

## Teaching strategies to promote immediacy in online graduate courses

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### Abstract

The present study is the result of the research question: How do teachers promote immediacy through interaction with their students in online graduate courses? Research was carried out at Tecnológico de Monterrey, a Mexican private university that offers online courses. The research methodology employed a qualitative approach of virtual ethnography, which entails non-participative observation and interviews with head professors and teaching assistants with the purpose of exploring the manner in which teachers foster immediacy in the discussion forums of online courses. The findings are organized into three main categories: instructional design, forms of communication and teaching strategies promoting immediacy, which show the manner in which teachers use immediacy when interacting with their students; immediacy that was also found in the administrative and academic forums of the online courses researched.

**Keywords:** immediacy; interaction; instructional communication; online teacher; online course; social presence

### Introduction

Immediacy first appeared in the “face-to-face” educational modality. Mehrabian (1967a) defined it as the degree in which communication behaviors facilitate physical or psychological closeness in interpersonal communication. Gorham (1988) broadened this definition to include any verbal interaction that increased the psychological closeness between teachers and students. This concept includes communication behaviors reducing the perceived distance between people (Thweatt & McCroskey, 1996). If the student manages to feel psychologically close to his or her teacher, this translates into teacher-student immediacy.

The immediacy phenomenon has been extensively studied in the face-to-face educational modality in which it originated (Andersen, 1979; Gorham, 1988; Plax, Kearney, McCroskey & Richmond, 1986; Richmond, Gorham & McCroskey, 1987). However, there is scarce research on how the teacher-student immediacy manifests itself in online courses. In Latin America, distance education has been developing only since the last decade, and because of that, immediacy in this modality and educational context has not been a subject researched enough. This situation is why further in-depth research is needed on this topic.

This study attempts to investigate the manner in which some distance education teachers achieve immediacy or psychological closeness to their students, by trying to answer the following question: *How do teachers promote immediacy through interaction with their students in online graduate courses?*

In light of how distance education using the Internet has become commonplace as an educational modality for universities, there is a growing need to investigate and analyze the online learning experience (Dennen, Darabi & Smith, 2007).

## Theoretical references

Interaction is at the heart of the distance learning experience (Moore, 1989). The Transactional Distance (TD) theory is one of the founding theories of distance education, which originated from a doctoral research in which instructor and student were physically apart (Moore & Kearsley, 1996). The transactional distance was conceived as a function of the student's dialog, structure and autonomy. Moore (1989) proposed that distance was a pedagogical phenomenon rather than a function of geographical separation, a phenomenon that exists in classes from both face-to-face and distance modalities.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) point out that the interaction between teachers and students is an important aspect of learning in both face-to-face and distance modalities. However, the need to identify critical factors related to this type of interaction in the distance modality, given the physical distance and the communication signals between student and teacher, has turned particularly relevant in a technology-mediated environment (Moore, 1991).

According to Ghamdi, Samarji and Watt (2016)

the TD theory is closely related to the concept of teacher immediacy because it explores the level of dialogue between the teacher and the student. In other words, the theory focuses on the social presence between the teacher and the student which is the core focus of teacher immediacy (pp. 18–19).

In general terms, learning interaction is considered a reciprocal event between the student and a part of the learning environment that brings the student closer to achieve an educational goal (Wagner, 1994). Instructor-student interactions can be those that quickly come to mind, and have been the most important in relation to the students' perception of learning (Marks, Sibley & Arbaugh, 2005).

According to Anderson (2002), it is not surprising that elements of the teacher-student interaction are frequently examined and discussed in distance learning literature. There have been research attempts to discover and document better practices for distance teachers to face and to solve the potential problems related to student's learning, fatigue, failing or dissatisfaction (Dennen, Darabi & Smith, 2007).

Woods and Baker (2004) add that, when interaction is encouraged, it leads students to positive communication behaviors, like immediacy or psychological closeness with their teacher, social presence and a feeling of community inside the online classroom.

