and designed for online learning environments. This would include, encouraging future contact with students, encouraging and explaining methods of online discussions, sharing examples, demonstrating vocal expressiveness, open gestures and body movement by the instructor. All of these can be delivered through video components that are planned for the online course. Instructors who use instructor immediacy behaviors appreciate or value the learning task, and this has been found to enhance cognitive learning (Hutchins, 2003). This can be especially true when the instructor is trying to establish their *teaching presence* for the class.

The instructor's *teaching presence* is usually established in this first class meeting and students are able to form opinions and make assumptions about the instructor and the course itself from that point on. *Teaching presence* is defined as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, Archer, 2000). There are three critical roles that a teacher performs in the process of creating an effective teaching presence (Anderson, 2004).

According to Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2000), the first role that a teacher performs in order to create an effective teaching presence involves course design, dialogue facilitation, and direct instruction in text-based computer conferencing environments. This role will take place both before the establishment of the learning community and during its operation. The design process provides the instructor opportunities to instill their own teaching presence by establishing a personalized tone within the course content. This is done by allowing students to see the personal enthusiasm and interests that inspires the teacher's attraction in the subject. The second role is for the instructor to develop and implement activities to encourage conversations between students, between the teacher and the student, and between the students with the content. The third role is defined when the instructor to adds subject matter expertise through a variety of forms of direct instruction. In these three roles, the instructor will set the foundations of their teaching presence in the first class meeting.

The instructor usually strives to establish these three roles involved in creating teaching presence throughout the course, but the standard of community of inquiry (see Figure 1 below) that integrates cognitive, social and teaching

elements that go beyond social exchanges begins in the first class meeting. Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) have developed a conceptual model of online learning that is referred to as the "community of inquiry" model,

> This model postulates that deep and meaningful learning results when there are sufficient levels of three component "presences." The first is a sufficient degree of *cognitive presence*, such that serious learning can take place in an environment that supports the development and growth of critical thinking skills. Cognitive presence is grounded in and defined by study of a particular content; thus, it works within the epistemological, cultural, and social expression of the content in an approach that supports the development of critical thinking skills. The second, *social presence*, relates to the establishment of a supportive environment such that students feel the necessary degree of comfort and safety to express their ideas in a collaborative context. The absence of social presence leads to an inability to express disagreements, share viewpoints, explore differences, and accept support and confirmation from peers and teacher. Finally, in formal education, as opposed to informal learning opportunities, *teaching presence* is critical for a variety of reasons.

Figure 1 – Community of Inquiry
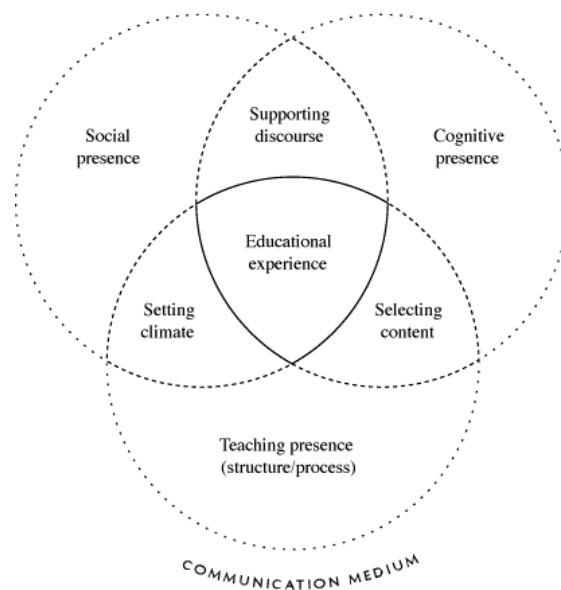
Cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence are all important preconditions in helping the learner to feel comfortable in the learning environment. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes concluded that 'teaching presence' is vitally important for the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry focused on the exploration, integration and testing of concepts and solutions (2005).

Creating or establishing *teaching presence* in an online course is just as important as it is in a face-to-face course. Writing, developing and producing an introductory video for an online course is one possible way to aid in

establishing teaching presence in an online course. Therefore, the primary question for this study is: From the students' perspective, will a streamed, introductory video establish *teacher presence* in an online course? Also, the secondary questions would include: 2) Will students perceive the introductory video worthwhile and credible? 3) Did the students report that meeting the instructor was important to their learning experience? 4) Did the students find that the video scripts were helpful to them in accessing the video content as well as getting to know the instructor? 5) What instructional components would the students like to see more of in this course?

Methods

This study evaluates students' perceptions and attitudes relating to the significance of writing and producing a video for an online course that introduces the instructor to the students and see if this video helps to establish the instructor's teaching presence for the students. The introductory video is designed to provide vital information to the students relating to course management issues, expectations and requirements as established by the instructor, while at the same time allowing the students to meet the instructor, virtually, hence beginning to establish the instructor's teaching presence with the students. The purpose of this study is to identify how well this information was conveyed to the online students. Furthermore, this study will establish if providing online (streamed) introductory videos is an effective method of delivering this type of information to the online students and at the same time, provide teaching presence for the online students.

Throughout the fall 06 through fall 07, 45 participants have been enrolled in a fully-online, graduate level course in library science. These students participated in online discussion boards, chat sessions and in a 15 item survey that measures their perceptions of the instructor's teaching presence and their satisfaction with the introductory video for the online course. Students were asked to share their perspectives on their satisfaction with the online video, how the video impacted their learning experience, and if the introductory video provided them the opportunity to accept the instructor in the role of guiding and directing their learning. In addition, the students provided suggestions that would improve their online learning experience as it relates to humanizing the instructional components of the course.

The data is currently being complied and analyzed. The literature and the data collected will be summarized as a paper and presented at the SITE Conference in March 2008.

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