Chapter 4
“I’m Here for You”:
Instructor Presence Online

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ABSTRACT
The author examines instructor presence by considering its historical role, the many important tasks that instruction presence accomplishes, and many ways instructional presence can be shown in online learning. Instructor presence has historically fulfilled four key functions: guidance, socialization, motivation, and coordination. Tasks that instructor presence can help with include welcoming and orienting learners, providing grades and explanations for grades, communicating course and instructor expectations and feedback on learner work, offering follow-up questions and comments, and moderating discussions. Seven techniques suggested to provide a sense of instructor presence include scheduling predetermined, regular appearances online, providing quick responses to comments and assignments, making occasional instructor posts throughout course discussions, offering periodic, brief, personal comments, providing special periods of instructor access, simulating presence by means of prerecorded audio or video clips and using instructor representatives.

INTRODUCTION
Everyone who has attended K-12, higher education, or training classes has probably been in a situation in which the class is about to begin, everyone is seated…and then the unexpected happens: the instructor never arrives. Initially, most people will wait politely, assuming the instructor was delayed, or is sick and sending a replacement, or that someone will come tell them what is going on. However, once it becomes apparent that the instructor isn’t coming, confusion and indecision can set in. The students begin to wonder what they should do. Leave? Wait longer? Call someone? Look in other classrooms to see if the class is meeting somewhere else? Sit and read the next assignment in the textbook? Everyone in class has a different idea of what to do.

What began as a well-planned and carefully orchestrated meeting that brings together dozens of people with a common purpose quickly degenerates into various factions, each ready to choose a different course
of action. This perhaps familiar illustration explains what can happen in an online class if there is a perception that the instructor is absent. How does an online instructor help learners dispersed across great distances and varied settings feel like the instructor is right there with them as they learn and interact?

This chapter will examine the background and influence of instructor presence on online learning. The concept of instructor presence in e-learning actually encompasses a number of concepts, with each having an impact upon learners, influencing their satisfaction with and academic success in the online courses. This chapter will also consider why instructor presence is important to e-learning and what forms it ought to take. It will explain that research and experience have revealed the following:

- Instructor presence has always been important to e-learning.
- Instructor presence fulfills important tasks in e-learning.
- Instructor presence can be used in different ways to help e-learning.

**INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE HAS ALWAYS BEEN IMPORTANT TO E-LEARNING**

After the Internet became widely used by more segments of society in the 1990’s, all kinds of communication, transactions, and business processes migrated to this new platform. Those in the fields of education and training looked for ways to capitalize on this new, worldwide network. Many people designing early online learning projects envisioned that once instructional materials, tutorials, and Web-based training courses and tools were online, learners would just access the information and teach themselves (Beer, 2000; Rosenberg, 2001). This thinking arose from the assumption that most online learners would be adults learning job skills on their own time. Since adult learning theory said adults want autonomy in their learning (Rovai, Ponton, & Baker, 2008), and Deci & Ryan’s (2000) Self Determination Theory of learning motivation also advocated learner autonomy, the move toward self-study seemed logical.

However, early Internet learning pioneers discovered that learners using computer-mediated communication have very different needs from learners in a face-to-face classroom (Allen, 2003; Beer, 2000; Chute, Thompson, & Hancock, 1999). Online learners were not content with self-directed learning. Instead, online learners needed and expected to be guided through the strange new world of e-learning (Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Sorensen, 2004). This unexpected need for help—combined with other obstacles such as technical malfunctions led to high drop-out rates in e-learning courses (Barrett, 2009; Neuhouser, Bender, & Stromberg, 2000; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). Research revealed that many e-learners felt isolated, disconnected, and not part of an organized class (Borup, West & Graham, 2011; Russo & Benson, 2005; Seaton & Schwier, 2014). In online classes with an instructor learners associated their satisfaction with their interactions with the instructor (Borup, West, & Graham, 2011).

Since removing the instructor altogether online didn’t seem to work, e-learning researchers and course designers began exploring what role the instructor would take in online learning (Dubuclet, 2008). Studies (Bonk, Wisher, & Lee, 2004; Lehman & Conceição, 2010; Seaton & Schwier, 2014) eventually revealed that online learners look to instructors to provide four key functions:

- Guidance
- Socialization
- Motivation
- Coordination
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