Mehrabian (1967b), widely considered the creator of immediacy theory, defines it as the degree in which select communication behaviors improve physical or psychological closeness in interpersonal communication. It can have verbal and non-verbal forms. Non-verbal forms refer to psychological closeness through physical communication behaviors, like face expressions, visual contact, posture, proximity, and touch, on the other hand, verbal forms refer to a sense of psychological closeness created through a choice of words. For example, using the word "us" promotes a deeper closeness in relationships and is considered more immediate than "you and me" (Woods & Baker, 2004). In an online modality, this is achieved by the word selection of written messages found in emails and work and discussion forums. Also the quickness of teacher's response to students through the various electronic communication means contribute to creating a sense of "online" closeness between the students and the teacher regardless of the many miles that might be separating them (Ghamdi, Samarji & Watt, 2016, p.18).

Although immediacy was originally developed within the context of interpersonal communication, it has been used in instructional communication research for the last two decades. However, thanks to the rapid spread of the Internet as a communication tool and as an important means of distance

education, interpersonal communication has been emphasized in this learning environment. While the concept may not be necessarily called by name, there is a definite conceptual coincidence between observations of traditional immediacy resulting in behavior change and the discussion of online interpersonal communication dynamics (Woods & Baker, 2004).

According to Hutchins (2003), immediacy through verbal interaction includes the use of humor, frequent use of the student's name, motivating discussions and following up on the comments started by students in order to promote a sustained contact with them, as well as sharing personal examples. Ghamdi, Samarji and Watt (2016) mentioned in their study some verbal teacher immediacy behaviors in online teaching and learning environments as initiating discussion (story), asking questions (Does anyone have answer the question?), using humor (funny story or funny photos), using self-disclosure (In the last weekend, I watched this movie at the cinema), addressing students by name (Please Adam can you. . .), and using inclusive pronouns (you, your, we, our).

The first immediacy research on face-to-face modality (Andersen, 1979; Andersen, Norton & Nussbaum, 1981; Andersen & Withrow, 1981) studied the teacher's non-verbal immediacy as a potential predictor of instructional effectiveness; it concluded that perceptions of closeness were highly correlated with favorable attitudes from students. Teachers showing proximity behaviors toward students were considered as more positive and effective, which in turn increased their esteem toward the instructor and the course itself. These studies hinted at the expressiveness of the concept as a potentially meaningful factor to improve instructional effectiveness. According to Ghamdi, Samarji and Watt (2016) there are non-verbal teacher immediacy behaviors in an online education as smiling (happy face emoticon), monotone voice (italics or caps: WELL or GOOD), vocal expressions (TODAY), gestures (using emoticons), vocalization (interjections in online immediacy), animated moves (emoticons with movement).

Both in the face-to-face and online modalities exists a scaffolding, a metaphor coined by Wood, Bruner and Ross (1976), based on Vygotsky's idea of the zone of proximal development. It is used to explain the tutorial role of support or establishment of cognitive bridges between teacher and students, which involves the interaction between an expert or more experienced individual, the teacher, and a novice or less experienced individual, the student. The primary role of the teacher is to act as a mediator or intermediary between the learning contents and the constructivist activity of the students to assimilate them. Vygotsky's theory highlights the importance of a socio-emotional link between teacher and student, and the closer this relationship is, this link could enhance the student's engagement in the teaching-learning process with his or her teacher. Immediacy is based on a theory of approach-avoidance and is a construct based on affection (Christophel, 1990).

## Methodology

For this study it was decided to use the qualitative research approach of netnography or virtual ethnography; this involved extensive observation of the natural environment of the online courses' discussion forums where the teacher-student interactions took place, as well as interviewing the participant teachers. This approach was chosen as it was considered that online communication and interaction could provide immediacy and access to emotional expression. Hine (2000) notes that virtual ethnography involves studying online environments and argues that the agent of change is not the technology itself, but the uses and construction of sense around it. Ardévol, Bertrán, Callén and Pérez (2003) called 'virtual ethnography' an observation work performed through a computer screen, with the objective of showing how social life is organized, based on the interaction and communication facilitated by a computer.

### Context and participants

The study was carried out at Tecnológico de Monterrey, a private institution of higher education in Mexico, which offers online graduate programs using the Blackboard technology platform. Three graduate programs from different academic areas were selected. From these, two online courses from each area were chosen in conjunction with the director of each program, according to the disposition and consent from the head professors and teaching assistants to grant access to the courses and observation of their discussion forums, as well as to being interviewed. See Table 1.

