

Book Review

Creating Teacher Immediacy in Online Learning Environments

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The development and improvement of digital technologies provides a wide array of options for educational institutions considering online education. This is because online courses are convenient and flexible, so that students can set their learning goals, and/or plan their own self-paced learning strategy. In addition, online courses no longer merely provide identical versions of classroom instruction. Online learning environments benefit particularly from the use of technology, and also integrated media and tools in teaching, for instance learning management systems, video lectures, interactive tutorials, and discussion boards (Ortagus, 2017). Today, more and more students prefer to connect with teachers and peers through virtual links rather than face to face, which means learners are easily engaged in mediated interactions via various technologies in diverse contexts. To keep up with this trend, educational institutions have the responsibility for delivering quality online courses and programs (Gazza & Matthias, 2016).

This book, “*Creating Teacher Immediacy in Online Learning Environments*”, composed of 15 chapters, is edited to illustrate that both communication and interaction are the core of successful web-based classrooms, and explores how to create teacher immediacy in online learning environments through feedback. In addition to focusing on teachers’ soft skills, the authors of the various chapters

also introduce innovative methods for building authentic as well as personalized online learning experiences. Hence, the target audience for this book comprises educators, researchers, course designers, teachers, and learners who are interested in online learning environments.

Chapter 1 explores the role of teaching presence in online classes, which starts with an overview of the community of inquiry framework (social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence) before discussing the teaching presence and how to foster it in online classes. In addition, the seven principles for good instructional practices in undergraduate education proposed by Chickering & Gamson (1987) is introduced. These principles could be regarded as a framework for fostering online teacher presence, although they were initially adopted for face-to-face instruction. However, new online teachers may face some challenges, so the author suggests that instructors need to be “VOCAL – Visible, Organized, Compassionate, Analytical and a Leader-by-example.

As rapidly developing innovative technologies have integrated into the instructional environment, some people have criticized that teachers are no longer needed. In fact, teachers are irreplaceable despite the explosion of new educational technologies. Therefore, Chapter 2 discusses the needs for online instructor immediacy and authenticity. This chapter’s author also mentions Chickering’s theory, and illustrates that instructor immediacy is reflected through good practice within any style of instructional environment. It is worth noting that student’s online learning success is also related to interactive activities, instructor’s philosophical belief systems, and the teacher’s understanding of cognitive vulnerability.

Chapter 3 starts from the perspective of instructional designers and instructor, discussing the effectiveness of online teaching presence as an adequate investment of time for the student’s benefit. This chapter reveals that it may be hard for instructional designers to determine the best use of educational technology and instructional choices for students’ learning outcomes. It is worth noting that most students prefer to have a personal connection with their instructor so that they become more engaged in learning. Thus, effective interaction can help students reflect on their class experience and bring them back to the classroom to link these experiences together. As some instructors think that online learning is more demanding and time consuming than traditional teaching, it is suggested that teachers should spend time exploring the factors that truly influence students’ participation in classes.

The importance of instructor presence in online learning environments is the focus of Chapter 4. Online learners expect instructors to provide four key functions: guidance, socialization, motivation and coordination. To elaborate on these, consider that new online learners may not know what to do, so instructors should guide them to explain information and activities, answer questions, and provide feedback. In regard to guidance, owing to the restriction of time and space, social connection with learners and between learners is a must, such as friendly banter in discussion, developing respect and trust as well as greetings and concern. Moreover, in order to facilitate learners’ motivation and engagement, instructors need to provide some additional incentives or programs to increase their learning interest. Last but not least, in an online course, instructors play an important role to coordinate learners’ opinions during discussions and team interactions. Further, they share knowledge and experiences to coordinate learners’ efforts to find learning information, and to recommend appropriate online tools to promote students’ learning outcomes. In addition, instructors also have to design orientation for learners and provide clear explanations about how to get good grades for learners to accommodate to the online surroundings.

Chapter 5 reflects that interactivity and immediacy can become online academic program goals. Some may criticize that teachers waste a lot of time to solve curricular issues of online programs instead of pedagogical issues for the courses that they teach. Therefore, it is necessary to help faculty members overcome technological problems so that they can concentrate on teaching events. This chapter first introduces the value of using interactivity/immediacy in the design of extended online academic learning programs. Then, instructional design best practices for interactivity in higher education are presented with explanations of how interactivity supports learner outcomes, especially focusing on recommendations for quality feedback in online courses. Finally, the author shows the

design of different levels of academic programs for different educational background students, such as undergraduate, master's, doctoral, and specialized programs including teacher education, certificate training, and professional development.

Instructors can create social presence via online videos, further foster instructor immediacy, and decrease the social distance in an online course. In Chapter 6, qualitative interview data were collected from 13 students enrolled in master's programs at Columbia University School of Professional Studies. The findings from the participants' perspective demonstrate that the best quality videos should include trustworthiness (social context and nonverbal communication, institutional branding, production values), personalization (humor, colloquial language), and feedback.

Chapter 7 gives an overview of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) theory, which has been widely used to guide online courses. The CoI framework identifies three principle elements to build a successful online learning community, including social, cognitive, and teaching presences. This chapter mentions that teaching presence has two dimensions: instructional design and organization. The authors offer seven strategies, illustrate how these strategies are conducted and how technology was used to augment the implementation. Moreover, six directed facilitation strategies are presented in the example course to promote social and cognitive presence. After reading this chapter, one can see that these strategies can be applied to any online course.

