Fostering Better Instructor Presence in Your Online Programs

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Introduction
Studies (Garrison, 2007; Anderson & Elloumi, 2004; Shea, Pickett & Pelz, 2003) show that a higher degree of faculty engagement positively impacts a student's learning experience, influencing student satisfaction and retention. Defining the student learning experience has traditionally been owned by the faculty, but new methodologies in online instructional design often dictate that faculty members are teaching courses that they did not create. The main task of the faculty becomes that of class facilitator, responsible for instruction as well as maintaining and/or increasing student retention and satisfaction.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry (COI) framework is an excellent model for illustrating how purposeful faculty engagement positively influences student learning experiences. The COI framework (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000) espouses, “learning occurs within the Community through interaction of three core elements” (p. 88): cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Student engagement results from the interaction of all three COI elements, yet we emphasize the teaching presence in this paper as the core method for creating impacting engagement experiences with students.

The COI framework defines the teaching presence as ‘the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, p. 33). In the online modality, faculty members assist students with the comprehension of the material and the completion of the outcomes without the benefit of being able to fully capture the attention of the student.

Establishing Faculty Engagement
Faculty are the engineers of their courses, defining the educational experience for students through the course objectives, critical learning paths and activities that assess student outcomes. Engagement is considered inherent through the design of the educational path and assessment methodologies. Most instructors have developed specific approaches for building rapport with their students while teaching on-ground class sessions. However, the pedagogical strategy that has always succeeded for an on-ground instructor does not necessarily translate directly to the online environment. The unique nature of the online environment necessitates that pedagogical instructional methods be modified.

Online students need more from faculty than a blueprint of the learning experience. They require specific types of communications and relationship building from the instructor to ensure that the student remains an active participant in the class and benefits from the social aspects of participating in learning activities.

In on-ground classroom sessions, students experience some level of affiliation through their proximity to instructor and peers. In the online learning environment, students connect to their course through their computer or mobile device and can essentially choose their level of connectivity to the activity going on...
in the course (Branch, Chen, and Jang, 2010). Should students opt to only participate when necessary and not engage with the activity going on in the classroom, their level of engagement with the course will not be as high as on-ground, face-to-face instruction or even that of their peers who are more active in the course. It is the responsibility of the course instructor to attract the attention of the students and encourage them to participate in the classroom (Easton, 2003).

Whereas in the on-ground classroom, students are sequestered in a classroom free from outside distraction, online students are battling a large number of interruptions when sitting down to complete their coursework. Students have a seemingly infinite number of diversions in the form of other online activities, family interruptions, full-time work obligations, and day-to-day responsibilities around the home (Roper, 2007). These elements tend to interfere with students’ feelings of connection with his/her program, the other students in his/her online course, and the faculty member. Specific types of faculty instruction and interaction can reduce the “perceived” distance that online students may feel in their online courses (Garrison, 2007).

**Top Ten Ways to Engage Online Students**

It is important to engage students during their very first interaction with your course, but it is even more critical to keep that engagement going throughout the duration of the learning experience. Below are ten recommendations for engaging students in online courses.

1. **Student Introductions** – This may seem like an obvious suggestion, yet we find that as students progress through their degree program, they reduce the information shared in their introduction. It is the responsibility of the faculty member to rejuvenate the introduction, asking questions that students will want to answer or that will instantly connect the student to the subject matter. Suggestions here include asking students to state a goal as it relates to the subject matter or conversely, stating their fear of the material so that the instructor can locate information to help make certain course concepts easier to understand.

2. **Webcam Instructor Introductions** – Instructor welcome videos are an important instructional tool available to faculty for free. Welcome videos allow instructors to present their digital personality, share their experience and passion for the subject matter, and outline expectations. This is a simple technique which reduces the “perceived distance” an online student may experience during the course. Most laptops come with integrated webcams, not necessitating an additional purchase for the hardware. Free software such as Windows Movie Maker and iMovie make this suggestion virtually free and easily reusable for future sections of a course.

