JET
The Journal of Effective Teaching
an online journal devoted to teaching excellence

Teaching Presence in Online Courses: Practical Applications, Co-Facilitation, and Technology Integration

Stephanie Smith Budhai[1] and Maureen Williams
Neumann University, Aston, PA. 19014

Abstract

The number of online courses being offered at the postsecondary level has constantly increased. However, online instructors are still investigating ways to translate their pedagogical instruction into the online forum, while maintaining a strong presence instructionally. This paper aims to address how to build teaching presence in online courses. An example of how teaching presence was increased in an online graduate research methods course is shared focusing on the constructs of designing organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. This paper concludes with implications and best practices for applying a similar model to build teaching presence in other online courses.

Keywords: Online learning, teaching presence, distance education, learning technologies, instructional design.

A recent report estimated the number of college students enrolled in online courses at over 5.8 million, which is 28% of all college students currently enrolled in institutions of higher education (Allen & Seaman, 2016). This number will continue to grow as 63.3 percent of chief academic leaders report online learning as critical to long time strategic plans (Allen & Seaman, 2016). While this confirms the continued growth in the area of online course and program offerings, research on faculty teaching in online courses is not as robust as the research on the student experience (Bair & Bair, 2011). As faculty move their courses to an online environment, it is important to develop the pedagogical skills, practices, and methodologies that mirror the quality and substance of teaching in traditional face-to-face courses. One way to create online courses where the presence of the instructor is immersed in all aspects of the course is by focusing on "teaching presence" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Teaching presence surrounds the process of facilitating, designing, and guiding the cognitive learning processes in a meaningful way (Rourke, Anderson, & Garrison, 2001). Guided by Garrison et al.'s (2000) Community of Inquiry Model, with an emphasis on teaching presence, the purpose of this paper is to address how teaching presence can be increased in online courses. What follows is an examination of teaching presence in the literature as well as an example of how teaching presence was increased in the research/information literacy portion of an online graduate research methods course by designing the organization of course, facilitating discourse

[1] Corresponding author's email: budhais@neumann.edu

through a co-facilitation model, and direct instruction through the use of emerging learning technologies.

Conceptual Framework

Elements of the educational experience within the online education environment have been explored by Garrison et al. (2000) through the Community of Inquiry model. The Community of Inquiry model focuses on cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence and was created to provide a way to contextualize learning transactions in a virtual environment. There are three categories of teaching presence indicators identified by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) related to teaching presence: design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Design and organization takes on instructional management characteristics and is related to the overall development and designing of the course and subsequent education experience. In order for the teacher to have a presence in the course beyond live sessions and written communication, they must select and organize the course content integrating the learning activities, assignments, and assessments in meaningful ways. Anderson et al. (2001) identified this as a primary function of the instructor.

The second category of teaching presence indicators, facilitating discourse, is "a process of creating an effective group consciousness for the purpose of sharing meaning, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, and generally seeking to reach consensus and understanding" (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 101). The process of facilitating discourse in an online course is an extremely intentional process that must be carried out with due diligence. Garrison et al. (2000) provided a coding scheme to identify indicators of discourse facilitation which include setting the climate for learning, acknowledging student contributions to the learning experience, and assessing the efficacy of the process. The online environment has proven to be a space that can facilitate deeper levels and discussions that call for higher level-thinking (Czerkawski, 2014). Facilitating discourse is closely connected with direct instruction, the third category of teaching presence, and takes charge of connecting content to opportunities where students interact and socialize with other. Hosler and Arend's (2012) study showed that students' learning experience was positively impacted when discourse, assignments, and introduction of course content was facilitated in an intentional way. Similarly, Kebritchi's (2014) findings "support the importance of maintaining close and frequent interactions between the online learners and instructors" (p.480). Providing modest but prompt instructor feedback is one of the most effective strategies to support social and cognitive presences (deNoyelles, Mannheimer, & Chen, 2014).

Direct Instruction is the final category identified to describe teaching presence. According to Anderson et al. (2001), direct instruction is when "teachers provide intellectual and scholarly leadership and share their subject matter knowledge with students" (p.8). This can be accomplished using a variety of pedagogical strategies, and research has shown the students how immediate feedback is will impact the student experience (Ladyshewsky, 2013). In an online course, instructors participate in the practice of teaching by presenting content and questions to students, summarizing group discussion points, provid-

ing explanatory feedback, assessing student learning to confirm understanding, and by clarifying misconceptions and inaccuracies (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer 2001).

Case Study Model: Online Research Methods Course

To understand how teaching presence was increased in the study at hand, the authors provide a case study of an online graduate research methods course that was facilitated through the framework of the Community of Inquiry Model (Rourke et al., 2001), specifically looking at the three categories of indicators of teaching presence (Anderson, et al., 2001).