**Table 1: Distribution by program, course and participant teachers**

| University   | Graduates Programs from each academic area | Academic term          | Observed courses (discussion forums) | Head professors   | Teaching Assistants   |
|--|--|------------------------|--------------------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|
| Tecnológico de Monterrey with a multi-campus system spanning 28 cities | Education                                  | Semester               | 2                                    | 2                 | 2                     |
|  | Humanities                                 | Semester               | 2                                    | 2                 | 3                     |
|  | 3. Administration                          | Semester/<br>Trimester | 2                                    | 2                 | 2                     |
| <b>Total</b>   | 3 Programs                                 |                        | 6 courses                            | 6 head professors | 7 teaching assistants |

Six head professors and seven teaching assistants participated in this study, giving their full consent for their courses to be observed, as well as to being interviewed. A head professor is a teacher with a doctorate degree, expert in the course's academic area, who is the author of the contents and the designer of the course; his or her responsibility is to administrate and monitor the development of the course, as well as to answer conceptual questions from the students. A teaching assistant (TA) is a teacher with a graduate degree who collaborates with the head professor to guide and track the performance of the students, provides feedback on their homework, answers questions and assesses their work.

### Instruments

The instruments used were the non-participant observation of asynchronous discussion forums of the six courses where the teacher-student interaction took place, as well as conducting semi-structured interviews with the head professors and teaching assistants of each course.

The interviews with the head professors explored the types of teaching and communication strategies used, as well as their thoughts regarding the instructional design of the courses to facilitate the teacher-student interaction and immediacy.

The interviews with the teaching assistants inquired on the teacher-student communication strategies used, the feedback methods, the dynamics to facilitate discussions and the collaborative work in the work forums.

For non-participant observation, a guide following the recommendations of Merriam (2009) was designed. Interactions and notes (memos) were tracked and recorded in a log during observation. These observations were carried out using the observation guide since the first days of the semester, in the period corresponding to January-June of 2010. During this observation period, we identified the manner in which each head professor configured their discussion forum, and at the same time we tried to determine which forums had higher interaction between teachers and students and if expressions of closeness or interest from teachers toward students were present in the messages.

## Data analysis

The data analysis started with the transcription of the recorded interviews with the teachers, as well as of the messages posted on the courses' forums by students and teachers. When transcribing the interview data and the messages published on the forums, particular attention was given to identifying key ideas, words and phrases that conveyed immediacy. This exploratory procedure of constant examination continued for the duration of the transcription process, until all the interviews and observation notes had been verified by the participants' *member checking* for their validation (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). All this data shared by the participants gave way to the creation of categories, which were populated throughout the study. Our findings come from the analysis of these observations, as well as from the messages in various course's forums that hinted at the presence of immediacy, and with the creation of the categories further explained below.

## Results and discussion

After observing different discussion forums from the six online graduate courses, two different types of forums were recognized: *Administrative* and *Academic*. An Administrative forum was designed to post messages with questions regarding the course, administrative advice, and use of technology, while the Academic forum had the function of answering questions regarding the specific contents of the course, as well as questions regarding individual and collective learning activities.

The Administrative forum appeared in the six observed courses. Less immediacy was found in these forums than in the Academic forums. However, there is a noticeable effort to create an environment of trust. Below are various examples of the different messages recorded through the observation of the forum of a humanities course and of an administration and business course, in which it is possible to appreciate messages with comments alluding to immediacy.

Humanities course's Administrative forum:

Hello Miss Lupita, I'm still having problems with the file, I can't extract it, it's giving me error messages, I don't know if you could send it to me another way, as a pdf file or if one of my classmates could send it to me, I kindly ask anyone that was able to download it. Thanks and greetings.  
Your student, Cecy

Hello, Cecy. We would like you to tell us if you managed to get the file, to re-send it or just to make sure you have it. Thanks.

In addition to the head professor's message, the teaching assistant adds:

Cecy. I reported the issue to María Elena, and since compressing it is the only way to ensure the file's integrity, they are not able to re-format it. They analyzed the file, and it worked on their end. Let's hope a classmate figures out a solution, so you're able to download it. Another option would be to try to track down the file on the Internet, and maybe you could find an English version.  
Cheers,

The student replies to the messages posted by the head professor and teaching assistant:

Thank you, Pedro and Lupita, an expert on compressed files finally helped me, and also Jánea emailed me the PDF files, thanks again for your attention.  
Cecy H.

