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Journal of Adult Education

Volume 42, Number 2, 2013

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Learning to Develop Presence Online: Experienced Faculty Perspectives

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Abstract

Presence describes the ways in which human beings interact with each other. This qualitative study sought to understand the techniques experienced online teachers learned in order to be "present" with their students. Data were gathered primarily through interviews and syllabus reviews. The findings included techniques the teachers used when organizing and planning their courses, communicating with students, incorporating collaborative work and encouraging student self-direction, and developing learning relationships in their online courses.

What is Presence?

Presence describes the ways in which human beings interact with each other. In the online environment interactions are mediated through technology, which changes the character of the interactions and can change the ways in which they are perceived. Gunawardena (1995) was one of the first to explore computer-mediated communication (CMC) and its effects on human interactions. Her review of the literature demonstrated that participants of CMC often perceived the conferences as interesting or engaging, yet the medium was not perceived as "social" even when visuals of the other participants were available. To help overcome that perception, Gunawardena encouraged moderators to take responsibility for promoting "interactions and collaborative learning" among CMC participants (p. 147).

As technology improved and the use of technology in higher education expanded, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) came together to find ways to address the human and teaching issues as well as the cognitive goals that emerged in their own online, text-based programs. Their collaboration resulted in the "Community of Inquiry" framework. Within the framework it was assumed that learning occurred "within a Community of Inquiry that is composed of teachers and students" (p. 88). The model was depicted as three interlocking circles with each labeled with one form of "presence": cognitive presence, teaching presence, and social presence. They described teaching presence as the "binding element" (p. 96.) in the development of an online community.

More recently, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010) explored the causal relationships among the presences in the Community of Inquiry. Using a survey

instrument developed in previous research (Arbaugh, 2007), these researchers explored the usefulness of the Community of Inquiry as a "theoretical tool to understand the complexities of the causal relationships among teaching, social and cognitive presences" (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, p. 35). The results supported previous findings of teaching presence as an important role in an online community and provided more clarity around the "importance of teaching presence in creating and sustaining social and cognitive presence in online learning environments" (p. 35). As these studies suggest, teachers make a difference in the learning process online. Consequently, it is important for educators to understand how to be "present" with students.

Why Presence Matters

Understanding how to be present with students online can influence the perception of a quality educational experience for both teachers and students. Presence is thought to improve learning and student persistence online, increase teacher and student satisfaction, and improve the perception of quality in the online environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Stavredes, 2011).

Creating presence with others online is thought to be a purposeful effort that includes development of the right skills and teaching approach (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). The physical distance between teachers and students can make it seem that the development of presence is unnecessary or even impossible to accomplish, but it might be worth the effort. As previously described, teachers have an impact on student learning online, and can reduce a student's sense of isolation, encourage collaborative learning, and offer emotional support for students who lack confidence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Kehrwald, 2010; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; York & Richardson, 2012). For many teachers in higher education, one of the most satisfying parts of the teaching role is the relationships formed in the classroom (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). For online teachers, being present with students could help overcome some of the dissatisfaction teachers might feel when teaching online.

Teachers as Learners

The higher education teacher's role has always been focused on encouraging learning, but perhaps teachers did not realize that switching to online teaching may require them to assume the role of learner as well (Ambrose, Bridges, DiPietro, Lovett, & Norman, 2010). The introduction of online teaching requires new pedagogical and technological skills (Garrison, 2011). Developing these skills may be beneficial to creating presence online, especially when it comes to encouraging students to become more self-directed learners (Ambrose et al., 2010; Bembenutty, 2009; Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

Embracing the role of learner may provide teachers with a solid foundation as they move into online teaching and may make it possible for teachers to learn how to solve issues on their own as they occur in their online teaching practices (Bates & Sangrá, 2011; Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Lehman & Conceição, 2010). It may also encourage the development of more professional development opportunities that focus on the skills needed to incorporate technology into the teaching process rather than adding technology on top of current teaching practices (Bates & Sangrá, 2011; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). A better informed teacher may find new ways to make information easily accessible to students. Students who are more able to direct their learning may work more easily online (Bates & Sangrá, 2011; Stavredes, 2011).

Method

Experienced online faculty members who had taught at least four online courses and who were identified by their deans as excellent participated in this study. The teachers all taught at nationally-recognized, well-established, and regionally accredited institutions in the northwest. Excellent faculty members who met the criteria were first identified by their deans. Once identified, the faculty members were contacted and asked to participate. Eight faculty members, four

women and four men, chose to participate. All of the participants represented the colleges of business and education at their respective universities.

Data Collection

Data were collected primarily through one-hour interviews although a syllabus from a course of the participant's choosing was also collected from each teacher. The purpose of the syllabus was to provide examples of how the techniques described in the interviews were implemented. Each of the interviews was recorded with the participant's permission.