There were two courses within a fully online Master of Science in Education program that the information literacy session was prepared for. While the program is fully online, about 95% of the students live within 30 miles of the university. Approximately 10% of the students attended the live session, and the remainder watched the recording within the week after the session was recorded. Due to the nature of scheduling and students having full-time work and home life responsibilities, it is extremely difficult to choose a time for a live session that is convenient for the majority of students. Through analytics within the Learning Management System, we are able to track when and how many times each student viewed the recording.

Designing Organization

The most effective way to build teaching presence within the online environment is to be proactive rather than reactive. Without the in-person orientation and connections of the traditional classroom, miscommunications and missed opportunities for learning can be amplified in the online environment. Developing community and communication to promote a shared peer experience is vital to success (Moore, 2014). Assignments should be purposeful and well explained and supported.

In this course, the instructor created a literature review assignment to synthesize course content with current scholarly resources. Students were expected to find their scholarly articles using the library's resources. The primary instructor then sought out collaboration with a campus librarian to facilitate a live demonstration and active information literacy learning session in the learning management system (LMS) on best practices in finding scholarly articles. This information literacy collaboration between faculty and librarian had its genesis in the traditional in-person environment. When this course was taught in the past, the librarian physically came to the primary instructor's classroom to facilitate a working session finding resources for course assignments. Students in these physical sessions were able to use the time while the librarian was in class to learn about the resources and to find their articles for the assignment. The librarian and faculty member wanted to transfer the success of the in-person collaborative session into the online environment. The librarians had worked extensively with classes in person but had never conducted a library session live online. The faculty member, while very experienced with

teaching in online environments, had not had a research session conducted in the online environment by an outside collaborator.

It was decided to hold a live session with the librarian facilitating instruction using a Blackboard Collaborate, a virtual classroom within the Learning Management System. Despite this being an asynchronous online course, "web conferencing technology allow(s) the instructor to quickly get feedback from students by asking them to use tools such as emoticons, text-chat, and polling" (Stover & Pollock, 2014, p. 399). This live session would not be required for students to attend, but was highly recommended. The session would be recorded and available to view by all students. As with an in person class, it is beneficial for students to be fully engaged with the learning process in every way possible. Prerecording a session to have available as part of the learning management system left participation in limbo so it was a purposeful decision to hold a live session.

The live session to be facilitated by the librarian would be scheduled two weeks before the literature review assignment was due, rather than at the beginning of the course. This was not a general library resources session, but rather a session specifically to help students with the literature review assignment. In general at this institution, information literacy workshops with the librarian are not orientations or overviews, but targeted sessions focusing on the specific research needs of the class on hand. Students in this course were introduced to the assignment by the instructor, and then encouraged to attend the live session with the librarian to solidify understanding of library resources and to begin their literature search. This was a purposeful design by the faculty instructor and librarian to make the session as relevant and focused as possible. Integrating this session into the course was not a flippant decision; rather, as prescribed by the theory of instructional management put forth by Anderson, et al. (2001), it was a deliberate effort to reach out to students at their point of need and directly provide an engaging opportunity for learning and assignment-specific instruction.

Facilitating Discourse

As discussed previously, the integration of the online librarian-led information literacy session was designed thoughtfully by the collaborating parties: the faculty member and the librarian. However, establishing a strong and impactful teaching presence in the online environment requires discourse with the students throughout all phases of the class. In order to build understanding of requirements and expectations, feedback and discourse must be proactively sought out, not just implicitly expected. There is a positive correlation between the preparation and guidance that an instructor puts into feedback activities and student engagement with those activities. Instructors must design the course to meet the needs of the students. Furthermore, once sought out, feedback should be acted upon, and should help mold instruction (Ma, Han, Yang, & Cheng, 2015).

Prior to the live online session with the librarian, an electronic survey was distributed by the faculty member to the students asking the following questions. With the exception of the first question, all questions were comment responses:

1. How confident are you with finding a peer-reviewed article from a research database? (Students had the options: 'Extremely confident', 'Confident', or 'Not confident')
2. What education research databases are you familiar with?
3. What keywords would you use to search for issues surrounding cultural and/or linguistically diverse minorities and assessment practices?
4. What experience have you had using APA style?
5. What specific help can the librarian provide you with during the online session?

Answers to these questions were varied, but only two students answered 'Extremely confident' to the first question. The general consensus was that help was needed knowing what databases to search, how to frame keywords in the databases, and the best resources for APA. These students were graduate students; yet there readiness reflected the need for introductory level instruction on research resources and best practices.