The head professor closes the message thread with the following comment:

Those are very encouraging news, Cecy.

I wonder if you could help Laura Elena García, who is facing the same problem to download Bajtin's file.

I'd appreciate any help you can give her, and also thank Jánea and the expert on my behalf for their contributions to solving the problem.

Greetings (Observation No. 1)

#### Administration course's administrative forum:

One of the students asked the head professor a question regarding his grades:

Hello Mrs. Myrna, I just have a very big question, for the second part of the project we got 98% as a team, and when I checked the grades in the Excel file you provided, it says 93.5. . . How is it that you calculated that grade? Thank you very much, best regards.

The head professor replied:

Hello, Miguel. I hope you are well. The grade obtained for the project is multiplied by the co-evaluation of the team during that time. I hope this was helpful, if it wasn't, I'll be waiting for your comments. Have a nice day. (Observation No. 2)

On the messages written by the student, the head professor and the teaching assistant of the Humanities course, we can observe a particular type of personalized messages, addressing each other by name in a casual way and even using diminutives. The professors show concern for the student's technical problem, and she expresses her gratitude. In the case of the Business course, in her messages the head professor first greeted and offered well wishes to the student, explained the situation regarding his grade and commented on how she hoped she was of assistance but, if needed be, she'd be awaiting further questions, showing concern for the student, and only then she signs off.

The Academic forums, on the other hand, revolve around the interaction between teachers and students through messages discussing the course's contents and seeking advice regarding the course's conceptual and theoretical topics. The following messages took place in the Humanities and Education courses:

#### Humanities course's Academic forum:

Sandra says:

Dear doctor, the first thing I'm trying to understand is that, out of the 10 identified procedures, some apply to production (who, where, under which circumstances the discourse is produced) and others to the utilization (to whom, where, how is it transmitted). Then, would it be correct to consider that the exclusion procedures (forbidden, reason/insanity exclusion, true/false exclusion) and those of internal control (commentary, author, discipline) to correspond to procedures of production and (ritual speech, discourse society, doctrine and social adequacy of speech) correspond to the conditions of use of semiotic-discursive practices? Thank you, and I'll be waiting for your comments. Your student, Sandra (Observation note No. 3)

The professor replies:

Dear student. Welcome to the forum. The comments you made about the mechanisms proposed by Foucault can surely be accepted. It happens that with many mechanisms, as we understand that discursive practices are in a dialectic between production and reception, it is a bit complicated to place some in production and others in reception. . .

What you could propose is that some mechanisms lean more toward production and others toward reception, but not separate them altogether. I hope I have helped you. Best regards

Your professor (Observation note No. 3)

#### Education course's Academic forum:

In a message providing academic advice, the teaching assistant apologizes to a student for not replying promptly:

"I'm sorry I took too long to reply, but I wanted to be 100% sure of my answer". (Observation note No. 4)

On the same message, she closes with the following phrase:

I hope I've been of help to solve your questions. If I haven't, please let me know, without hesitation. With appreciation, Martha. (Observation note No. 4)

After one of the students had received a full message from the teaching assistant answering his questions, he reacted in the following manner:

I read your reply yesterday, but I neglected to thank you; I offer you an apology for this lack of attention. I send my best regards. Juan Pablo Rodríguez. (Observation note No. 4)

On another message of academic advice, the same student replied to the teaching assistant writing: Good morning, Professor: Thank you very much for your feedback and comments; they are a great motivator for the development of our latest work. Greetings and let's keep in touch. (Observation note No. 4)

On the recorded messages, phrases like “dear doctor”, “dear student”, “your student, Sandra”, “welcome to the forum”, “let me know without hesitation”, and “they are a great motivator” are used. In them, the immediacy between students and teachers comes through, since it is palpable how teachers welcome students, boost their confidence and show a willingness to help and to solve the students' questions. The reaction of students' is also notable, as they express gratitude, feeling motivated, and a sense of belonging to the group and toward the teachers by signing off as “your student”. These types of messages between teachers and students show that interaction via online courses is not cold or impersonal. On this regard, Walther (1994) states that researchers with experience working with online teaching and learning reject the notion that interaction in these environments is impersonal: if anything, it can be “hyper-personal”.