Data Analysis

As each interview was completed, the data were analyzed. Verbatim transcripts were typed and codes assigned. Iterative readings of the transcripts yielded categories. The syllabus provided by the participant was reviewed using a worksheet developed by the researcher after review of the Quality Matters Rubric Standards 2011–2013 edition (Quality Matters Program: QM, 2013) and relevant literature (Dykman & Davis, 2008a, 2008b; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Stavredes, 2011). The worksheet was used to help maintain rigor and consistency in the review process. As the interviews were completed and codes and categories documented and combined, patterns emerged. When patterns are identified and no new insights are discovered with subsequent interviews, "saturation" is said to have occurred (Creswell, 2007, p. 160). Saturation was achieved in this study.

Findings

The participants in this study were experienced online teachers so they could share what they had learned about developing presence. Most admitted they had not considered how or if they developed presence until they received the request to participate in this study. As they reflected on their work, they realized that their efforts to overcome some of the issues they had found in their courses often resulted in increased presence with their students.

As is suggested in the literature and confirmed by this study, there seems to be no one factor that leads to a learning environment that encourages presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Stavredes, 2011). Presence describes a component of human interactions online. As such, presence emerges in large part from what the teacher brings to the environment, which means that the teacher's personality, teaching approach, and beliefs influence the development of presence.

Four categories emerged from the data. The four categories are planning and organization, communication, collaborative work and student self-direction, and learning relationships.

Planning and Organization

Online teaching, like classroom teaching, requires planning and organization (Dykman & Davis, 2008a, 2008b; Lee, Dickerson, & Winslow, 2012). The primary difference online is that students anticipate being able to view the whole course at once in order to plan their time (Stavredes, 2011). Especially for self-directed students, due dates or materials that are difficult to find or a confusing array of activities and assignments can feel frustrating and demotivating. For students who are learning how to be good online students, a poorly planned or organized course can leave them feeling demotivated, incompetent, or confused.

One approach to organizing online courses is by modules that are organized chronologically or by topic (Dykman & Davis, 2008a, 2008b) and that have a similar look and feel for each module. Laying out courses so that students can find their way is important and represented a must for the participants of this study. A rigorously planned and organized class also benefitted the teachers.

The online teachers in this study associated online teaching with more work. The need to write out all instructions explicitly and deliver the coursework all at once with no changes throughout the duration of the course seemed like it took extra hours. Over time, the teachers learned that by clearly organizing the syllabus and the course site and by providing explicit

instructions upfront, they were asked fewer questions during the course. They commented that it seemed to encourage students to settle into the work instead of worrying about the structure.

Many of the participants made sure that their syllabus and course site were nearly identical, certainly in flow but also in structure so that students could easily follow the course requirements and expectations. A review of the syllabi provided for evaluation during this study showed they were very detailed and often had tables or charts that mimicked the course site. The lesson here was that taking the time upfront to plan, organize, and document the course seemed to encourage student self-direction and minimize questions.

Communication

Ongoing and consistent communication with students was another factor mentioned by every participant. While all teachers know that staying in touch with students is important, it can become problematic online because of the physical distance between teachers and students. Students can "disappear", and it can be difficult to get them to engage. For teachers, the perceived workload increase that is associated with numerous emails and forum discussions can be viewed as a deterrent. Yet, all of the participants in the study felt ongoing communications with students were crucial for a successful online course. Common practices such as creating welcoming messages were often used, but many of these participants expanded the welcome message to include statements about course expectations, directions for course navigation, and specific instructions about how to get help with the technology or answers to questions about the course. The teachers also put aside extra time at the beginning of each course to answer questions quickly, and monitored student engagement closely for the first week or two. Those who engaged in these practices felt that early engagement and management of issues encouraged students and reduced the ongoing teacher workload. Asked why they thought that occurred, the teachers described students who seemed to have an increased sense of confidence in being able to manage on their own and a sense of trust about the teacher's commitment to be present with them during the learning experience. These teachers thought that being present with their students made their classes more successful.

Collaborative Work and Student Self-Direction

Participants' responses varied widely about collaborative work online. Most participants felt that online collaboration could be beneficial to students, but many were reluctant to make any collaborative assignments. Concerns were generally associated with the work involved in scheduling and coordination of group activities and with the course management issues related to students who did not engage; these were issues they knew well from their classroom teaching experiences.

Two of the participants had tried collaborative assignments and had found success by giving students more control over the activity. Prior to the collaborative assignment, these two teachers engaged students in activities to prepare them for the group work. One had student groups create codes of conduct for their group, which had to include specific steps the students would take if a group member was not doing such things as meeting deadlines or attending meetings. The teacher was available during development of the codes of conduct and during the group activity if the students were unable to solve the problem themselves. The other teacher appointed a student lead in each student work group who became responsible for engaging others and communicating with the teacher. The teacher met first with the group through some electronic means and discussed the assignment and explained the role of the group leader. Then, the teacher let the groups work out the logistics on their own. The teacher was available for questions from the group leader weekly if needed.

