

Teaching Presence in Online Education: From the Instructor's Point of View

Kristi A. Preisman
Peru State College

Abstract

Most often the topic of creating presence in online education is viewed from the student perspective (Oztok & Brett, 2011). The purpose of this mixed methods research was to look at the creation of teaching presence from the vantage point of a *lone ranger* instructor (Anderson, 2004). Based on data collected from student grades, student-instructor communication, and course evaluations, the researcher/instructor set out to determine if creating a greater sense of teaching presence was a worthwhile investment of her time and energy. Over the course of three semesters, the researcher/instructor incorporated various techniques to create a greater sense of teaching presence in one of two simultaneously occurring graduate assessment courses. There was minimal evidence from this study that demonstrated that creating a greater sense of teaching presence in the online classroom was an effective use of the instructor's time and efforts. It was also determined that instructors play a key role in the creation and facilitation of the learning process, but it is likely more important for the instructor to simply be available for students through a well-structured course as opposed to creating a presence of oneself in the online classroom.

Introduction

This research, examined from the instructor's point of view, sets out to determine whether creating a greater sense of teaching presence is an effective investment of time and energy based on data collected from student grades, student-instructor communication, discussion board postings, and course evaluations. The motivation behind this research is twofold. First, according to Oztok and Brett's (2011) review of the research, the idea of presence is historically viewed through the eyes of the student learner and/or community of learners with a specific focus on strategies to create/improve presence in the online setting. The research presented here is based on the perspective of the instructor and how she perceived the time and energy invested in attempting to create teaching presence in her online courses. Second, though not conclusively proven (Van de Vord & Pogue, 2012), there is a general consensus that faculty perceive online education as more demanding and time consuming than face-to-face instruction (Bollinger & Waslik, 2009; Harber & Mills; 2008, Worley & Tesdell, 2009). If online courses are more demanding, it is important to make sure that the instructional choices made are a smart investment of the instructor's time and energy.

Literature Review

Social presence is a term that can take on vastly different meanings depending on the field in which it is being studied. Lowenthal (2010) stated, “It is often hard to distinguish between whether someone is talking about social interaction, immediacy, intimacy, emotion, and/or connectedness when they talk about social presence” (p. 125). Due to the fact that presence in online education is such a broad term, the researcher/instructor chose to examine this concept using the theoretical model of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer’s (2000) community of inquiry (CoI). Within this model, there are three elements that come together to create a complete educational experience in online education: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Anderson, 2004). Though the focus of this work is on teaching presence, social presence and cognitive presence are a part of a complete educational experience and, therefore, will be referenced. As mentioned, the definition of teaching presence that is used for this project comes from Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001):

...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. Teaching presence begins before the course commences as the teacher, acting as the instructional designer, plans and prepares the course of studies, and it continues during the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction when required. (p. 5)

Teaching presence consists of three critical roles for the instructor. According to Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001), the first responsibility is design and organization of the learning experience, which takes place prior to the course opening and during the run of the course. Second, instructors are responsible for the creating, implementing, and monitoring activities that encourage communication and interaction between the students, teachers, and content resources. Finally, instructors must contribute academic knowledge and relevant experiences through forms of direct instruction. Anderson (2004) also notes that students contribute to this third facet as well because they bring their own knowledge and experience to the course.

Research regarding presence, which can be referred to as social, teaching, instructor, and cognitive presence, focuses on a few specific areas. Most often, researchers will study the impact of presence on student success and satisfaction (Archibald, 2010; Allen & Laumakis, 2009; Bliss & Lawrence, 2009; Ladyshevsky, 2013; Oztok & Brett, 2011; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Shutt, Allen, & Laumakis, 2009; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004). Picciano (2002) found a significant correlation between positive social presence and students’ positive perception of their learning. Picciano (2002) and Jung et al. (2002) have also found some indication that a greater social presence correlates with higher performance. Others (e.g., Anderson et al., 2001; Rovai, 2002) have examined social presence and its impact on the development of community in online learning. There is a plethora of information ranging from articles to websites on how to create presence in the online classroom. Research that focuses on instructor satisfaction primarily pertains to institutional job satisfaction (e.g., McLawhon & Cutright, 2012; Wilson, 2008) or satisfaction with e-learning tools (e.g., Keengwe, Diteeyont, & Lawson-Body, 2012).

