

The Importance of Being Human: Instructors' Personal Presence in Distance Programs

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Literature on the role of higher education distance instructors mostly focuses on their teaching role, involving tasks such as curriculum design, instruction, and facilitating student learning. What is missing is the role of the "person" of the instructor, defined as his or her personality, identity, integrity, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, and values. The aim of this study was to ascertain whether distance students want a personal presence from their instructors, and if so, how an instructor's personal presence might impact on teaching and learning in the higher education sector. Qualitative analyses of 68 surveys and a focus group interview found that, while a minority of students report not wanting instructors to have a personal presence, most highlight the need for engaging, passionate, and understanding instructors who show these attributes through self disclosure, relationship building, humor, and individualized feedback. At the same time, instructors' personal qualities need to be mediated through learning. Various modes were identified that might encourage a personal mode of distance teaching, though the teaching medium did not appear to matter as much as having an instructor who, in the words of one participant, was "human."

University instructors and other professionals bring more than their professional skills and knowledge to practice: they also bring various personal qualities (Jeedawody, Reupert, Rushbrook & Reid, 2006). While the personal and the professional are intertwined, by personal we include instructors' personality, identity, integrity, emotions, thoughts, beliefs, values, life experiences, and background (Palmer, 1998). This article explores whether higher education students, studying in distance mode, want an instructor's personal self to be visible and active, how these personal qualities might impact on teaching and learning, if at all, and what form the personal self of instructors should, or could assume within distance education.

The use of one's self or personhood is a concept that is most often found in the therapeutic literature (see for example, Baldwin & Satir 1987; Brothers 2000; Reupert, 2008) but also in other human service professions, including social work (Reupert, 2007), nursing (Akerjordet & Severinsson 2007) and teaching (Palmer, 1998). Palmer (1998) points out that good teaching cannot be reduced to technique but instead "comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher." (p. 10). Increasingly the use of self is being recognized as a trans-disciplinary concept (Jeedawody, Reupert, Rushbrook & Reid, 2006). Whilst the following quote by the renowned family therapist Satir (1987) refers to therapy, "therapist" could, we argue, be substituted for "instructor," "patient" for "student," and "treatment" for "education":

Common sense dictates that the therapist and the patient must inevitably impact on one another as human beings. This involvement of the therapist's "self" or "personhood" occurs regardless of, and in

addition to, the treatment philosophy or approach. Techniques and approaches are tools. They come out differently in different hands. (p.19)

Specifically in relation to teaching, Marsh and Bailey (1993) through a meta-analysis of students' evaluations found that teaching effectiveness is primarily a function of the instructor who teaches a course rather than of the course that is taught. Similarly, Husbands (1997) found that some instructors are evaluated by students more highly than other instructors teaching in the same mode, in the same course. These results suggest that it is the manner in which a subject is interpreted and implemented by the individual instructor, rather than course materials, which impacts on student outcomes. Whilst these results might be attributable to variations in instructors' professional experiences and skills, and/or other attributes such as gender, they might also result from the personal characteristics of individual instructors and how these personal qualities are enacted within the teaching environment.

Related to the concept of "personhood" is that of "instructor presence," defined as being salient and visible to learners in either distance or face-to-face classrooms. While interaction on its own does not necessarily equate to presence (Picciano, 2002), it is generally agreed that instructor presence involves frequent and meaningful communication from an instructor to his or her students, especially in distance education. Further refining this concept, Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) define teaching presence as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Describing Teaching

Presence section, para. 1). This definition is based on an earlier framework which conceptualized instructor presence in three parts (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). The first element of teaching presence involves being an instructional designer of the educational experience, in terms of planning curriculum, establishing time parameters, administering instruction, and offering student evaluation. The second role is that of facilitator of discourse and co-creator of a social environment. This aspect of presence involves the instructor identifying areas of student agreement and disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding amongst students, acknowledging and reinforcing student contributions, setting the climate for learning, drawing in students, and prompting discussion. The role of the lecturer here is to create and maintain a social environment that is conducive to learning and is “*in situ* design of instructional activity” (emphasis included, Anderson et al., 2001, “Facilitating Discourse” section, para. 3). The final aspect of instructor presence, identified by Anderson et al. (2001) focuses on direct instruction and involves the instructor presenting content and questions, focusing the discussion on specific issues, summarizing discussion, confirming understanding, diagnosing misperceptions, injecting knowledge from diverse sources, and responding to technical concerns. Thus, instructors can become present or visible in many ways, though on the whole need to focus on enhancing the teaching and learning environment for distance students. Instructor presence in this model is focused on pedagogical issues, even when targeting the social cohesiveness of the student body. Thus, it could be said that, whilst instructor presence is a concept that has been extensively discussed and researched (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005; Picciano, 2002; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer 2001; Shin, 2003), the concept of the instructor’s person, or what might be called instead “personal presence,” is not acknowledged or addressed. In other words, whether the person of the instructor is a part of this presence and/or how it might be enacted has not been explored.