The librarian received these results prior to the session. The design of the session was directly drawn from the results of this survey. Without reaching out directly to the students to gauge their comfort level and ability, as well as asking open-ended response questions, the online session would not have had concrete student input into its creation. In traditional information literacy sessions, the librarian reaches out to the faculty to ascertain student needs, assignments details, and any special areas of focus. This approach was enhanced by the inclusion of the survey. Without the faculty member communicating with a librarian and with the students, research needs could have been left unmet.

The faculty member and librarian facilitated discourse purposefully and empowered the students to voice their needs. In doing so, understanding was built between all parties involved. There was then a brief electronic survey distributed after class gauging effectiveness and soliciting advice for what could be improved. This was a more informal open-ended survey and students responded positively and expressed interest in a similar session in future classes. In the future, a more concrete post-session survey will be distributed to get quantitative data on student perceptions. None of the attending students had APA errors and all submitted articles were peer-reviewed and within the currency parameters.

In addition to surveys, during the live online session, the chat feature in Blackboard Collaborate was used, and students spoke up using their own microphones. The communication lines continued to be open and encouraged during direct instruction and this enhanced the relevance and effectiveness of the librarian's session. There was a sense of peer-to-peer and peer-to-instructor community that was actively encouraged. There is no single way to promote this type of community and communication, but establishing in some way in the online environment is key to student satisfaction and success (Moore, 2014).

Direct Instruction

Direct Instruction is the third tier of Teaching Presence discussed (Anderson et al., 2001) and it accounts for the most traditional of the three tiers. The result of the discussed design and communication was an hour long live information literacy instruction session facilitated by the librarian and delivered through Blackboard Collaborate, the course management recording system. In an effort to put forth a collaborative teaching presence, both the faculty member and the librarian were live in the session. The purposeful design and proactive efforts at discourse led to a targeted session catered directly to the students' needs.

Students, the librarian, and the faculty member 'met' at 7pm in the Blackboard Collaborate room. The expectation was that most students worked during the day so the session was held after traditional work hours were over. The librarian began the session with an uploaded PowerPoint shared with the class. The chat was activated from the beginning of the class and the librarian continuously encouraged questions to be asked either using microphones or the chat.

After discussing the literature review assignment requirements, introducing what peer-reviewed journals are and what library databases are, the librarian switched from the uploaded PowerPoint to a shared browser screen. As discussed in the 'Designing Organization' section, the goal was to make this online research session mirror as closely as possible the in-person research session that the librarian frequently conducted. Transitioning from demonstration to hands on work is a key part of a successful library instruction session and that was transferred as closely as possible to the online environment. Recent research has shown that an instructor's activity planning and discourse establishment are vitally important to student engagement in the online environment (Ma et al., 2015).

The librarian had been provided with the students' topics in advance and modeled several in the library database while sharing the screen. Mechanics of the database were discussed, as were research best practices. The librarian's browser screen was shared with students throughout this demonstration. The students' pre-submitted topics were used to demonstrate best practices in education research in the database. Students used the chat to ask questions as this demonstration was ongoing. This point-of-need discourse could not have happened with a pre-recorded video. Students were then given time to search their topics on their own to see if they had any issues or questions. The live session wrapped up with sharing of library's contact information and an offer of individual help if needed. The session was targeted, relevant, and interactive. The principles of teaching presence were woven into every aspect of the synchronous session. Using the Community of Inquiry model put forth by Anderson, et al. (2001), a successful synchronous session in an asynchronous course was designed, shared and delivered.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions for Best Practices

The findings of this study have brought forth several practical recommendations that can inform best practices for effective teaching presence in online courses. First, when plan-

ning for teaching, determine the individual needs of the students, where they are currently at academically, and their particular learning styles. Preisman (2014) advocates "developing and implementing more highly individualized cognitive activities and assignments" (p. 14). In the courses covered in this article, the instructor and librarian prepared and sent a survey to students to capture their individual needs. Additionally, this will set the tone and allow that what you are teaching is applicable to the learning and content acquisition needs of the students.

Secondly, scaffold and differentiate instruction so all students receive the support they need. Scaffolding involves guided instruction in multiple layers until students are able to complete the given task independently (Vygotsky,1978), while differentiating instruction is designing curriculum to meet the individual needs of students. Differentiation should go beyond the planning phases and include the actual instruction of content (Parsons, Dodman, & Burrowbridge, 2013). Since the individual needs of students would have already been determined, plans for supporting students at the levels they are currently at, can be part of the process. In the course at hand, some of the students never heard of APA formatting prior to the assignment, while others have worked on research papers in previous courses. The range of student levels will vary, which makes it difficult to teach all learners the exact same way.

