

Instructor Presence in the Online Classroom

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Presence in online classrooms has been linked to immediacy behaviors, instructor-student interaction, and participation. Research shows that presence can be managed and sustained, but little documentation exists about perceptions of the meaning of presence. An interview-based qualitative inquiry of three online instructors was conducted to discover how faculty create, promote, and sustain online presence. Results suggest that presence is an individual matter, linked to the teaching style, content delivery, and established patterns of instructor-student feedback.

Keywords: Presence, Affect, Online

Communication and interaction are at the heart of the learning experience. The research literature on distance learning supports the assumption that instructor to student, and student-to-student interaction is a critical component of learning, and an important factor in learner satisfaction (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003; Picciano, 2002; Roberson & Klotz, 2002). Instructor presence plays a significant role in facilitating communication in the online learning environment. In the online classroom, instructor presence is closely tied to discussion, communication, and instructor to student interaction (Blignaut & Trollip, 2003). According to Blignaut and Trollip: “Being silent in an online classroom is equivalent to being invisible” and “presence requires action” (2003, p. 347). Picciano states an instructor is perceived as present in the online classroom when visible to the student--the student knows the instructor is attending to, and participating in the class. An instructor who establishes patterns of interaction with his/her students establishes instructor presence (Picciano, 2002).

As more courses in higher education move to the online environment, online instructors are challenged to find ways to establish their presence, while at the same time meeting the students’ needs for feedback and support. According to Woods and Ebersole (2003), online learners may potentially experience feelings of isolation and alienation, if instructor-student feedback is lacking in the course. For example, in a traditional class, a student does not necessarily require personal acknowledgement from the instructor on a regular basis to feel the instructor’s presence in the class. Also, the moments before and after class allow for serendipitous comments, questions, and communication interchange. However, in an online learning environment, a student may expect the instructor to personally acknowledge individual email postings. The student may expect individualized feedback, or expect a more personal approach to learning than is feasible in the online environment. Online instructors are challenged to find ways to establish their presence, while at the same time meeting the student’s need for feedback and support.

Problem Statement

Instructor presence in the online classroom has been linked to instructor immediacy behaviors, and to instructor-student interaction and participation (Blignaut and Trollip, 2003; Picciano, 2002, Richardson and Swan, 2003; Roberson and Klotz, 2002;). The research suggests that instructors can manage and sustain their online presence by assuming the role of facilitator, and fostering an online learning environment that is collaborative and interactive (Richardson and Swan, 2003). According to Ebersole and Woods (2003), online learners may potentially experience feelings of isolation and alienation, if instructor-student feedback is lacking in the course. In addition, the student’s satisfaction with the learning experience may be decreased if instructor presence is lacking (Brady and Bedient (2003). Instructor presence is a dynamic process, conceptualized at the earliest stages of the instructional design process, and integrated into the course learning environment (Anderson et al, 2001). Although research suggests that presence may be linked to one’s teaching style or to the presentation and packaging of content and learning objects (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001), little research exists on the instructor’s perception of the meaning of presence. The purpose of this study is to understand how instructors establish presence in the online learning environment. By conducting this qualitative inquiry, we hope to contribute to best practices for facilitating online presence, along with establishing a deeper understanding of the instructor presence construct.

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Theoretical Framework

Online courses are designed for time and place independent learning, to allow students to pursue learning at their own pace and convenience. However, it is this self-directed and independent learning environment that can result in student isolation and disconnection to the instructor or class as a whole. A challenge for today's online instructors is creating a consistent level of instructor-student and student-student interaction that facilitates learning and cultivates a high degree of instructor presence in the classroom. A review of the literature on instructor presence suggests that interaction between instructor and student is a critical component of learning (Berge, 1995; Blignaut & Trollip, 2003; Brady & Bedient, 2003; Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001; Picciano, 2002; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Roberson & Klotz, 2002;). The literature on instructor presence is closely tied to the research on social presence and teacher immediacy (Richardson & Swan, 2003). The research suggests that in the online classroom, high teacher immediacy behaviors create a sense of social presence, which facilitates instructor to student interaction (Roberson and Klotz, 2002). Instructor to student feedback and interaction serves to generate a high degree of social presence and has a positive effect on students' satisfaction, motivation, and learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Brady and Bedient (2003) investigated the effects of increased teacher presence on student performance and attitudes towards instruction. They report that instructor feedback and increased instructor to student interaction could enhance student satisfaction with the learning experience. The research suggests that high instructor presence leads to increased student satisfaction with the learning experience.

