Chapter 3

Emphasizing Instructor Presence in Digital Learning Environments

Rachael Olubukola Afolabi
Carlow University, USA

ABSTRACT

The role of the instructor in any learning environment is a good motivator for students. It is important to understand how the instructor’s position can be viewed in the online learning environment. The principal role of the instructor in any learning environment is to assist students in making connections and identifying significance through an educational process. This chapter, examined from an instructional designer and instructor’s point of view, sets out to explore the effectiveness of the online teaching presence as an adequate investment of time for the student’s benefit.

INTRODUCTION

Teaching online has evolved through a myriad of structures without following a particular set of standards in course structure or development. The expectations of traditional teaching is defined and understood when a student comes into a pre-set venue at a pre-set time to listen and learn from an instructor who gives a lecture on a particular topic in a field of study usually in a degree track. With online teaching, several institutions have adopted the “self-paced” and/or an asynchronous, student-centered education model. While the asynchronous method has proven successful in many online learning environments, there is a gap in the instructor and or student relationship and mentorship that learning should provide.

Until recently there have not been a set standards set up for the purposes of teaching online. The International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL) formerly known as the North American Council for Online Learning, have established themselves as essential resources for educators by compiling research, advocating for positive policy changes and helping to create effective standards. iNACOL designed a National Standards for Quality Online Teaching to provide states, districts, online
programs, and other organizations with a set of quality guidelines for online teaching and instructional design (Kennedy & Archambault, 2012). The initiative began with a thorough literature review of existing online teaching quality standards, a cross-reference of standards, followed by a survey of iNACOL members and experts to ensure the efficiency of the standards adopted.

Part of the results that yielded from this survey revealed that online technologies for learning can provide active learning for students; however, using the technology alone is not enough to foster learning. It is important that online instructors redefine the methods utilized in the traditional classroom by enhancing existing pedagogical practices within a technology based environment.

One of the “seven principles” for good practice in undergraduate education which was first established in 1987 by the American Association for Higher Education identifies one of its components as “encourage student-faculty contact” (Hudgins, Orellana & Simonson, 2009). While these principles were designed and formed as a foundation for the traditional classroom, they are an important consideration of instructor practice in the online classroom.

The role of the instructor in any learning environment is a good place to start and align how those positions can translate into the online learning environment. The principal role of the instructor in any learning environment is to assist students in making connections and identifying the significance through an educational process. According to Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer in Preisman (2014), teaching presence consists of three critical roles for the instructor which are as follows:

1. The first responsibility is the designing and organization of the learning experience, which takes place prior to and during the run of the course.
2. Secondly, instructors are responsible for the creating, implementing, and the monitoring of activities that encourage communication and interaction between the students, teachers, and content resources.
3. Finally, instructors must contribute academic knowledge and relevant experiences through forms of direct instruction.

The above roles of the online instructor align back to these three positions. This chapter, examined from an instructional designer and instructor’s point of view, sets out to explore the effectiveness of the online teaching presence as an adequate investment of time for the student’s benefit. The motivation behind this chapter arises from observations from an instructional designer while working with faculty to create online courses. The perspective and perceived notion of several instructors is that online learning is more demanding and time consuming than face-to-face instruction (Bollinger & Waslik, 2009; Harber & Mills; 2008, Worley & Tesdell, 2009). This usually poses a challenge for instructional designers to decide on the best use of educational technology and instructional choices not only to meet the student learning outcomes, but also to be a smart investment of the instructor’s time.

‘Technology-mediated learning’ is essential for online instruction; however, the challenges associated with the organizing and developing of online courses is forming the sensation of a “real-life” experience in the digital classroom. Hansen & Bryant (2005), argue that humanizing the online learning environment will increase the student’s comfort level, and most significantly put a form of reduction within the psychological path or distance between the instructors and students. In essence, creating an environment that has an almost immediate response that can facilitate students’ investment within the learning process.