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Teaching Presence

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What is teaching presence?

The relationship between instructor and student is at the heart of the learning process. Instructional settings characterized by frequent and meaningful instructor-student interactions have consistently been found to support student achievement and learning satisfaction (Cornelius-White, 2007; Wit, Wheelless, & Allen, 2004).

With responsibilities ranging from the selection of appropriate instructional methods to fostering positive and supportive learning climates, the evidence that instructors play a critical and influential role in supporting student achievement is robust (Hattie, 2009; Nye, Konstantopoulous, & Hedges, 2004).

As education has increasingly moved online, however, many of the interactional affordances typically found in a traditional classroom have been displaced by new technologies or have been made impractical by geographic and temporal distances. In online learning, for example, instructor-student communication is primarily computer mediated, often involving asynchronous text-based exchanges, and thus lacks the physical nuances and immediacy of face-to-face interactions. These significant changes in instructor-student dynamics have prompted educators to call for increased research into the emerging roles and responsibilities of online instructors. From this research has emerged the concept of teaching presence, broadly characterized as the virtual “visibility” of an instructor in an online learning environment, an idea that has become the subject of significant scholarly attention in recent years (Baker, 2010). While teaching presence is still an emerging area of inquiry, and recommendations remain tentative, substantial progress has been made in conceptualizing and investigating the importance of establishing teaching presence in online learning (Swan, 2003).

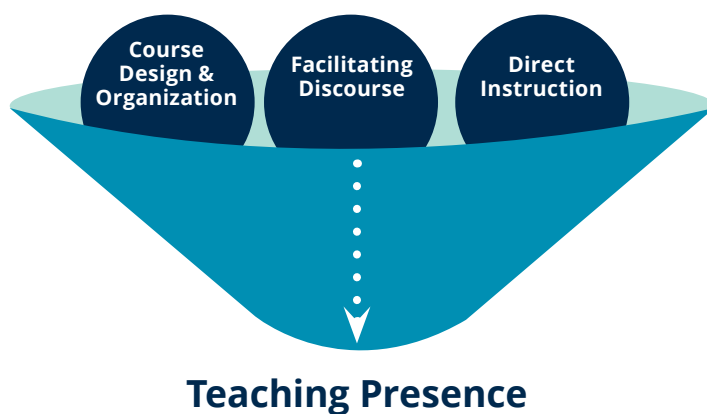
Teaching presence: identifying a framework

In an effort to promote best teaching practices, a number of empirically-informed guidelines have been proposed during the past several decades to formalize available research on teaching and learning (e.g., Chickering & Gamson, 1987). More recently, scholars have sought to develop updated models that capture the unique and novel features of learning in the online medium. One model that has generated significant interest from researchers of online learning is the Community of Inquiry (COI) framework proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Garrison, et al. contend that effective online learning/teaching is best understood in terms of the interrelationship of three types of presence: (1) cognitive presence, the ability of learners to construct meaning and build understanding; (2) social presence, the capacity of learners to present themselves as “real people” with individual characteristics; and (3) teaching presence, the design and facilitation of cognitive/social presences to achieve learning outcomes. The COI framework conceptualizes effective online learning as the result of appropriately designed and encouraged interactions between instructional content, students, and instructors (Swan, 2003). Most relevant for our purposes is the concept of teaching presence which has, to a significant extent, framed past and current research into the activities of successful online instructors.

Teaching presence is defined in the COI model as “the design, facilitation, and direction of [student] cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). More concretely, teaching presence consists of three discrete elements: instructional design and organization, facilitation of discourse, and direct instructional activities. It is claimed that teaching presence is the “binding element” that connects an online learning community together and makes possible

the cognitive and social activities required for effective online learning (Garrison, et al., 2000; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). A closer look at these elements of teaching presence reveal more detailed guidelines for online instructors.

Teaching presence begins prior to any interactions with students through the **design and organization** of an online course (Arbaugh, 2007). Decisions regarding course goals, timetables, and curricular materials reflect the instructor’s role as the primary designer and administrator of students’ learning experience (Anderson, et al., 2001). Successfully fulfilling this role—for instance, by making learning outcomes clear and ensuring a strong link between learning activities and assessments—supports students’ efforts to navigate a course and construct meaning from instructional content. Instructors also play a critical role in **facilitating discourse** among course participants. Learning outcomes are improved when students actively participate in collaborative dialogues with other participants (peers and teachers) through discussions that personalize, challenge, and expand on the topics covered in class. As a result, instructors have a primary role in promoting productive discourse by focusing class discussions, raising pertinent questions, finding areas of consensus, and moderating student participation (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). Finally, teaching presence depends on the effective and frequent use of **direct instruction**. Instructors engage in direct



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instruction when exercising scholarly leadership, through coherent content presentation and the injection of external resources/perspectives, and conducting evaluative activities, such as providing feedback or assessing student understanding (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). It should be noted that these interactions between teacher and student do not require synchronicity; in fact, research suggests that online courses employing an effective asynchronous approach often achieve greater student achievement than those mandating frequent synchronous interactions (Bernard, et al., 2004).