Another body of related literature has examined instructor immediacy behaviours, defined by behaviours that reduce social and psychological distance between people (Arbaugh, 2001). Some have argued that instructors achieve presence through certain verbal behaviours including humor, providing and inviting feedback, and learning students’ names, as well as nonverbal behaviour such as eye contact, smiling, and movement (Arbaugh, 2001; Freitas, Myers & Avtgis, 1998; Menzel & Carrell 1999; Myers, Zhong & Guan, 1998; Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996; Sanders & Wiseman, 1990; Swan, 2002; Weiner & Mehrabian, 1968; Witt, Wheelless & Allen, 2006). Appropriate or engaging immediacy behaviours have been associated

with student motivation and learning in online as well as on-campus learning environments (Freitas, Myers & Avtgis, 1998; Menzel & Carrell, 1999; Myers, Zhong & Guan, 1998; Rodriguez, Plax & Kearney, 1996; Shin 2003). Additionally, researchers have compared immediacy and learning among different cultural and ethnic groups, generally finding a positive relationship between nonverbal teacher immediacy and students’ perceived learning (Witt, Wheelless & Allen, 2006).

Other research has examined the role of distance instructors. For example, Johnson (2001) argues that distance instructors need to provide (1) open-ended complex questions, (2) the real work context, (3) shared goals (4) cognitive organising tools, and (5) facilitation. Berge (1995) categories four major functions for online facilitators, including that of manager, social facilitator, pedagogical facilitator, and provider of technical support. Collectively, previous research and literature on presence, immediacy, and role emphasizes the teaching responsibilities of higher education distance instructors. The focus in these studies is on instructors’ development and organization of teaching materials and the instructor’s role in facilitating an effective educational process, while the “person” of the instructor is missing.

But do distant tertiary students want the ‘person’ of their instructor? Several studies have found that distance students are attracted to distance courses because of their flexibility (Daughtery & Funke, 1998; Polloff & Pratt, 2001; Tricker, Rangelcroft, Long & Gilroy, 2001). More specifically, Conrad (2002), in a survey of first year graduate students, found that distance students wanted instructors to provide clarity and comprehensiveness of instructions rather than fulfil a “caring role,” and in her words, to be seen “not as a personality, but as a course resource” (Conrad, 2002, p. 222). Similarly, Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper (2004) found that distance students preferred to study on their own, concluding that there is often a gap between distance education theorists who espouse interactional models of teaching and what distance students actually prefer. Such research suggests that distance students are willing to sacrifice face-to-face, personalized teaching for the flexibility and convenience of distance education.

However, while distance students might not *want* a personal relationship with their instructor, they might well *need* it for a successful learning experience. For example, in the above mentioned study by Gorsky, Caspi and Trumper (2004) even though students preferred individualized study, when they failed or struggled, students opted for more interactional systems of teaching and learning. Isolation, one of the major causes of withdrawal from university studies in distance mode (Hipp, 1997; Peters, 1992; Polloff & Pratt, 2001), is defined as physical isolation, from human and

material resources, as well as psychological isolation in which the student feels disengaged from the lecturer and his or her peers, and the university institution (Lake, 1999). Distance education students tend to have higher drop out rates than students in traditional courses (Carr, 2000) for many interrelated reasons, some related to the course, some not. Thus, whether distance students want or need the personal presence of the instructor, and what form this could assume, is still a question that appears unanswered.

Some argue that distance teaching does not have the same capacity, when compared to face-to-face teaching, to transmit the lecturer's presence in an immediate and effective way (Flaherty, Pearce & Rubin, 1998). Similarly, others have criticized the distance experience for students, arguing that distance education can lead to ambiguous communication from the lecturer, isolation, frustration, boredom, overload, and low course completion (Hara & Kling, 2000; Northrup, 2002). Price, Richardson and Jelfs (2007) compared the experiences of students taking the same course by distance with those taking the course on campus and found that distance students reported poorer experiences. Students reported that the face-to-face sessions were seen not only as an academic activity but also as a highly valued pastoral activity in which lecturers' presence was essential. Finally, Miller, McKenna and Ramsey (1993) found that student-lecturer interactions are reduced in distance environments (even though there might be technological support for this to take place), and that distance students report a decreased sense of belonging, as compared to students studying on campus.