Roberson and Klotz (2002) support the assumption that instructor to student, and student-to-student interactions are important elements in achieving a high degree of online presence. Richardson and Swan (2003) agree, noting that high instructor presence can enhance student learning. The research findings demonstrated that students who indicated high perceptions of social presence had higher perceived satisfaction with their learning experience and with their interactions with the instructor.

Instructors can achieve a high level of interaction, and presence, by exhibiting high "instructor immediacy behaviors" (Richardson & Swan, 2003). High instructor immediacy implies that an instructor, as a communicator, has a minimal degree of psychological distance between him/herself and the student. Woods and Ebersole (2003) agree that students eventually develop an expectation of presence based on the instructor's response rate. Instructors who exhibit high immediacy behaviors make themselves accessible to their students, by establishing clear expectations about the level, and type of feedback students can expect. High immediacy behavior results in a higher degree of social presence, thus leading to higher instructor presence in the online classroom (Picciano, 2002, as cited in Blignaut & Trollip, 2003).

Richardson and Swan (2003) found that instructor presence is achieved when the instructor takes on the role of facilitator. As facilitator, the instructor guides the student towards the acquisition of knowledge, as the student becomes increasingly self-directed in the learning activity. The authors state: "The role of the instructor can be altered to become more akin to a facilitator than a lecturer, while the role of student can be altered by allowing them to become active learners" (p. 69). According to Berge, the instructor's role is to encourage and facilitate critical thinking and reflective inquiry. Rohfeld and Hiemstra (1995) explain that it is the instructor's responsibility to make sure that class discussions remain on track, while building new knowledge and insights as they emerge from threaded discussion topics (as cited in Berge, 1995).

Instructor presence in the online classroom requires careful planning and foresight, at the earliest stages of course development. The research on distance learning suggests that students need more support and feedback from their instructor than would be required in a face-to-face course, since time and space separate them from the instructor and their classmates (Picciano, 2002; Wheeler, 2002). In a traditional classroom, the instructor's presence is known simply by his/her physical appearance. The student's peer group is evident, regardless of how silent some classmates may be, or how vocal others are. The opportunity for personal interaction is present, since both instructor and student occupy the same physical learning space. In an online class, the physical space is unknown, and the communication exchange may be delayed.

In summary, instructor presence in the online classroom is apparent to students when the instructor is visible to the student (Picciano, 2002). Researchers suggest that action is tied to instructor immediacy behaviors, and to instructor interaction and participation. Instructors can promote and sustain online presence by taking on the role of facilitator and encouraging a collaborative classroom environment. Instructor presence is a dynamic process, conceptualized at the earliest stages of the instructional design process, and integrated into the course learning environment.

Research Questions

The broad question for this inquiry is “how do faculty members facilitate instructor presence in the online learning environment?” It is framed by several topical interview questions. Each topical question deals with a specific component of instructor presence:

1. ‘What comes to mind when I mention the words "instructor presence?"’ seeks to elicit the faculty member’s personal reflections on the concept of instructor presence, and tries to invoke the faculty member’s individual and personal feelings on the meaning of instructor presence.
2. “How do you construct your own presence, in the online classroom?” challenges the instructor to reflect on the process of creating presence—to take a step back, and visualize the process from inception.
3. “What instructional strategies do you use to promote instructor presence in your online course?” is an inquiry into the pedagogy of instruction.
4. “How do you sustain instructor presence in your online course?” is an inquiry into the effectiveness of the instructional methodologies used to construct one’s presence.