In both cases, the teachers reported that the collaborative work was a success. Not only did the teachers believe that the groups had learned the material expected of them, but they also seemed to learn leadership and management skills as well as how to be collaborative in a virtual environment. The teacher who assigned the code of conduct activity also said none of the teams had ever asked for help, and she later shared

that the real impetus for learning how to do this was to streamline her workload related to the activity. Positive student comments in a post-activity reflection paper suggested to her that students felt more satisfied with the online collaborative activity as she had restructured it than in past attempts. She also reported that her workload during the activity was reduced. The teacher who had assigned group leaders reported that the leaders usually requested one or two meetings at the beginning of the activity, but then the groups became self-directing.

The collaborative activities described here are good examples of how self-direction can be beneficial online. The literature suggests that online learners need to be self-directing sooner than their classroom counterparts primarily because of the asynchronous nature of the online learning experience (Bejerano, 2008; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The teachers who ventured out and found ways to incorporate collaborative assignments into their courses did not know at first how to make it work. Both initially tried to assist student learning by making themselves responsible for organizing and managing parts of the activities. Yet, when the teachers took responsibility for all of the logistics, their workloads increased, and they received more questions from their students.

Collaborative work can be difficult in any situation, but what can be seen here is that for online students, the value of the activity can be more than just the learning outcome it is meant to achieve. It is the sense of accomplishment and the knowledge that they as students can make the online learning experience richer by taking responsibility for what they learn. These teachers learned through trial-and-error, ultimately finding a solution that worked well for all.

Learning Relationships

Being engaged in learning activities and working with students to develop learning relationships is considered a best practice in online teaching (Dykman & Davis, 2008a, 2008b; Fish & Wickersham, 2009). Learning relationships are also thought to increase teacher satisfaction and can encourage students to think deeper and feel part of the learning environment; learning relationships have also been described as supportive of student persistence and are often mentioned in relation to developing presence (Artino, 2010; Bejerano, 2008; Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). This study revealed that for at least one of the participants the development of presence and the development of learning relationships were not necessarily linked for her in online courses.

While most of the participants engaged consistently with students throughout the course and made efforts to get to know the students individually, one teacher who taught large survey courses felt that was impossible. She did, however, understand the benefits of connecting with students online. Using trial-and-error to find the right balance, she developed a process that combined using personalized early welcoming messages and emails with the later use of automated messages in the learning management system (LMS) to stay in touch with her students and give the impression of her daily presence in the course. She did that by planning her course carefully and by creating announcements during planning that she then posted in the LMS and scheduled for future delivery. At the appropriate time, the announcement was sent to students via the LMS messaging system, reminding them of an upcoming assignment or explaining a particularly difficult topic. She also created standard responses to posts or questions that she knew from experience occurred in nearly every class. By copying and pasting the previously developed responses, she simplified her workload without students being aware of the difference. It should be noted that this teacher said her approach was possible because she had years of experience teaching this survey course and that the course had changed very little over the years. Another teacher, however, reported similar workload management benefits after he began using the automated announcements feature he found in his LMS. There was additional planning work required in both situations, but the workload during the course was lessened.

These teachers' use of the LMS demonstrates another method of regular engagement with students that also helps maintain a more balanced workload for teachers. The teacher who used the LMS more

extensively also reported that she thought the approach was successful because student evaluations had improved and overall class grades improved, as well. This evidence is anecdotal but was for this teacher a positive solution to the problems she had encountered. Additionally, these findings suggest that if students perceive their teacher's presence, that may be enough to support their learning.

Conclusion

At its core, presence has been described as the sense that parties who are communicating remotely are present with each other or who are communicating as though they are in the same physical location. To accomplish that takes work even with today's greatly improved technologies. It takes planning, organization, clear writing, engagement, persistence, and a number of other factors that have been raised in this study. One of the benefits of creating presence is thought to be improved learning, which is generally accepted to be the goal of higher education (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). For teachers, it is reasonable and likely expected that they engage with students to help them learn, but developing presence takes effort. Training teachers about what presence is and how it can be achieved is important, but mentoring teachers to understand the online environment and to balance the workload seems equally important.

This study described the techniques learned and practiced by experienced online teachers. Some of the teachers suggested that student satisfaction seemed to improve as reported by student comments and course evaluations; others suggested learning might have improved since course grades overall had improved. While the evidence is anecdotal, the teachers' seemed satisfied with the progress they had made in their courses, which they related to more presence with their online students. The literature tells us that teachers can also benefit from an increased sense of satisfaction with online teaching. More than that, these teachers realized as we discussed presence that they had overcome obstacles to become excellent online teachers.

Learning is often described as a process that leads to change (Ambrose et al., 2010; Cranton, 2001; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). It has also been observed that learning occurs rarely "in splendid isolation from the world in which the learner lives;… it is intimately related to that world and affected by it" (as cited in Merriam, Caffarella, and Baumgartner, 2007, p. 5). Teaching is a contextual activity (Ambrose et al., 2010) that is shaped and formed by the students, institutional expectations, fields of study, and the technologies available. Students have changed expectations related to their online learning experience, and excellent teachers have learned to adapt. The techniques suggested by this study may be helpful for some. Equally important is the recognition that online teachers may need to become learners in order to adapt to the new environment.

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