Chapter 1
Building Teaching Presence in Online Classes

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ABSTRACT

In their framework outlining educational experiences for online students, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) identify and explain the critical elements of a Community of Inquiry that support instruction and learning. The elements include: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. While an online educational experience is impacted by the interplay of all three presences, new online teachers may struggle with developing a teaching presence since their own educational experiences as students may be very different from the ones they encounter as online instructors (Lortie, 1975). In this book chapter, the importance of teaching presence will be discussed. Strategies for developing online teacher presence will be examined and technologies for fostering teacher presence will be outlined. The chapter concludes with broad design principles that apply to the construction of online learning environments that foster a strong teacher presence.

INTRODUCTION

Distance learning is exploding in higher education. In their report tracking online education in the United States, Allen and Seaman (2014) found that of the more than 21 million students enrolled in degree granting institutions of higher education, one third had taken at least one online class during their collegiate experience. Examining online enrollments since 2002, the researchers found that the online student population has grown at “a compound annual growth rate of 16.1 percent” despite collegiate populations only increasing at an annual rate of 2.5 percent over that time period (Allen & Seaman, 2014, p. 15). But why are more students enrolling in online classes? In a 2011 survey of university leaders, respondents felt that most students enrolled in online classes because the courses offered greater flexibility in scheduling than face-to-face classes would (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Despite the flexibility, many students struggle in online classes. Xu and Jaggars (2013) examined 500,000 courses taken by over 40,000 community and technical college students in Washington State. The researchers studied
students’ success in online courses relative to their ability to do so in face-to-face courses. Looking at different sub-groups of students based on academic preparedness, age, gender, race and socioeconomic status, the study found that every sub-group performed significantly better in their face-to-face courses than their online ones. While a number of factors may contribute to a student’s success in an online class, instructors have little control over the vast majority of them. For instance, Wojciechowski and Palmer (2005) found that a student’s GPA, reading ability and previous online course experience were strong predictors of success in online classes. Although these student characteristics may play a role in students’ success in online classes, various studies have shown that instructor involvement can positively impact online students’ satisfaction and perceived learning (Fredricksen, et al, 2000; Shea, et al, 2002).

In this chapter, the role of teaching presence in online classes will be examined. The construct of “teaching presence” was first introduced as part of Garrison, Anderson and Archer’s Community of Inquiry framework (2000). The chapter begins with an overview of the Community of Inquiry framework before focusing specifically on teaching presence and how it can be fostered in online classes. The chapter will also discuss some of the challenges that online instructors face when teaching online classes and discuss how face-to-face instruction can provide some guidance for developing teaching presence online. Drawing on Chickering and Gamson’s seven principles of quality undergraduate education (1987), the chapter will outline how these principles which were originally developed for face-to-face instruction can be fostered in online learning environments. Strategies for developing online teacher presence will be examined and different technologies for fostering teacher presence will be outlined. The chapter concludes with recommendations that support the facilitation of online learning environments that foster a strong teacher presence.

BACKGROUND

In their examination of computer-based conferencing in higher education, Garrison, Archer and Anderson (2000) introduced the Community of Inquiry framework as way to describe a “worthwhile educational experience” for students. The framework involves three overlapping “presences” which help to describe the overall learning activities with which students and instructors must engage. The framework includes: social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence. Social presence in an online class helps to develop the affective dimensions of learning and foster interpersonal relationships between a student and their peers. Developing social presence helps a student feel more connected in online classes and more open to express their ideas and collaborate with their peers. Social presence helps to form a risk-free classroom where students can share their knowledge, experience and emotions and work together to build a cohesive learning community (Dikkers, Whiteside & Lewis, 2013). In their research examining social presence in online classes, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that students who felt more socially connected in their online classes had higher rates of satisfaction and perceived learning than students who did not.

Cognitive presence involves students engaging in critical discourse of course content and analyzing assigned material to construct understanding and meaning. While social presence relates to affective dimensions and the overall cohesion of the classroom community, cognitive presence focuses on the critical thinking processes with which students must engage to learn in an online community. Garrison and Archer (2010) introduced the construct of “practical inquiry” where students cycle through phases