Maintaining Instructor-Presence in an Online or Blended Course

Did you know consistent interaction through **multiple channels** (announcements, emails, discussion forums, etc.) is more important than just one specific mode (Dixson, 2010)? Maintaining instructor-presence in an online course is critical to fostering an online community of learners. This teaching tip will discuss the role that **instructor presence** plays in building a community of online learners and technology tools that can be used to support instructor presence and instructor-student interaction. The information provided below is based on my research with Nate Turcotte, Clinical Assistant Professor at Florida Gulf Coast University.

What is Social Presence?

Learning is a socio-cultural process that involves interacting with others (Vygotsky, 1978), and although learning through interaction in an online format may seem different, it is of no exemption. It is not sufficient for instructors to log into a learning management system, assign grades, and consider that to be a successful online learning experience. In an online community, it is the members (including the instructor) to maintain a social presence (Lowenthal, 2010).

The ecosystem of online learning includes interaction with content, interaction with peers, and interaction with faculty (Horton, 2012). Building strong, respectful relationships and creating open communication lines with faculty has proven valuable to the well-developed course experience. Chickering and Gamson's (1987) framework identifies that students are more engaged in their learning when:

- Contact between faculty and the student is increased
- Students have the opportunity to work in cooperation
- Instruction encourages students to use active learning strategies
- Students receive timely feedback
- Instruction requires students to spend quality time on tasks
- High standards are set for student work
- Instruction addresses the diversity of learners and their needs

Learners want faculty who support and communicate with them (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Although Chickering and Gamson's (1987) framework was not originally targeted for online education, several of these principles can be applied to online learning settings to engage students. Research indicates that instructor presence has a positive impact on student learning, motivation, and engagement (Dixson, 2010; Glazier, 2016). Even more, thorough and timely feedback can increase an instructor's visibility can show that the instructor cares about their students' progress (Martin et al., 2018).

How Do I Maintain Social-Presence?

Here are some tips on how to maintain a social presence.

- Create an introduction video (e.g., using MediaSite recorder)
- Post (weekly) announcements, emails on BOLT
- Provide timely grading and student feedback via videos and commenting features available with specific tools on BOLT.

- Leverage new media and alternative sources of communications (i.e., Flipgrid, Voicethread, Slack)
- Create assignments with different forms of student-student and instructor-student interaction (i.e., presentations, discussion forums, team projects, symposiums)

Alternative Tools

Some examples of tools that support social presence:
- Slack
- YouTube
- Flip (formerly known as Flipgrid)
- Voicethread
- Google Docs
- Poll Everywhere
- Mentimeter
- Zoom

Digital technologies are expanding how online courses are being developed and taught, but at the end of the day students still want to feel cared for and valued. Learners want faculty who support and communicate with them (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). Students appreciate regular reminders as a communication strategy (Martin & Bollinger, 2018). It is thorough and timely feedback and communication that can increase visibility and make students feel like the instructor knows who they are and cares about their progress (Glazier, 2016; Martin et al., 2018). I have found that utilizing the above strategies has helped students understand that there is a "real" person behind the course that cares about them and wants them to succeed.

Sources:

Chickering, A. W., & Gamson, Z. F. (1987). Seven principles for good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE bulletin*, *3*, 7.

Dixson, M. D. (2012). Creating effective student engagement in online courses: What do students find engaging?. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, *10*(2), 1-13.

Glazier, R. A. (2016). Building rapport to improve retention and success in online classes. *Journal of Political Science Education*, *12*(4), 437-456. Horton, W. (2011). *E-learning by design*. John Wiley & Sons.

Lowenthal, P. R. (2010). Social presence. In *Social computing: Concepts, methodologies, tools, and applications* (pp. 129-136). IGI Global. Martin, F., & Bolliger, D. U. (2018). Engagement matters: Student perceptions on the importance of engagement strategies in the online learning environment. *Online Learning*, *22*(1), 205-222.

Martin, F., Wang, C., & Sadaf, A. (2018). Student perception of helpfulness of facilitation strategies that enhance instructo r presence, connectedness, engagement and learning in online courses. *The Internet and Higher Education*, *37*, 52-65.

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978) *Mind in society: The development of higher mental process*.