Methodology

Sample

The research design of this qualitative inquiry is a semi-structured interview with four open-ended questions, conducted on-site at the instructor’s office. Three faculty members who had at least 5 years’ of online teaching experience and had recently taught or were currently teaching an online course were interviewed. We requested current or recent online teaching experience because we were relying on the felt experiences of the participants, and wanted to capture their unique perceptions during the teaching process. The sample size was limited to three people due to time and cost factors. A purposeful sampling process was used. A contact at the college was emailed and asked to identify faculty who met the criteria of early adopter. We requested that interviewees have significant online teaching experience (at the early adopter level) because we believed experienced instructors would have a more in-depth understanding of the instructor presence construct. This contact, or *gatekeeper*, suggested the three faculty members that were contacted. All selected instructors had taught their first online course in 1997. All three instructors taught undergraduate, science-based courses. This particular sample was chosen because of the experience level of the online instructors, and the maturity of the online courses. Our assumption was that experienced instructors would have the instructor presence construct well conceived. In addition, one of the researchers was familiar with the background and experience level of the selected faculty members.

Data Collection Process

Each interview lasted approximately an hour. The semi-structured interview format was framed by these four open-ended questions, each question focusing on a specific construct of instructor presence (creating, promoting, sustaining presence).

1. What comes to mind when I mention the words "instructor presence?"
2. How do you construct your own presence, in the online classroom?
3. What instructional strategies do you use to promote instructor presence in your online course?
4. How do you sustain instructor presence in your online course, over the duration of the semester? (i.e., feedback/facilitation strategies, etc.)

The semi-structured interview format was chosen because it facilitates an interview climate that is open, flexible, and spontaneous—characteristics that allow for the exploration of reflections, perceptions and feelings. The semi-structured interview seemed best suited for gathering descriptive data that would be insightful, and forthright (Bogdan & Bicklen, 2003). The interview was the dominant strategy for data collection, used in conjunction with document analysis (course web site, online syllabus, online lecture notes and other course materials).

The interviews took place at each faculty member’s office. The third interview was recorded with permission, while the second interviewee declined to be recorded. The recorder was not available for the first interview. Even when the recorder was used, each interview was hand recorded as well. Upon the completion of each interview, the data was transcribed, noting the interviewer’s feelings before and after the interview session. Lengthy interviewer comments were recorded throughout the transcript. In addition, the interviewer examined course websites and other course artifacts, such as online lecture notes, syllabus, and other online course materials from each subject.

Results

What Comes to Mind When I Mention the Words Instructor Presence?

The qualitative data collected from the four open-ended questions indicate that for these instructors, presence is personal and unique to the instructor's style and course content. For example, consider the following response:

"I think instructor presence are those unique characteristics of the instructor that the student wouldn't get if they took someone else's version of [course name]. I use my own materials—my materials are unique to me. So, part of instructor presence comes within the broader curriculum of courses, what you choose to teach. The other part is the instructor's style" (personal communication, November 15, 2004).

One of the instructors, who teaches a highly visual scientific course, includes a large amount of real audio files that accompany each associated image file. The student clicks on the image, and then hears the instructor's voice, explaining the image. For this instructor, presence is defined by the format of the content. The instructor states: "it's mainly the audio that I put into my course, as well as the feedback that I give students on their essays. They hear my voice" (personal communication, November 15, 2004).

All three instructors mentioned feedback as an important component of instructor presence; however, only one instructor described interaction and feedback as the meaning of instructor presence. Delivery of content, for this instructor, informs much of the basis of the course interactivity. Feedback to the class as a whole is sent out on a regular basis, and most of the feedback pertains to the course content. On a weekly basis, the instructor sends an article to the course listserv that pertains to the content covered during the week, with the purpose of stimulating class discussion on the listserv. The course content drives much of the feedback, since collaborative group work, and student to student peer work, is not a component of the course.

How do You Construct your Own Presence in the Online Classroom?

One way instructors construct their presence is through their role as "deliverer of content." In addition, faculty placed great emphasis on the feedback they give their students, via email, the class listserv, individualized instructor to student feedback (acknowledgement feedback, assignment feedback, and content feedback), and automated feedback via the online quizzes. One instructor stated that "the self-test quizzes give the students feedback with their answers, so if they make a mistake, they receive an explanation. The feedback is immediate. The students just love this" (personal communication, November 15, 2004). Instructors also facilitate their presence through immediacy behaviors—these include setting clear expectations about the type, and level of feedback that students can expect. Instructor presence is created when individualized feedback is sent to a student (for example, to inform them of how they are doing in the class, to send comments on their class assignments) or by the instructor sending regular postings to the class listserv. All three instructors exhibited these immediacy behaviors, and this established their presence, because the students perceive this as the instructor being attentive to the class. The instructors establish their visibility online, and this in turn enhances their online presence.

