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Humanizing and Establishing Presence in an Online Course: The Role of Introductory Videos in Distance Learning

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Abstract: 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. Faculty members can find it even more difficult to establish an instructional relationship with students in an online course as they do in a face-to-face course. 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. The challenge in designing 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 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.

Imagine that today is the first class meeting for any particular online course. It would be a fair assumption to say that the students who have registered for this course have several questions on their mind including:

- 1) Who is going to teach this class?
- 2) What is the teacher like – will I be able to work and learn from this person?
- 3) What are the requirements of this course and what should I expect to learn?
- 4) What materials, textbooks, technology, and resources will I need for this course?
- 5) Where do I go for help if the technologies or other resources that I need fail?

These are, in fact, the same questions that students typically ask when they participate in a traditional, face-to-face course. When meeting with a class for the first time, a faculty member usually provides students with the answers to these questions through a lecture type class meeting along with a course syllabus and/or other supporting

documents. Students in higher education may even expect that the first class meeting will be reserved for receiving vital information about the course schedule, a review of the course content and at the same time, have an opportunity to meet the instructor. During this first class meeting, students usually begin to form an instructional relationship with the teacher.

Many things change when instruction and communication 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 REVIEW

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 concept of 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 behaviors 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.

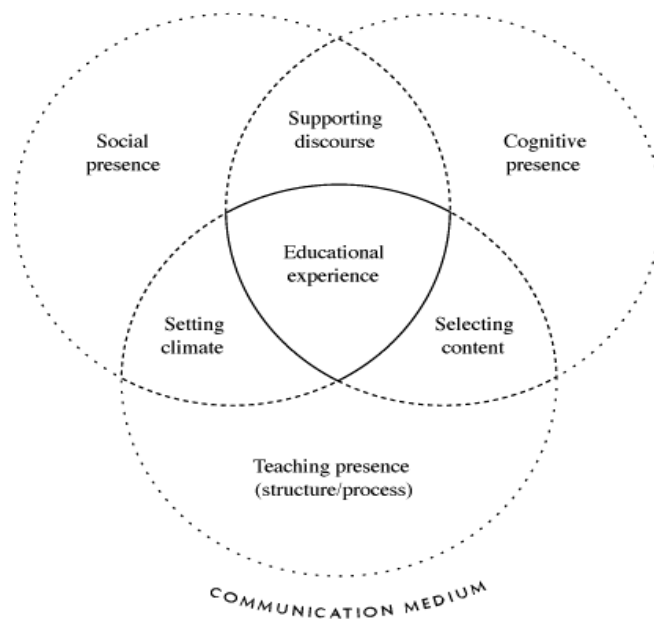
The instructor's *teaching presence* usually begins to be established in the first class meeting. Students form opinions and make assumptions about the instructor and the organization of the course from the first meeting. *Teaching presence* is defined as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive 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), there are three roles involved in establishing teaching presence, 1) course design and organization, 2) dialogue facilitation, and 3) direct instruction in text-based computer conferencing environments. These roles will take place both before the establishment of the learning community as well as 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 through the organization of the course components, the visual and audio instructional components that are used and by allowing students to see the personal enthusiasm and interests that inspires the teacher's attraction in the subject through the planned instructional components and organization of the course. 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 about the content. The third role is defined when the instructor 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 very important to the learners. 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 help to 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 online 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 evaluated 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 helped to establish the instructor’s teaching presence for the students. The introductory video was 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 was to identify how well this information was conveyed to the online students. Furthermore, the survey was conducted to see if library science students felt that this was an effective method of delivering this type of information to the online graduate students and at the same time, establish teaching presence for them.

Throughout the spring 06 and summer 06 terms, 32 participants enrolled in fully-online, graduate level courses in library science participated in this study. These students participated in online discussion boards, chat sessions and in a 15 item survey that measured 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.

FINDINGS

With a 71.8% response rate, the results of the study are summarized as follows:

Table 1: Survey Results

1	82.5% of the respondents reported that the instructor and student relation was important to them.
2	82.5% valued having the opportunity to meet the instructor virtually by seeing their face as well as hearing the teacher's voice.
3	95% of the students did in fact watch the introductory video. (Note: one student could not due to lack of access to adequate technology)
4	43.3% of the students appreciated having the streamed introductory video because it allowed them to replay the information as often as they preferred. In fact, approximately one-fourth of the student participants reported that they watched the video more than once throughout the term
5	60.8% of the students read the scripts that accompanied the video.
6	69.4% of the students reported that the introductory video and/or the Video Scripts were indeed valuable to them because it allowed the student to learn about the course requirements.
7	65.2% of the students reported that the introductory video helped them to prepare to participate in the online course
8	43.3% felt the introductory video helped them to learn the content in the course.
9	65% of the students reported that they felt that the introductory video did not have a direct impact on their final grade in the course.
10	56.4% of the student participants indicated that the introductory video was valuable because it allowed the students to learn how to access the technological resources and supports that were available to them.
11	Over half of the respondents were indifferent when asked if they felt that the introductory video was not needed for the course. In fact, 56.5% of the students responded "neither agree nor disagree" with 21.7% responding "disagree."
12	For instructional components, students reported that they prefer to have access to more text files in the online courses (34.7% ranked this #1 – see table 1). Second, they prefer to see more power point presentations with audio components added (34.7% ranked this #2 -- see table 1). Third, students preferred to see more online videos (34.7% ranked this #3 -- see table 1).
13	Their least preferred method of instruction for online delivery was having all instructional components packaged on a CD at the beginning of the term.