Thus, the research is mixed regarding the place of the instructor's personal presence in distance education courses. Should instructors merely be a resource to students? And/or should instructors reveal more about themselves as people? Should higher education instructors, as Coombs-Richardson (2007) advocates, provide a "personal touch" such as sending individual emails to students and other forms of personal attention? If distance students want a more personalized approach from instructors, how does this impact on teaching and learning and not just subject satisfaction or "liking" an instructor? Some students might confuse "popular" with "effective" educators. For example, one study showed that students give higher ratings to instructors they perceive as "sexy" (Felton, Mitchell & Stinson, 2004). Consequently, it is important to identify how an instructor's personal presence might be associated with specific teaching practices and subsequent student learning, rather than qualities students might merely "like" or consider "ideal." Finally, if important, how might instructors teaching in distance education best facilitate a personal presence? Are there modes of distance education that

are more personalized than others, according to students? These are the research questions within which this qualitative study is framed. Such information is seen as useful as it can lead to the development of innovative strategies to promote quality teaching in distant programs.

Methodology

Theoretical Framework

Within an interpretative research paradigm, a qualitative approach to data collection was employed as a means of tapping students' attitudes about the personal presence of their instructors. Mahrer (1988) labelled such an approach "discovery orientated" as opposed to "hypothesis-testing." The intention of discovery orientated research "is to learn more... to answer a question whose answer proves something one wants to know but might not have expected, predicted, or hypothesized" (Mahrer, 1988, p. 697). As the personhood of the higher education instructor is a concept that has not been previously investigated, the open ended, exploratory nature of qualitative research was considered the most appropriate framework to employ.

Participants and the Recruitment Process

After ethics was provided by the university's ethics body, potential participants were invited to participate via an email sent to all second year distance psychology students studying statistics, a mandatory subject for course completion. The first of two ways that students participated involved a focus group interview, when they attended a residential school mid-way through the subject. A semi-structured interview was used for this focus group that consisted of seven female participants, aged from 22 to 50, with a mean age of 37 years.

Students were also invited to complete an online survey at the end of the semester, with similar questions asked of the focus group. Of the students enrolled (128), 68 responded, giving a response rate of 53%. Fifty-six of the students were female (82.4%), while 12 were male (17.6%). The mean age of the students was 38.4 ($SD = 9.8$). In terms of experience in undertaking distance education subjects, the students were varied, with the distribution being highly positively skewed. The mean number of distance education subjects previously taken was 6.4, the median was 4.0, and the mode was only 1 ($SD = 8.4$). The inter-quartile range was 6.25 (with the 75th percentile being 8.25 subjects and the 25th being 2 subjects). Overall, students were generally quite experienced in studying by distance education mode, and most were mature aged.

Procedure

Questions in both the survey and focus group were framed around the personal qualities of distance instructors and how an instructor's personal presence might impact on teaching and students learning, if at all. Semi-structured questions were framed around the following four areas.

1. As a distance education student, is it important for the instructor to have a personal presence in your subject? If yes, why? If no, why not?
2. What are the important personal qualities, if any, that instructors bring to distance teaching?
3. Impact on teaching and learning:
 - a) What do these personal qualities look like in terms of instructors' teaching practices (if at all)?
 - b) How do these personal qualities impact on your learning (if at all)?
4. How might instructors make distance education more personalized, if at all?

Data Analysis

The focus group interview was recorded, and a qualitative content analysis with an inductive approach was applied (Berg, 2004). In the first instance, the first two authors independently went through the transcript several times to identify overall themes and content corresponding to the four research questions. These text units, including words, sentences, or whole paragraphs, were highlighted, and notes were made about the content. Focused coding followed, which moved the process to a conceptual level (Charmaz, 1983). Categories were created and named from participants' words and the researcher's perspective, as informed by the previous literature review (Constas, 1992). The first two authors independently organized these codes into themes, and then met to negotiate a final consensus. Each of the 68 surveys were analysed in a similarly inductive manner by the first two authors, first independently, and then together to reach a consensus. Finally, the survey and focus group data were pooled and presented according to the four research questions.