From the data generated from interviews with the head professors and teaching assistants, as well as from observing the interactions with students in discussion forums through messages, the following three categories of analysis emerged: instructional design and immediacy, forms of communication that promote immediacy, and teaching strategies that promote immediacy, which are described and illustrated below.

### ***Instructional design and immediacy***

It is expected that, if interaction and collaboration are encouraged in an online course, with activities that teachers monitor and provide feedback to on discussion forums created for this purpose, immediacy could occur between teachers and students. This category includes the relationship between instructional design and immediacy, in which participants, from their perspective, point out various elements of the instructional design of their courses that could favor teacher-student immediacy. These are presented in table 4.

**Table 4: Category. Instructional design and immediacy**

| <b>Instructional design and immediacy</b>  |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Incidents</b>   | <b>Professors' quotes</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Open forums of voluntary participation</li> <li>• Design as if it were the professor</li> <li>• Activity design that promotes interaction.</li> <li>• Design based on project-based learning techniques and collaboration that favor dialog.</li> <li>• Design of collaborative activities to interact with students</li> <li>• Create discussions, ask questions, request summaries, and thanks students for their determination and effort</li> </ul> | <p>(The design) has had a favorable effect on interactions via forums, emails and Messenger, and has guided (students) in the design of their project. (Interview – head professor 2)</p> <p>...but we must not forget it is not enough to explain how the head professor should be; we must also analyze how learning is mediated within the course, and for that we need to consider the instructional design is itself a teacher, just as the students are. (Interview – head professor 1)</p> <p>...thinking about this subject, I realize that subconsciously we develop learning activities as if wanting them to be a perfect substitute for the teacher, that is, we try to turn instructional design into a surrogate teacher. (Interview – head professor 1)</p> <p>My online course uses a Project Oriented Learning technique, in conjunction with Collaborative Learning, giving particular importance to the continuous dialog between teachers and students. (Interview – head professor 3)</p> <p>In my case, I use collaborative activities designed by myself, which help me stay in touch with them because I think interaction is very dependent on the disposition of the head professor. (Interview – head professor 6)</p> |

These comments indicate that the instructional course design is a significant aspect to promote immediacy with students, since discussion forums, emails, Messenger, etc. are means for interaction just as much as the constructivist instructional design approaches, such as project-oriented learning and collaboration, since these incorporate dialog and interaction. Some teachers commented and reflected on instructional design as a surrogate teacher, or that the design is a teacher itself. Hutchins (2003) notes that immediacy is related to course design and cites Gagne, Briggs and Wager (1992), who have stated how the teacher deliberately prepares a set of external events to support the internal process of student learning, while distinguishing between teaching and instruction, since instruction may include events generated by animate or inanimate events (television, book, image, etc.), while teaching can play an essential role in organizing such events.

De Verneil and Berge (2000) have noted the importance of the designer explicitly including learning in a social context in courses since the learning process itself occurs within a social framework.

### **Forms of communication that promote immediacy**

Online courses create opportunities to increase responsibility and communication through discussion between students and their teachers (Borthick, Jones & Wakai, 2003; Brandon & Hollingshead, 1999; Qing, 2002; Swan & Richardson, 2003). The creation of a highly interactive and cooperative virtual classroom is a necessity for true dialogic communication and immediacy. According to Johannsen (1990), this form of interaction means to promote conversation through dialogs that stimulate support, collaboration and motivation for learning and not the monolog that currently dominates the classroom.

Table 5 shows some of the communication forms or strategies the head professors and teaching assistants of the online courses implemented from this category.