Table 2 – Preference Table.

Of the following online instructional components, which would you prefer to have access to in your online course(s)? Rank in order of importance to you: 1 would be your most desired online component and 6 would be your least desired online component.

Answers	1	2	3	4	5	6
Online Videos	8.6%	13.0%	8.6%	34.7%	17.3%	21.7%
Online Audio Files	0%	0%	13.0%	17.3%	43.4%	26.0%
Text files that can be accessed online	34.7%	17.3%	8.6%	8.6%	21.7%	4.3%
Power Point files with the lectures provided in text	26.0%	26.0%	21.7%	13.0%	8.6%	4.3%
Power Point files with the lectures recorded (audio files attached)	4.3%	34.7%	39.1%	13.0%	8.6%	4.3%
I would prefer to receive all of the materials at the beginning of the term in a package on a CD or DVD, along with my textbook (even if the cost of the book/package is slightly higher.)	21.7%	8.6%	5.263%	13.0%	0%	43.4%

Student Comments (from the discussion board and recorded chat sessions):

A select group of the student’s comments pertaining specifically to the introductory video are summarized in the following tables:

Table 3: *Presence Established through Video: Organization and Expectations of the Course*

1	<i>Student Comment:</i> You pointed out many things that I hadn't really given much thought to. Your first main point about having a back up plan just hadn't really entered my mind. But, with many technology problems we face sometimes just trying to get on chat, I can definitely see why this would be important. I look forward to the class, and learning new things. I have taking Dr. K before and you will learn in her class. I guess what I enjoy most about these classes is that you do much of the learning on your own. The teacher is there to assist, but the majority of learning takes place while we are at home on our own. Being in a group is an excellent way to approach problems that arise as well.
2	<i>Student Comment:</i> I felt the video was a great way to feel in touch with our professor before the semester begins. I am not real great at never having the face to face meetings, so this was a nice surprise. It also contained a great deal of information to help me feel a bit more prepared.
3	<i>Student Comment:</i> I thought these were the three important things from the video: 1. We need to check our email day and night. 2. We will need to try to do assignments ahead of time. 3. We will be learning for ourselves
4	<i>Student Comment:</i> I really liked the video introduction. It made class seem a bit more "real." By this, I mean, we have a real person on the other end of the computer. Instead of just reading all of the information, we could listen to it instead. We heard it from the professor's mouth.
5	<i>Student Comment:</i> I thought this was a great way to introduce the online course.
6	<i>Student Comment:</i> The video was an excellent way to introduce the class. I detected a note of reassurance and strong support of what to look forward to in the class. The video just seem to calm me down and provide reassurance.
7	<i>Student Comment:</i> I feel as if all necessary information was presented in the introductory video. This was the very first class I had ever taken where the instructor completed an introductory video. So bravo!

Table 4: *Presence Established through Introductory Video: Getting to Know the Instructor*

1	<i>Student Comment:</i> I liked the video intro. That is a good way to get to know your instructor for an online class. I have had some online classes where I never met the instructor. It is difficult to talk to a computer when you deal with people face to face each day. The computer doesn't respond as a person would. I am from the old
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	school where you meet face to face.
2	<i>Student Comment:</i> I also liked the idea of the instructor introducing herself to the class this way.
3	<i>Student Comment:</i> The video was almost like being in class (face-to-face) with the instructor. It was a nice way to introduce your self to the class. That was great! I was glad to have the text version of the audio, also.
4	<i>Student Comment:</i> I thought this was an excellent way for us to get to see our instructor and find out some information about the course.
5	<i>Student Comment:</i> How wonderful to put a face to all the e-mails I swamped you with last semester! The video was a great idea! Nice to finally "meet" you.
6	<i>Student Comment:</i> As someone who has had almost no interaction with this instructor, the video was great. I'm not a visual, but an auditory learner, so for me to hear her voice and where she put emphasis was really important. Somehow, you can get a lot more of someone's personality by watching/listening to them than by reading their words.

Table 5: *Convenience: Having access to the streamed video and the script*

1	<i>Student Comment:</i> It (i.e., the streamed video) is there if we need to refer back to it. I liked that.
2	<i>Student Comment:</i> I liked the fact that the text for the video was also offered. I guess I am a visual learner.
3	<i>Student Comment:</i> I liked that there was text on the video. It kind of pulls everything the instructor is talking about under a heading and helps you organize your thoughts.