Results

As previously described, information from the survey and focus group interviews were grouped according to the structure of the questions asked and are reported as follows:

1. Relative importance of an instructor's personal qualities;
2. The important personal qualities instructors bring to teaching;
3. How instructors' personal qualities impact on (i) teaching and (ii) learning; and
4. How distance education might become more 'personal.'

Relative Importance of an Instructor's Personal Qualities

The majority of students, including all the focus group participants as well as 63 of the 68 survey participants, reported that it was important for instructors to, in the words of one participant, "*be human*." These students highlighted the need for the teaching environment to be an interpersonal place in which both students and instructors communicated as people.

One student reported that there was a distinct difference between distance subjects, reporting that "*some subjects have emotion in them, while others are dead and rigid*," a tone she attributed to the instructor. The importance of the personal qualities of the instructor was further emphasized by the focus group with representative comments including:

It is difficult to show yourself [as an instructor] in distance subjects, but it is how you [the instructor] write, how much emotion you put into it, how you react to students, how often you react to students, all these things impact on me as a distance student.

It is important to me, as a human being to interact, not with a computer, or a book, but with others, who know more about this subject than I do. They need to be there, to bring it to life, they need to show their human side....

At the same time, there were five female survey respondents (no focus group participants) who strongly argued that this was not the case:

Not really, never see them, rarely talk to them, [and] don't want to really.

I don't really care if the subject is taught in a way that's personable or not. If I wanted, I'm in a position to study on-campus but choose not to.

I don't really care how "friendly" the lecturer is; we're not here to be friends. I want the lecturer to be dedicated to the subject and give direct answers to questions (when they can).

I actually find I am less distracted and take more in without all the “personalities” of staff and students.

I have a goal and nothing will stop me from achieving it.

Another female survey participant added the following qualifier:

I choose distance education partly because I prefer to be independent in my learning, BUT it is nice to know the lecturers are there when I need them.

Whilst there might have been some disagreement as to its value, most students agreed that the instructor’s personal presence was inevitable:

I get a picture in my head as who the lecturer is, even if they don’t give much of themselves away...you can tell something about them from the package, the assignments...all of my [distance] lecturers have been different and that says something about who they are as people, I suppose.

Well, the person of the lecturer is something that is out there, you can see it in everything they do and say, even if that’s not a lot. Sometimes you get the feeling that they are involved and interested [in us,] and others you get the feeling that they are too busy and don’t have time for us. You work out their personalities in all these things.

Not only was it inevitable, the majority of survey participants and all the focus group participants suggested that it was important for the instructor to make visible his or her personal presence. The personal qualities that distance students considered to be important are described below.

The Personal Qualities Instructors Bring to Distance Teaching

When describing the important personal qualities that instructors bring to distance teaching, students identified several, interrelated personality traits. In the first instance, the ability to engage with students was highlighted:

The ability to engage, not just present information, is very important to me.

A sense of openness to connecting with students is essential to DE teaching.

As well as being engaging, a related personal attribute was being approachable:

It is important that the teaching staff are very approachable and there are no stupid questions

[you need to be able to] approach your lecturer/tutor and [know] that they have a genuine interest in your progress

Generally I don’t have the confidence to phone a lecturer but if they show that it is okay and that they are human, well it makes it easier for me to ring them and talk about what is happening.

Being engaging and approachable appeared to be important when establishing relationships with students. Then, according to students, once a relationship is established, instructors need to be empathic and understanding:

[important that instructors have an] understanding of family demands and work commitments that distance students have on top of studying.

Understanding that students have lives outside of the university is very important for distance students.

Patience when dealing with repeated students’ requests was another important personal attribute for instructors to show:

Sometimes it is difficult to work out what needs doing and then you know, the lecturers must get the same questions again and again, so yes, they definitely need patience.

Finally, a salient personal quality was for instructors to demonstrate passion and enthusiasm about their subject:

I don’t want a lecturer who just follows a textbook; they need to be up to date and enthusiastic about what they are teaching. They need to have a passion; otherwise we might as well just be reading about it.

Making the content interesting and relevant is really important, especially in a subject like statistics, which could potentially be pretty boring and useless.

Thus, according to students, the essential personal characteristics of distance instructors focused on their ability to relate to students (being engaging, approachable, empathic and patient) and being passionate about their subject area.

Impact on Teaching and Learning

Specific teaching practices aligned to an instructor's personal self were identified, followed by how these practices might impact on students' learning.