Finally, it is extremely important to leverage the appropriate technologies that can support the teaching process and student experience. The availability of new and exciting emerging learning technologies (Pacansky-Brock, 2013), present an opportunity for teacher educators to provide student-centered personalized feedback in online courses. In the case represented four multimedia application were used to facilitate the teaching process. Google Forms is a great way to create simple or complex surveys and was used by the instructor and librarian teaching team as a way to capture students' prior knowledge. Within the Learning Management System, Blackboard Learn, Blackboard Collaborate was used to hold and record a live session on navigating research databases; a skill many students new to the research process struggle with. Blackboard Collaborate also allowed for a question and answer session with students and an embedded chat feature which allowed students to unobtrusively ask questions during the session. The Learning Management System also served as a file and content storage system which held the recorded lesson, sample research database explorations, documents with examples of APA citation and formatting, and other related files.

Conclusion

As online education continues to expand (Oyeleke, Olugbenga, Oluwayemi, & Sunday, 2015), it is important that learning remains transformative and that classes are designed and taught through constructive pedagogy. Taking Research Methods can be quite challenging for students new to the process, even if they are at the graduate level. Partnering with a librarian for a co-facilitation model has proven useful and inspired similar collaborations. Ni (2013) captures next steps for continuing exploration of the teaching effectiveness in distance education when they stated: "as we continue to assess, improve, and therefore accumulate knowledge of teaching and learning effectiveness in an online envi-

ronment, we hope that students, too, will achieve a greater understanding of and enjoy greater benefits from this new mode of instruction" (p. 213). This includes all content and subject areas, at all levels of learning and discourse.

References

Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2016). Online Report Card – Tracking Online Education in the United States. Babson Park, MA: Babson Survey Research Group and Quahog Research Group.

Anderson, T., Rourke, L., Garrison, D. R., & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing teaching presence in a computer conferencing context. *Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 5*(2), 1-17.

Bair, D., & Bair, M. (2011). Paradoxes of Online Teaching. International Journal for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 5(2), 1-15.

Czerkawski, B. (2014). Designing deeper learning experiences for online instruction. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning,* 13(2), p. 29-40.

deNoyelles, A. a., Mannheimer Zydney, J. j., & Baiyun Chen, b. (2014). Strategies for creating a community of inquiry through online asynchronous discussions. *Journal Of Online Learning & Teaching, 10*(1), 153-165.

Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. *The Internet and Higher Education,* 2 (2), 87–105.

Hosler, K. A., & Arend, B. D. (2012). The importance of course design, feedback, and facilitation: student perceptions of the relationship between teaching presence and cognitive presence. *Educational Media International*, *49*(3), 217-229.

Kebritchi, M. M. (2014). Preferred teaching methods in online courses: Learners' views. Journal Of Online Learning & Teaching, 10(3), 468-488.

Ladyshewsky, R. K. (2013). Instructor Presence in Online Courses and Student Satisfaction. International Journal For The Scholarship Of Teaching & Learning, 7(1), 1-23.

Ma, J., Han, X., Yang, J., & Cheng, J. (2015). Examining the necessary condition for engagement in an online learning environment based on learning analytics approach: The role of the instructor. *Internet & Higher Education*, *24*26-34.

Moore, R. (2014). Importance of developing community in distance education courses. *Techtrends: Linking Research & Practice To Improve Learning*, *58*(2), 20-24.

Ni, A. Y. (2013). Comparing the Effectiveness of Classroom and Online Learning: Teaching Research Methods. Journal of Public Affairs Education, 19(2), 199-215.

Oyeleke, O., Olugbenga, F. A., Oluwayemi, O. E., & Sunday, A. J. (2015). Changing the landscape of learning: Critical factors in open and distance learning. *Journal Of Education And Practice*, *6*(13), 53-61.

Pacansky-Brock, M. (2013). Best Practices for Teaching with Emerging Technologies. Routledge: New York.

Parsons, S. A., Dodman, S. L., & Burrowbridge, S. C. (2013). Broadening the view of differentiated instruction. Phi Delta Kappan, 95(1), 38–42.

Preisman, K. A. (2014). Teaching presence in online education: From the instructor's point of view. *Online Learning*, *18*(3).

Rourke, L., Anderson, T., Garrison, D. R. & Archer, W. (2001). Assessing social presence in asynchronous text-based computer conferencing. Journal of Distance Education, 14(2), 50-71.

Stover, S., & Pollock, S. (2014). Building a community of inquiry and analytical skills in an online history course. *International Journal Of Teaching And Learning In Higher Education*, *26*(3), 393-403.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.