3. **Google Alerts** – Set up Google Alerts that relate to each module in your course, and then let Google do the work for you! Google will email the faculty new information on those topics according to the options selected when establishing the alert. The faculty member can simply scan the article and post a link to the course. When students observe an immediate application of the course content, there is an increase in satisfaction levels with the course.

4. **Audacity** – Audacity is a free piece of software that allows faculty members to record voice presentations. The presentations can be exported as mp3’s and easily uploaded to an LMS. The key with this suggestion is brevity as the idea is to connect with students, not lecture to them. LMS’s also often have size limitations, so keeping the mp3 small is a good idea.

5. **RSS Feeds** – This is a similar concept as the Google Alert, but it gives you continuous updates from an entire website instead of just specific topics. iGoogle does an excellent job of managing RSS feeds. As educators, we highly recommend the New York Times: Education, Washington Post: Education, and NPR Topics: Education.

6. **Jing** – Jing is a wonderful tool for taking videos and screen shots of your computer. A fee-based version does exist, but we find that the free version exceeds our screen capturing needs. This
software is particularly vital for industries where demonstrations of computer software are essential.

7. **Wordle** – Wordle is a great tool for presenting themes from student submissions or module topics. Wordle is an example of a tool that creates word clouds, which are graphical representations of words. The clouds give greater prominence to words that appear more frequently in the source text. You can tweak your clouds with different fonts, layouts, and color schemes.

8. **Text-based Summary** – Text-based summaries are created using the announcement or discussion tools accessed through your learning management system, such as Angel, Blackboard, or eCollege. A weekly summary is a powerful learning tool, which allows instructors to recap themes presented in student submissions, ask additional questions that challenge perspectives, and transition to the next topic.

9. **Create Your Own Facebook** – Bonding with others is so much easier when you can connect a face to a name. This same concept also applies to the online environment. Ask students to post a picture to the discussion forum as well as upload it to the LMS. Students who are camera shy can create an avatar using free online software. The faculty member should lead the effort by having their picture already in the course when it opens to students.

10. **Voicethread** – Voicethread is a collaborative, multimedia slide show that allows students to interact with the presentation by leaving comments and feedback directly on the slides via audio, video, or text. Voicethread allows faculty to replicate the types of interaction that occur naturally in on-ground classrooms.

**Conclusion**

The presence, interaction, and engagement of faculty influence the sense of community, connection, and confidence students have of their learning experience (Heyman, 2010). It is possible to make enhancements to the online experience that do not cost a significant amount of time or money. Including our simple and effective solutions into your online classroom will increase the likelihood that students become actively involved in their courses, remain engaged in their program of choice, and continue with their degree to completion.

**References**


About the Presenters

Lauren Wright has over 15 years experience in instructional design, management, and leadership. She has designed, produced, and managed the administration of course development for graduate programs in Nursing, Allied Health, Psychology, MBA, Teacher Education, Law, Criminal Justice, and others at over six universities. She is currently a Program Development Manager with Deltak Innovation in Oakbrook, Illinois. Her main responsibilities include working with universities to transition their on-ground programs to the online environment. In addition to working with higher education, Lauren has worked in corporate learning and development where she designed curricula in many areas, from sales management, leadership, operations to new employee orientation. Lauren earned her Master of Arts in Counseling Psychology from the University of Denver in Denver, Colorado. She earned her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from the University of California, Irvine, in Irvine California. She is a recent graduate of the University of Wisconsin-Madison Professional Development Certificate Program in Distance Education.

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Courtney Moke has been a Program Development Manager with Deltak Innovation for over four years, focusing her efforts on quality course development and comprehensive faculty training for some of Deltak’s many premier partner schools. She guides a team that creates and maintains over 100 courses per year while serving as the lead faculty trainer for over 150 active instructors. Courtney’s undergraduate degree in Computer Information Systems is from the Kelley School of Business at Indiana University in Bloomington, Indiana. Her first master’s degree is in Instructional Systems Technology from the Indiana University School of Education. Courtney also holds a Master’s in Business Administration from Benedictine University in Lisle, Illinois. She served as a panelist at the 2011 IST Conference in February and teaches online courses at both the undergraduate and graduate level.

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