Instructors mentioned that the online quizzes and weekly written assignments, coupled with the individualized feedback on those assignments, enhanced their presence in the course. Clearly, the automated feedback system generated by the online quizzes (used in all three courses) fulfilled the immediacy behavior required of high instructor presence. Was an automated feedback system less valuable, in terms of establishing online presence? Not according to these instructors. In fact, they stated that feedback generated by the online quizzes could be perceived as coming from the instructor him/herself—and served a dual purpose by increasing the instructor's visibility in a supportive role.

Another way instructors construct their presence is by using a variety of media to present course content, and by creating their own learning objects (modular online materials, such as real audio files, images). The instructor explains: "I think you need a lot of different types of media, so I've got a mixture of text, a lot of images, and audio. So some of the content is in text, some is in audio, and a lot of the content is in images" (personal communication, November 15, 2004). Closely tied to this is the instructors' need to have ownership, and control over course content, along with the flexibility to make content changes and updates. Each instructor stated that keeping the content well organized and up to date is a component of instructor presence.

What Instructional Strategies do You Use to Promote Instructor Presence in Your Online Course?

Email, for these instructors, and specifically, the use of a class listserv, is crucial to promoting their online presence. Instructors established clear policies for communication, and this ensured they remained accessible to their students, but did not get overwhelmed with email. The data do suggest that feedback, which is an important component of instructor presence, is also important in promoting their presence (enhancing instructor visibility). Instructor immediacy behaviors create a sense of social presence online (the students felt a sense of "belonging"), thus facilitating the instructor's presence.

Another instructional method instructors use to promote their presence is constructing a visible support role. An instructor explains:

“I always send the students a reminder when their essay is coming due, or when the quiz is coming due, or when they’ve got an exam. You know, I’ll give them little hints, make sure you use the study guide, make sure you do this, that’s important, because they know someone is out there, looking out for them, in some sense” (personal communication, November 15, 2004).

How do You Sustain Instructor Presence in Your Online Course, Over the Duration of The Semester?

One way instructors sustain their online presence is through their role as “facilitator of learning” –they create a course environment that promotes self-directed learning. The data suggest that instructors facilitate the learning process through their role as deliverer of content (or subject matter expert). All the instructional activities were presented in teacher-centered format. The following remark captures this:

“The other thing I do, and this may be instructor presence, is I have study guides that are fairly detailed, and I tell them if you can do everything on the study guide, you will probably get 100% on your exam. They really like that. They spend a lot of time on the study guides and that helps them through the content to some extent.

It’s difficult for students to organize the content online, and this is one way I help them do that” (personal communication, November 15, 2004).

Another instructor states: “I think I’ve provided them with all the tools they need to learn, without my direct assistance.” All instructors interviewed encourage their students to be self-directed, and the course content and instructional activities are designed to facilitate self-directed behavior.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The major limitation of the study is that it only took into consideration instructor and not student perceptions of instructor presence. As a result we cannot determine from the data whether or not the instructor and student perceptions of presence are in congruence. Second, we cannot determine from the data if the instructors’ presence has an effect on the students’ overall satisfaction with the learning environment. We can determine, however; the instructors’ level of satisfaction with their online presence, and whether or not they perceive their online presence as visible, effective, and closely linked to the materials, media, and content of their course. Third, there is a limitation in regards to sample size and selection. The sample used for the study was a convenience sample, and was bound by a time limitation. The data are also limited to class size enrollment of 15 – 40 undergraduates per course, so we cannot determine if the data derived from this study would be applicable to a larger class size, or to a graduate student demographic. Finally, the courses under consideration did not include collaborative, student-to-student peer work or group work.

What is the meaning of instructor presence, and how is instructor presence facilitated in the online environment? Based on the interview data, instructor presence is defined within three broad presence constructs:

1. Course content, 2. Instructor’s role, and 3. Student needs. For these instructors, presence is facilitated in the following eight ways: 1. Via the instructor’s role as provider of content and subject matter expert; 2. By using materials that are unique to the instructor; 3. Through the creation of one’s own learning objects; 4. By designing an effective student support structure; 5. Through the instructor’s role as “facilitator of learning”; 6. By implementing high instructor immediacy behaviors in feedback (instructor to student interactions); 7. Through the use of a variety of media formats; and 8. By organizing content and structuring the course for self-directed learning.