Impact on teaching. Students report that at times the personal qualities of instructors came through in *how* they taught, that is, patiently, passionately, and enthusiastically. At other times the strategy was a direct result of the person of the instructor with specific teaching practices including self-disclosure, relationship building, humor, feedback, and good organization. For example, an effective teaching strategy identified by students was the ability of the instructor to link his or her own experiences to the subject material.

Making the link to real life, like using examples from his or her [the instructor's] life so that we can see how it might relate to work situations is important.

I like a lecturer to talk about his [sic] life... it can shine a light on the material being presented and helps me see it in different ways.

Here, self disclosure of the instructor's experiences was considered an effective teaching tool, when directly related and/or linked to the subject material.

Building relationships with students was closely aligned to the person of the instructor:

Treating students as individuals and not as a large group or as a faceless person on the end of phone is important to me.

Knowing my name is a good start and wanting to ask how things are going... I asked for an extension and it was good that the lecturer wanted to know how I was, was interested in what was happening for me. This was more than just teaching, it was building a relationship with me as a person.

Relationships with students were not necessarily personal, but instead consisted of the instructor knowing who his or her students were in order to more effectively work with them.

Humor was another personal quality that some students identified as a teaching tool:

... the tone, sense of humor, writing manner of the staff is important.

[an instructor's] sense of humor can take stress out of distance and [a] difficult subject.

However, other students were more tentative about an instructors' use of humor:

... humor might work though could also could foster stress.

I like lecturers to have a sense of humor but in the past it has lulled me into a false sense of security thinking I was going OK.

Students also described the provision of individualized and timely feedback as personable:

When we get our assignments back it is really important that there is something positive on it, even if other bits aren't so good. Often you get the impression that they[instructors] have lots to read, and they don't really read yours properly, they get bored, and you are just another number, not a student or a person....

... quick email responses both on the forum [on line discussion group] and directly take some of the "distance" out, I think.

Finally, students reported instructors' sense of organization, or lack thereof, as another personal attribute related to teaching style:

How a subject is laid out, having regular assessment items, getting regular feedback, having set chapters to read, all these are important and ways that we can see the personality of the lecturer.

Impact on student learning. The positive ways that instructors' personal qualities impacted on students' learning included feeling motivated, focused and less stressed. For instance, students suggested that if an instructor showed that he/she was passionate about the subject they in turn would also be interested in the subject:

Some lecturers don't seem that interested. Having lecturers who actually appear to have a passion to want to teach makes me motivated to learn.

The enthusiasm of the staff [can] spark my own enthusiasm.

The engagement and warmth of a lecturer are important in making a subject 'come alive' and forming a connection with the subject matter

Similarly, if students saw the personal qualities of their instructors they were less likely to be distracted and instead, more focused:

Well it means that I don't drift off, or get bored or otherwise distracted.

Instructors' approachability and engagement also relieved the stress for some students:

When lecturers make themselves available, and give lots of feedback, I feel less stressed and more comfortable about where I am going.

In sum, instructors' enthusiasm, patience, and understanding appeared to impact on students' affective states.

How Might Distance Teaching Become More Personable?

Students had several suggestions for making distance education more personable, some of which they had experienced, but some they had not. Specific supports and techniques, all of which involved various forms of communication between instructors and students, included:

- voice over PowerPoint slideshows
- timely feedback
- weekly phone chat including chat room tutorials and lectures
- pod casting of the material
- residentials
- videos
- being allocated a contact person for problems, personal and teaching
- 2-3 smaller tutorials in regional centres
- personal emails

Students also mentioned an online discussion group or forum and the need for clear direction and support from instructors. For example, some suggested that

There needs to be a forum but [it needs to be] interactive - on the forum, [instructors need to] ask for students to complete specific sections, then discuss.

I have used forums often in the past, and on the whole find them to be confusing, dominated by needy personalities, without clear, concise instructions and directions. [I believe that] few students use forums efficiently. I can't help fellow students as I am usually struggling with my own understanding.

In the survey, two students reported that distance education did not have the capacity to express the personality of instructors, though they did not mention why. The same five students, outlined earlier, reiterated in the survey that they believed distance education should strictly focus on the teaching experience alone. Another reported:

Distance education needs to be personable but in a flexible way. Subjects need to use a combination of materials such as CD-Rom lectures, forums, and residential [schools]. These things make it very personal for me, but [they] still need to be delivered with all the benefits offered by distance education, i.e., flexibility to plan and pace study time.