The construct of teaching presence as described by the COI framework provides an intuitive and explanatorily powerful framework for understanding the important roles of effective online instructors. For these reasons it has found widespread support among online educators and is arguably the most influential and widely used model for researching teaching online (Anderson, 2008). Accordingly, the COI framework has generated a significant scholarly literature among online learning researchers.

Research findings on teaching presence

The general literature consensus is that teaching presence is strongly predictive of several important variables believed to contribute to student learning (Garrison, 2007; Swan, 2003). Studies investigating the influence of teaching presence in online learning consistently report a significant positive relationship between COI teaching presence indicators (i.e., course design, facilitation, and direct instruction) and student perceptions of learning, motivation, and satisfaction (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Baker, 2010;

Russo & Benson, 2005; Shea, Pickett, & Pelz, 2003). Additionally, teaching presence has been found to be positively correlated with students' feelings of belonging to a learning community and can account for significant variance in student retention (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2010; Shea, et al., 2006).

Notably, research has also indicated that teaching presence is more predictive of student success in online learning than interactions with peers (Marks, Sibley, & Arbaugh, 2005; Means, Bakia, & Murphy, 2014). This finding has been attributed to the observation that a strong teaching presence, as evidenced by a robust course structure and active instructor leadership, is crucial for achieving deep and meaningful learning outcomes (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005). Conversely, online courses dominated by student interactions can easily devolve into exchanges of poorly-reasoned personal experiences and extended serial monologues (Angeli, Valanides, & Bonk, 2003).

While research on the importance of teaching presence is promising, we must remain cautious about overreaching in our conclusions. Current research is preliminary and largely based on self-report data utilizing student/instructor surveys. It thus lacks the experimental rigor to make any definitive causal claims about the impact of teaching presence on improving student learning (Rourke & Kanuka, 2009). That being said, recent preliminary research explicitly investigating the link between teaching presence and objective learning outcomes (i.e., course grades) has been encouraging (Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010).

Establishing an effective teaching presence

Although available research provides only provisional guidance, the importance of the three elements of teaching presence are corroborated by surveys of experienced online students and teachers (Kupczynski, Ice, Wiesenmayer, & McCluskey, 2010; Shea, et al. 2003; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). In addition, many of the specific guidelines associated with teaching presence—e.g., providing

students with clear goals, frequent feedback, and strong direct instruction—are well-supported by available empirical research (Hattie, 2009).

Below we outline a number of techniques for creating and maintaining an effective online teaching presence utilizing the COI framework. These suggestions have been adapted from a number of sources (Anderson, et al., 2001; Baker, 2010; Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008).

Course Design/Organization

- Provide clear course learning goals.
- Share a course overview and welcome message
- Hold initial face-to-face or synchronous meeting to introduce teacher and course.
- Ensure instructions for completing course activities and using required technology are clear.
- Set expectations for student participation and activity in the course.
- Communicate assignment deadlines and give frequent reminders as deadlines approach.
- Provide engaging, relevant, and appropriate active learning opportunities.
- Design assessments that are congruent with learning goals.
- Communicate expectations for teacher participation (e.g., extent of teacher involvement in class discussions and email response times).
- Present content in a conversational rather than academic style.

Facilitating Discourse

- Begin course with a trust building conversation (e.g., introductions and icebreakers).
- Provide clear discussion participation requirements (length, content expectations, netiquette, and timeliness).
- Foster fruitful discussions through engaging/open-ended questions.
- Challenge and test student ideas (ask for justification/rationale).
- Monitor discussion to ensure productive dialogue and shape direction as necessary.
- Model appropriate contributions.
- Focus on student creating meaning and confirming understanding.
- Encourage “thinking out loud” and openness for all ideas.
- Identify areas of agreement/disagreement.
- Reinforce and encourage participation (draw in less active participants and temper more active posters).
- Find consensus/agreement; summarize class discussions
- Share personal meaning/experiences.

Direct Instruction

- Offer specific ideas/share expert and scholarly knowledge.
- Help students correct misconceptions/diagnose understanding.
- Suggest new resources/content; inject knowledge from outside resources.
- Connect ideas (analogies, related topics) and make abstract concepts concrete.
- Provide personal anecdotes and commentary on teacher’s own efforts to master material.
- Provide frequent feedback and evaluation guidance (particularly explanatory feedback—expansion of ideas/different explanation).
- Present content in effective and focused manner.
- Raise questions that lead to reflection and cognitive dissonance.
- Scaffold student understanding as necessary.
- Annotate/comment on assigned scholarly work to personalize and add interest.

Where can I learn more about teaching presence?

An important starting point for reading about the teaching presence framework discussed in this paper is the influential article by Anderson, et al. (2001). For an accessible and helpful discussion of specific behaviors that online teachers can adopt to promote teaching presence, the book chapter by Anderson is recommended (2008). Finally, for a concise and informative summary of the history and current state of the teaching presence literature, the article by Baker (2010) is particularly helpful.

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