This study explored the concept of instructor presence, and how presence is created, promoted, and sustained in the online classroom. The qualitative data collected from the four open-ended questions informs several emergent themes within the instructor presence framework (see Table 1). The data suggest that for these instructors, presence is closely tied to the instructor’s views on course content, teaching role, and student learning needs.

Instructor presence and course content

The data highlight the importance of the organization and structure of the content as an important construct in instructor presence. As the research suggests (Anderson et al., 2001) course design and organization plays an important role in facilitating instructor presence. We discovered that faculty established their presence as they structured the course content, using a variety of multimedia components, and integrating activities that engaged students to interact with the content in a self-directed manner. In addition, faculty sustained their online presence by integrating consistent feedback mechanisms into the course.

The faculty interviewed believed their presence was closely tied to content and to the use of their own unique materials. Access to the course materials was a significant issue—each faculty member believed the ability to make content changes/updates on an as-needed basis was important in building and maintaining instructor presence. Presence was highly personal and individual, and instructors’ felt a personal ownership over their own content.

However, not one of the courses was password protected, or placed within the space of a learning management system, because instructors wanted material easily accessible, to students, and colleagues. Flexibility, in terms of media selection, and the ability to make content interactive (automated quizzes with feedback) facilitated instructor presence.

Table 1. *Proposed Thematic Framework for Instructor Presence*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Instructor Views of Course Content</i>	<i>Instructor Views of Teaching Role</i>	<i>Instructor Views of Student Needs</i>
<i>Accessibility</i>	Course not password protected	Set clear expectations on email turn-around time; Be responsive to student requests	Needs clear expectations in terms of instructor accessibility; course accessibility
<i>Flexibility</i>	Provide content updates as needed; use variety of media	Provider of content, accurate, up-to-date, timely updates related to content	Student expectations met if content provided uses appropriate media
<i>Ownership</i>	Content ownership; instructor's unique materials (PPT, study guides, questions asked databank, audio, images, lecture notes online)	Creates own learning objects; Instructor as subject matter expert; Instructor as content-provider; Instructor style tied to media selection for content (i.e. audio)	Interacts with instructor's style through learning objects unique to course [i.e. real-audio files]
<i>Structure</i>	Organization of content critical, organizational structure must be well-defined; i.e. questions asked databank; repackaging of content Clear course policies	Communicates course policies clearly Has clearly defined email management system via listserv and categorizes messages to listserv—[content updates, informative, supportive, assignment reminders, due dates emailed to listserv]	Facilitates student becoming more self-directed as distance learner
<i>Student engagement Strategies</i>	Automated quizzes with feedback; audio, images, mixed media	Class listserv; bundle email from students to listserv; Article sharing via listserv; welcome message to listserv;	Email instructor or email listserv; Telephone calls; Office visits; receives current updates via listserv on regular basis; receives informative postings to listserv related to content
<i>Instructor feedback/guidance/Facilitation</i>	Self-study guides facilitate self-directed development; feedback frequency; feedback immediacy	Instructor support role visible; has system in place which provides individualized feedback; feedback immediacy behavior important, whether individualized to student or system generated	Receives immediate feedback through quizzes; receives individualized feedback, even if automated; student has a support structure available via study guides, questions asked databank; listserv messages also serve support role (i.e. reminders, updates, current articles, questions-asked); Students have opportunity to be self-directed learners

Instructor Presence and the Teacher's Role

Each instructor viewed his/her teaching role as responsive, and each instructor had clear, established guidelines for feedback on student emails and assignments. As the research suggests, and as our results found, high instructor immediacy behaviors facilitate instructor presence (Roberson & Klotz, 2002). Each of the interviewed instructors had well-established turn-around response times to student email (48 hours at most). These instructors believed, as the research points out, that immediate student feedback and instructor-student interaction generate a high degree of social presence and has a positive effect on students' satisfaction, motivation, and learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003).