Table 6: *Using Technology to Establish Presence: The Benefit and Pitfalls*

1	<i>Student Comment:</i> This would be an excellent way to introduce your class to the students and parents on the school website.
2	<i>Student Comment:</i> What a great idea having a video to introduce this class. The video was a technology-efficient way to introduce the instructor and provide us with course information.
3	<i>Student Comment:</i> I like the idea of the introductory video. For online classes such as this one, even though this instructor has taught several of my classes, it is nice to be able to see the professor's face at the beginning of the course. However, because I viewed it on a dial-up connection it was very slow to load and stopped several times in the middle to load. I am glad the written transcript is also available.
4	<i>Student Comment:</i> I am looking forward to becoming even more resourceful! We have dial up at home. It never has been too much of a problem before, but the more involved I get with technology, I am beginning to see the downside!
5	<i>Student Comment:</i> I know students would love it if we used this to introduce ourselves before school. It would also be a good way to discuss attendance policies and school rules. Parents could always go back and check on classroom policies.
6	<i>Student Comment:</i> I enjoyed having the video at the beginning of the semester. More videos throughout the course would be useful.
7	<i>Student Comment:</i> For me, the introductory video was very long already. Honestly, most of the important information about this class has come in the syllabus or through our class meetings, rather than the introductory video.

CONCLUSIONS

Establishing teaching presence is very important in an online course. The three roles involved in establishing *teaching presence*, include establishing the course design and organization, setting up the dialogue facilitation, and providing direct instruction are indeed vital for learning. One method that can be used to help in establishing teaching presence in an online course is to develop and produce an introductory video along with a text-based script that students will be able to access at will.

The introductory video and the supporting script provide opportunities for the teaching presence to be established in the following three ways. First teaching presence begins to be established by providing organizational services to help prepare students for the current online course. This includes the design and structure of the course (the instructional design and planning phase of the course), and at the same time the efforts to communicate the organization and expectations to the students. The introductory video can aid in communicating the organization and

expectations to the students. At the same time, this step is critical in modeling appropriate etiquette and demonstrating effective use of the technology. The second aspect of creating teaching presence is facilitating discourse. Discourse is facilitated by the instructor after the students have viewed the video and/or read the scripts, they have a good direction of where to begin the course, and where to go online to communicate with the other students in the course as well as where to go to seek answers to questions. Finally, teachers provide intellectual leadership and share their knowledge of the subject matter with their students. The instructor must be able to communicate the intellectual climate of the course and serve as a model for their students.

From this study we have found that students participating in an online course do indeed value the instructor and student relationship. Therefore, students appreciate having the opportunity to meet the instructor “virtually” through the use of introductory videos. Participants in this study reported that they valued having the opportunity to meet the “living instructor” of the course through the introductory video. When organization of the course, the course expectations and the requirements are all provided in writing only, there is no “real life” in the instruction. The students stated their preference was to have a sense of learning from a real persona and not just from text-based instruction. Students also stated that they value the opportunity to “get to know the instructor” at the beginning of class. The relationship that is forming from the beginning is seen as valuable and has a direct impact on the students’ progress in the class.

One important finding from this study was that even though text-based versions of the video (scripts) is required in order to be ADA (American Disabilities Act) compliant, over 60% of the participants reported that they used the scripts to support their efforts to understand and learn the information presented on the video. Therefore, the video and the script serve a dual purpose in aiding all students to comprehend the information in video components, not just those with special needs.

Another very important finding from this study relates to the preference of delivery modes for the students. Students reported they preferred to have access to more text-based instruction first. Second, the students’ preference of receiving instruction was to offer more slide shows with audio-based instruction. Their third preference for receiving online instruction was through video. Their least preferred method of delivery was to receive all of the instructional components packaged via a CD at the beginning of the term.

From the online discussions and chat sessions, it does appear that the majority of the students were able to access the video with any technical difficulties. Only 1 student reported that they had to depend solely on the text-based scripts because they were not able to access the video on their local computer system.

Certainly, it is challenging to establish one’s teaching presence in an online course, especially if the course is completely text-based. Creating the introductory video is more than just being seen or heard by the students. The value is in being seen, heard, and at the same time “experienced” by the students. Being able to hear the instructor’s tone, humor, and see their body language helps to make the information real for the students. The participants report that they felt as if the introductory video gave them a sense of “being in class” and provided them a familiar feeling of “communicating face-to-face”. This study indicates that from the student’s perspective the time and effort it takes for an instructional design team (i.e., the instructor, the instructional designer, and the producer) to develop and produce an introductory video are valued and therefore, we recommend that faculty should write a script and produce an introductory video that addresses course requirements, instructor expectations and assessment information for the online courses they are teaching.

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