Today, higher education institutions start to adopt online education to share educational knowledge, either asynchronously or synchronously, which can cross geographic regions. In Chapter 8, the use of synchronous and asynchronous tools in online learning for the English-speaking Caribbean is introduced, with demonstrations of both. Asynchronous learning takes place virtually, but since e-tutors and students may not be online at the same time, they can interact via asynchronous activities such as discussion through the online platform, by email or text messages. Synchronous occurs virtually in real-time, which allows for video, audio, and web-conferencing, creates technological immediacy, and even promotes teacher presence. Both synchronous and asynchronous tools have plenty of functions to facilitate student learning, among which e-tutor presence is a meaningful learning effect that is contributing to the instructor understanding students' learning processes, comprehension levels and critical thinking skill development.

Chapter 9 outlines how the most popular social networking sites such as Facebook, are used as teaching tools to promote students' learning. The rapid technology developments may lead teachers to feel stressed and face challenges of adjusting their teaching style to satisfy student's preferences. If necessary, social networking technology may also be used to engage students. For instance, through functions such as online communication, discussion, and provision of instant feedback, an interactive learning community can be built on the principle of mutual influence and mutual benefit.

The School of Professional Studies (SPS) at Columbia University is used as a model in Chapter 10 to find the best way to enhance and maintain a strong instructor presence for online course support. The SPS model makes use of weekly live sessions. In order to ensure that online interactivity is well adopted, training, coaching, and a constant feedback system were implemented. During live sessions, students have the opportunity to interact with teachers and peers via technology tools, such as video conferencing, instant chat, online polling, and breakout team work.

Chapter 11 mainly focuses on the impact of online education on student experiences and learning outcomes through a case study. There still remain some challenges in an online learning environment, such as: 1. providing formative feedback on assessment in the online environment; 2. encouraging student self-assessment to enhance learner specific student-teacher interaction in the online environment; and 3. using rubrics. In order to address these problems, the author proposes strategies that include effective uses of rubrics and encouraging self-assessment to assist student-teacher interaction that relates to personal student learning requirements. These further show the effect of improving teacher interaction and decreasing the physical and psychological distance of online learning.

In recent years, online courses have not only gained popularity, but also attracted more learners to enroll in these courses. However, the learning process may be affected by isolation, poor instructor feedback or additional factors. Most online courses rely on text-based feedback and communication, so it seems hard to establish instructor presence. Chapter 12 explores the ways of using audio and video feedback to increase instructor presence in asynchronous online courses. Findings indicate that both audio and video feedback can strengthen the instructor's ability to affect learning and generate more personalized online community interactions.

Chapter 13 introduces Macromedia Director-MX Lesson Development system (MAD-LED Model) to design and develop animation utilizing the text, video, audio, as well as graphics in a real-time environment. It seems to be a user-friendly teaching aid into which instructors or designers can input the relevant learning resources and create a practical lesson. The ways of using effective learning materials and interactively presenting them can take into consideration how to facilitate teaching-learning information mobility via online learning methods.

The popularity of Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) has impacted traditional teaching pedagogy and reshaped online teaching and learning practices, thus it is important to know students' perceptions of the teacher's role in MOOCs. In Chapter 14, the authors adopted Berge's model of the online instructors' roles, including four dimensions: pedagogical, managerial, social, and technical to explore how instructors fulfill their roles to foster the core value of MOOCs. It is found that the pedagogical dimension can motivate students to relate the learning with the discipline and facilitate students' interaction with teachers and peers. Managerial dimension can offer students clear instructions, and assists them to plan and arrange course activities proactively. Social dimension can provide a role model for students with professional skills and course facilitation performance, and motivate students to create an affective bond with the online learning community. In terms of technical dimension, it can guide students to a technical support team for solving basic technical problems.

Lastly, Chapter 15 first reviews the impact of game-like environments for learning, and then covers teachers' perspectives from different fields and different educational levels. It is found that the importance of teacher immediacy exists in every element in a teacher-free gaming environment. Besides that, cooperation with partners at varying skill levels may yield some benefit in course design. Finally, designers have to figure out how to adopt what kind of theories in game design, pedagogy, and cognition to create a satisfactory virtual learning environment.

One weakness in terms of the book's structure is the lack of theories. As we know, teacher presence and teacher immediacy are both important in traditional and online learning environments. However, the book mentions only a few theories such as Cognitive Vulnerability Theory and Chickering and Gamson's principle. Therefore, it is suggested that the authors of more of the chapters could provide relevant theories related to teacher immediacy, providing definition as well as explanation. Another weakness is that the theories currently presented in this book seems to have low correlation with teacher immediacy. In our opinion, theory need not be formal or complex, but it should clearly define the research topic that the author is exploring. Consequently, the book could present adequate theories related to its topic, so that readers could consider and further select which theory is appropriate to integrate in their online course without trial and error.

The book's subject is of obvious importance in online education environments, and it is a useful complement to promote human interaction in teaching and learning. A key strength of the book is its coherent approach and that it is easy to read. After reading this book, we realized that neither Facebook, nor many media or online platforms were built for educational purposes; these technology tools should be regarded as a means of implementing learning strategies with appropriate complementary approaches and measures to facilitate students' learning motivation and performance. Therefore, instructor immediacy and student interactivity are the most crucial elements of online courses. All in all, we should create, build, or continue expanding online education programs with technologies that are best suited to our institutions, faculty, and above all, our students.

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