Our data found the instructors exhibited high visibility in their courses, which is in keeping with the research (Picciano, 2002). For example, instructors were certain to communicate course policies clearly and succinctly. They had defined email management strategies, and they used listservs effectively, and were efficient and judicious

in their use of email. Listservs were used to send content updates, informative weekly updates, supportive messages, and assignment reminders—all serving to create, and sustain instructor presence. They bundled student questions, repackaging the content and sending informative updates to the listserv. They responded to student emails, they encouraged their students to visit the office (if feasible) and to communicate in other manners—phone or fax, for example. The support role was visible, consistent, and built into the overall structure of the course. The research suggests that instructor presence in the online classroom is apparent to students when the instructor is visible to the student (Picciano, 2002). These were not instructors who ‘disappeared’ from their course. According to Picciano, action is tied to instructor immediacy behaviors, and to instructor interaction and participation. These instructors clearly exhibited high immediacy behaviors and maintained these behaviors for the duration of the course.

Instructor Presence and the Needs of the Student

Finally, our research found that for these instructors, presence implies attending to the needs of the student. What do online students need? Students need an instructor who is accessible (again, this points to immediacy behaviors) and students need clear guidelines in terms of instructor feedback, how, when, and how often it will occur. In the online environment, students need some level of immediate feedback on their work; and this component can be built into the course via automated quizzes and other feedback mechanisms. Even if automated, these instructors felt the feedback was perceived as individualized to the student and the student perceived the instructor as present.

The interviewees expressed that as online instructors, they shared responsibility with the students in fostering a learning environment that was self-directed. The research on instructor presence advocates that instructor presence is achieved when the instructor takes on the role of facilitator (Palloff & Pratt, 2003). Palloff and Pratt state that in effective online learning, the instructor, as facilitator, guides the student towards the acquisition of knowledge, as the student becomes self-directed during the learning process. Each instructor interviewed had taken careful measures to establish an integrated support structure citing the following examples: study guides, questions asked databank, case studies and online quizzes.

From this study we can conclude that the meaning of instructor presence is heavily influenced by the instructor’s own perception of the role of content, the role of the teacher, and the students’ needs. Instructor presence is integral to the instructional design process, and must be considered at the earliest stages of design and development. Presence means the instructor is visible to the students, and that requires consistent activity in the form of feedback and other response mechanisms. The data suggest that instructor presence is heavily dependent on instructor-student interaction, and on the instructor taking an active role as content provider.

The preliminary results indicate that the instructor presence construct can be framed from a content-driven, rather than learner-driven standpoint. In other words, the impetus for interaction is framed around the course content provided by the instructor, rather than arising from student discussion or dialogue (student to student interaction). Delivery of content informs much of the basis of the course interactivity. The three courses in this sample did not include much student to student interaction; yet, the instructors were satisfied with the level of instructor presence. This contradicts the research, which states that both types of interaction (instructor-student/student-student) are important for high instructor presence (Berge, 1995).

It is important to note that these are preliminary conclusions, based on the analysis of three interview transcripts; clearly, the topic warrants further investigation. To our surprise, none of the instructors mentioned the absence of student-to-student interaction as problematic. However, scientific courses are often not discussion-laden. Thus, the implication is the meaning of instructor presence may vary depending on the discipline under study. Future research could investigate the concept of instructor presence from a variety of disciplines, to discover if instructor presence carries a different meaning, depending on the discipline under investigation. Finally, we cannot determine from this qualitative inquiry if the instructor presence described in this study is ideal, high, or low instructor presence. A future study could provide a benchmark of presence, from the student’s perspective.

Significance to HRD

HRD practitioners, faculty, distance education administrators, and researchers interested in distance education may use the research data to design online training and courses that offer the highest degree of instructor presence. The data gathered from the research would benefit HRD faculty and practitioners who teach and design online workshops or courses, by offering insight into the instructional strategies and methods others have used to construct their own presence. The results of the qualitative inquiry will inform instructors and designers in the selection of instructional methods to create and promote instructor presence in the online classroom. In addition, the research will raise faculty members’ awareness of the importance of high instructor presence as leading to a positive outcome on students’ satisfaction with the learning experience. Instructional designers and HRD faculty may find the results

of interest as they plan for and develop online learning environments for their own students. Finally, the added value of this qualitative inquiry is to encourage and promote further research in the area of instructor presence.

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