**Table 5: Category. Forms of communication that promote immediacy**

| <b>Forms of communication that promote immediacy</b>   |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Incidents</b>   | <b>Professors' quotes</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Establish communication with different people</li> <li>• Establish closeness and empathy</li> <li>• Use of language and protocol; polite greetings and goodbyes</li> <li>• Use the familiar "you" to address each other</li> <li>• Send emails and instant messages</li> <li>• Reply to emails on the same day</li> <li>• Communication as if it happened in an actual classroom</li> <li>• Establish a dialog</li> </ul> | <p>...replying quickly to their queries helps students to feel that closeness, according to their opinion. (Interview – head professor 7).</p> <p>...maybe that's the most complicated part of an online course; here I try to see how they react to my observations and from that I try to establish different forms of communication for each person. (Interview – TA 1).</p> <p>...it gets very complicated when members of a team have differences, and you need to intervene very carefully, here it is very important they feel you are not far away from them. (Interview – TA 1).</p> <p>...you need to try and be empathic and, sometimes, even complicit, and always respect the student. Even if it is an obvious question, it is an important question for whoever formulated it, and thus merits attention. (Interview – TA 3).</p> <p>He added that he had lost his patience on occasion:<br/>         ...specially when they ask, and they ask, and they ask the very same thing, something I had already answered a long time ago, but, well, I try not to lose my patience. (Interview – TA 5).</p> <p>...always try to call them by the familiar "you", by their name, greeting them, asking them how they are doing or about their health. And then, after that, I start to explain the answers and my comments. (Interview – head professor 5).</p> |

| <b>Forms of communication that promote immediacy</b> |  |
|--|--|
| <b>Incidents</b>                                     | <b>Professors' quotes</b>  |
|  | <p>...a communication that is effective, direct, kind, polite, making them feel the distance between the teacher and the student is under 50 centimeters. (Interview – TA 2).</p> <p>The first communication strategy to achieve immediacy is to address them with the familiar “you”, and if they have a preferred way to address them, then use that one; an example would be to use “Yola” instead of “Yolanda”. Another form of communication is to welcome someone joining a discussion already in progress. A third one is to highlight the participation of students that “I miss”, stating something like “we were missing your contribution”. A fourth communication strategy could be through brief participations or just greeting them in the discussion boards or the Group Pages, so they feel cared for and that we are listening to them every day. (Interview- TA 5).</p> |

Some professors stressed the importance of addressing students with the casual “you” in their communication to build trust. Others seek empathy, as well as trying to make them feel some closeness and a reduction of distance by replying immediately and encouraging dialog and communication with each student. These findings match what Mehrabian (1971) wrote about verbal immediacy, seeing it as verbal communication behaviors that reduce the psychological distance in the interaction between teachers and students. On the other hand, Swan (2001) finds that cognitive presence occurs through frequent interaction with the reading material; teaching presence happens through frequent and affectionate interaction with the professor; and social presence occurs through frequent and affectionate interaction with students.

### **Teaching strategies that promote immediacy**

These strategies relate to the instructional procedures used by professors in their courses, on which immediacy can be perceived. As shown in Table 6, techniques, design, motivation, questioning and other aspects were considered.

**Table 6: Category. Teaching strategies that promote immediacy**

| <b>Teaching practices that promote immediacy</b>   |   |
|--|---|
| <b>Incidents</b>   | <b>Professors' quotes</b>   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A problem and project-based learning design favors interaction and dialog.</li> <li>• Presence and attention paid to students in forums</li> <li>• The professor as a professional mindful of his own practice</li> </ul> | <p>My online course uses a Project Oriented Learning technique, mixed with Collaborative Learning, which puts high emphasis on the dialog between student and teacher (interview – head professor).</p> <p>... First, using the same design of the course activities; second, by my presence on the forums and through general announcements; third, by timely attention to their concerns in the forum and in my personal email account, and finally also by the feedbacks to each of their exercises. (Interview – TA 4).</p> <p>One of the forms and better practices I have is motivating the students to ask freely and to make them consider the forums as if we were gathered in a classroom to share our opinions, questions, and answers. (Interview – TA 14).</p> |

| Teaching practices that promote immediacy  |   |
|--|---|
| Incidents  | Professors' quotes  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unplanned situations, falling outside of the instructional design</li> <li>• Encourage students to ask questions</li> </ul> | <p>You can establish a more personal link, but unidirectional, from teacher to student, if the professor presents himself as a professional mindful of what's happening in the course. . . just by sending unplanned messages, outside of the instructional design where he can show himself as a thinking individual, concerned about the same subject students are trying to learn. (Interview – head professor 9).</p> <p>. . .a simple comment like “Keep it up!” or “This isn’t goodbye, we’ll keep in touch”, are phrases that communicate clear objectives and make me stand apart from other teaching assistants, showing a general interest and, to do it in an individual manner, we send them personalized messages along with their grades reports, regarding their performance and opportunities for improvement. (Interview – TA 8)</p> |

Instructional communication is any form of communication, be it oral, written, kinesthetic or visual, used for teaching purposes. In this process teachers and students instill meaning into each other's minds using verbal and non-verbal messages (McCroskey, 1968; Mottet, Richmond & McCroskey, 2006).