Finally, several students made the point it was the person of the instructor that was important as opposed to the form or medium employed, for example:

Lecturing staff who continually encourage, inspire, challenge and support students are going to make a difference when studying either on campus or via distance.

I am not really into computers, but I do want a connection with the person who is teaching me. To me, it doesn't really matter if it is distance or not, or what materials are used... I need to see that the other person is a person, and is someone I can relate to, on both the subject material as well as on a personal level.

Discussion

A minority of students (five of the 68) wanted to focus on their studies alone, without what one student described as the "interference" of either students or instructors' personalities. At the same time, students perceived that instructors inevitably brought different aspects of themselves to teaching, which permeated at different levels of the subject. On the whole, the majority of students reported the need for distance instructors to provide a personal presence, describing this presence in terms of being engaging, approachable, understanding, patient, and passionate about the subject. These qualities were enacted through specific teaching strategies including self-disclosure, relationship building, humor (though there were qualifiers to this), provision of individualized and timely feedback, and organization. Many of the qualities and subsequent teaching strategies primarily

focus on the relational aspect of teaching and learning between instructors and students. Thus, the person of the instructor appears to be at the heart of establishing effective interpersonal relationships with students. For example, the strategies listed by students for making distance teaching more personable highlighted different ways of enhancing communication channels between students and instructors.

In contrast to Conrad (2002), who found that distance students preferred teachers to take on a teaching as opposed to a caring role, the students in this study wanted instructors who understood that students had commitments aside of their course responsibilities and had the ability to build relationships. Many of the attributes and teaching strategies outlined by students delineate an open and warm communication style, for instance, obtaining individualized feedback, being accessible, and showing understanding and empathy. Similarly in therapy, the person of the therapist has been directly related to the relationship building skills of the individual therapist (Reupert, 2008; 2009a).

However, whilst the majority of students said that they wanted a personal presence from distance instructors, this presence was still very much focused on the teaching and learning environment. For example, students wanted instructors to self disclose, but specified that self-disclosure should be linked to the subject in some way. Similarly, students wanted instructors to be present on forums to provide direction and organization. Humor was only appropriate, according to students, if it helped them achieve, and did not, in the words of one student, “lull” them “into a false sense of security.” In other words, the personal presence of instructors, according to students here, needs to be channelled or mediated through subject materials and teaching strategies. An instructor’s personal presence was important, but only if relevant to the subject and the student’s learning. In the same way, relationships between students and instructors were important, but students made it clear that this was not a personal relationship, even if the instructor’s personal qualities were instrumental in establishing it. Instead, the relationship was centred on students’ learning and progress. Similarly, Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) stress that the social interactions established by instructors need to be more than social:

Although the natural and appropriate inclination [of instructors] is to first direct interaction efforts to establishing social presence and creating interrelationships, this is only a precondition for a purposeful and worthwhile learning experience. Teaching presence is important for the creation and sustainability of a community of inquiry focused on the exploration, integration, and

testing of concepts and solutions (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005, p.135).

In other words, the personal qualities of instructors need to be active for students to see, but still linked to course objectives and used to support students to become part of a supportive learning community.

This study has limitations that could be addressed in future research. Students involved in this study were opportunistic; they wanted to be involved and came from the one subject only. Students from other disciplines and/or not studying in distance mode might have other views. We did not seek instructor input to ascertain what personal qualities they brought to their teaching and their views regarding the relationship between personal and professional aspects of themselves. Future studies could examine the connections between student and instructor views as well as the perspectives of higher education administrators.

Nonetheless, the results of this study demonstrate that distance instructors require more than technological expertise; they need to be able to communicate and engage with students using a variety of mediums, but without losing the flexibility that distance education affords students. According to the students, an instructor’s personal presence is inevitable and will be perceived by students through instructors’ attitude towards, and selection and organization of, their subjects, as well as their relational qualities. Students will surmise who their instructors are, regardless of whether this perception is accurate or not, and regardless of whether instructors intend for this to happen or not. Whether these personal qualities can be taught, and if so, how, is another matter that has been raised elsewhere (Reupert, 2009b). Given the implicit nature of personhood, we would argue that instructors need to be encouraged to purposefully channel personal qualities such as passion, understanding, and patience, and they should use self-disclosure, relationship building, and humor through their learning materials and interpersonal relationships with students. In this way they keep distance teaching “human.”

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