These findings show how professors use certain teaching techniques when designing their courses, such as Project oriented learning, to stimulate a dialog between teachers and students, their presence in forums, feedback on the student's tasks, and motivational messages. Stacey (2002), and Tu and Mclsaac (2002) mention that, according to the results of their investigation, the professor's presence in online courses can improve the motivation of the student. These instructional actions seemingly incorporate immediacy by showing concern from teachers. Similarly, Fisher and Katt (2007) and Marks, Sibley and Arbaugh (2005) cite that a professor can make his presence felt and increase the motivation of his students through verbal behaviors that incorporate immediacy with students.

## Conclusions

To answer the research question *How do teachers promote immediacy through interaction with their students in online graduate courses?* we analyzed the forums of the courses selected for the study and found two distinct types: Academic and Administrative forums. It is possible to find immediacy in both. After extensive observation of the online courses, we analyzed the students' reply messages from the discussion forums, where we could infer immediacy to be present. Forum observation revealed that when the professors participated, interacted and were involved with students and the course's activities, students were immediately aware of the fact. According to Beuchot and Bullen (2005), the presence of socio-affective contents tends to motivate a higher degree of interactivity. Interactivity, then, is not a characteristic of the electronic medium, but a condition to be developed by students and teachers.

Forum observation and teacher interviews generated three main categories: 1. Instructional design and immediacy; 2. Forms of communication that promote immediacy; and 3. Teaching strategies that promote immediacy. The first category, Instructional design and immediacy, shows how the participant professors consider course design an important factor to promote the immediacy they claim to incorporate, through learning activities, forum layout, and collaborative learning techniques, project-based learning, encouraging to engage in discussions and overall interactions to foster

immediacy. Regarding interaction, Berge (1999) supports the perspective of interaction as an element of the course's design, since it does not occur spontaneously and must be deliberately integrated into the instructional program. Merrill (1994) maintains that distance education specifically calls for the design of instructional methods and interaction.

In the second category, Forms of communication that promote immediacy, head professors and teaching assistants remarked on how replying immediately to students' questions, trying to be empathic, addressing them with the casual "you" and asking them about personal details like their health, welcoming them, engaging students with low participation, trying to treat the online interaction as if it happened in a real classroom and giving their questions the importance they deserve, are all forms of communication with students that encourage immediacy and psychological closeness between teacher and student, indicating a social presence. In this regard, Gunawardena (1995) defines social presence as the ability to connect and communicate with students living in different places and an opportunity for students to see the teacher and the other participants as real persons.

In the third category, Teaching strategies that promote immediacy, it is of note that teachers mention the following strategies: the importance of social presence, paying attention to students, motivation, personalized messages, establishing personal links and making them feel as if they were in a real classroom. Easton (2003) mentions that strategies to increase online immediacy include writing in a conversational style, using the name of the students in messages and including personal notes when giving group feedback.

The three categories that are part of the findings of this paper could be developed as a guideline manual for online distance education teachers. The use of instructional strategies designed to encourage interaction between the instructor and the remote students should be employed consistently in online education (Bohnstedt *et al.*, 2013).

It could be argued that the findings of this study offer some evidence supporting the principles of the Transactional Distance theory (Moore 1993), as well as of Merabian's (1967a, 1971) immediacy. Evidence has been shown of how the participant teachers incorporated immediacy and interaction to their pedagogical practice in their online courses, demonstrated by forum observation and the categories created using their interview answers. The results suggest that teachers make a distinction between the simple particular presence of dyadic communication and the authentic presence of a social interaction that incorporates immediacy to improve the online learning experience. Further research on this topic is recommended, in the hopes of more findings that could bear witness to the importance of immediacy and interaction in online courses, be it teacher-student, student-teacher or student-student, in order to achieve higher academic performance and motivation in distance education modality, which will surely keep developing further into the XXI century.

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