Dichotomy of Online Presence

There is a great dichotomy when studying presence in the online environment. Research promotes creating a greater sense of presence, immediacy, and/or community of learners in online courses because it is perceived that it can have an impact on students and the learning environment. Oztok and Brett (2011), through their meta-analysis of research on social presence, sum it up effectively when they state that “studying online communities through the concept of social presence could provide a fundamental understanding of how individuals connect, communicate, interact, and form relationships as they work collaboratively in an online environment” (para. 6).

However, a contradiction exists when one examines the various reasons why many students *choose* to take online courses. There is not a strong indication that students need a personal connection with the instructor; rather, the literature demonstrates that students enter the online world because it is suitable for independent learners because it offers a delivery format that is convenient, flexible, anonymous, and immediately accessible (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). Beaudoin, Kurtz, and Eden (2009) listed elements of online experiences that influenced satisfaction among Western students, and these included content and organization, convenience and flexibility, online interaction, and instructor's role, especially in providing feedback. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) found the indicators of instructor presence that were most important to students were clear course requirements, responsiveness to students' needs, timeliness of information, and instructor feedback. The authors stated that while there was a focus on instructor communication and responsiveness, students did not find importance in synchronous communication or being able to see or hear their instructors. According to Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006), the top three expectations of students include communication with the instructor, instructor feedback, and challenging online courses. Cheawjindakarn, Suwannathachote, and Theeraroungchaisri (2012) listed five critical success factors according to students in their higher education study. These factors, in order, were institutional management, learning environment (that included interactive learning with students and instructors), instructional design, services support, and course evaluation. A study conducted by Fetzner (2013) investigated why students leave online learning. Of the top 10 reasons they listed, only one addressed the instructor (teaching style). Most of the others addressed personal reasons, difficulty of course, or technical difficulties. Within this study, there was no indication that students left because the instructor was not present enough for their satisfaction.

Overall, the focus of online presence centers, as it should, on the learner and how much he or she is invested and part of the course. As stated earlier, researchers have examined through the measurement of involvement, grades, retention, and community how the student is impacted by social presence. The dichotomy of online presence and the examination of teaching presence from the viewpoint of the instructor is the motivation behind this research. Based on data collected from student grades, student–instructor communication, discussion board postings, and course evaluations, will the time and energy spent creating greater teaching presence be a worthwhile venture for the instructor?

Method

This mixed method research examines the creation of teaching presence from the vantage point of a *lone ranger* (Anderson, 2004) instructor, one who is solely responsible for the creation and management of the course. Based on data collected from student grades, student–instructor communication, discussion board postings and course evaluations, the researcher/instructor set out to determine if creating a greater sense of teaching presence was an effective investment of her time and energy. Through a three-semester study, the researcher/instructor incorporated various techniques to create a greater sense of teaching presence in one of two simultaneously occurring graduate assessment courses.

This study took place at a small state college in rural Nebraska. At this institution, courses are taught in a variety of settings that include face-to-face, hybrid, and online courses for undergraduate students and online-only programs for graduate students. Though the majority of students in the graduate program are teachers in Nebraska, there are graduate students from across the nation that complete degrees through this online program. As a lone ranger, the researcher/instructor is responsible for creating and developing her own course shells for each undergraduate and graduate course. There is a push at this institution to be more “present” to online students; however, there is minimal assistance or professional development provided by the institution to guide and/or assist instructors in this process.

Over the course of three semesters from 2011–2012, the researcher/instructor gathered data from the graduate department capstone course, Assessment of Instruction. Students were completing their

master's degrees in Curriculum and Instruction. Class size averaged 21 students, and each semester the researcher/instructor taught two sections of the course. Each course was eight weeks long with weekly assignments and discussion board postings, a final project, field experience, and the completion of a graduate portfolio.

The Assessment of Instruction course had been in production for five years prior to the beginning of this research study. During the first five years, the course did contain both synchronous and asynchronous elements. In order to conduct the research, the researcher/instructor duplicated the current course shell but worked to incorporate a greater sense of teaching presence into one of the shells based on Anderson's (2004) explanation of the three components of teaching presence. In the following sections, each of these components will be identified in both the original course shell and the modified course shell.

Original Course Shell: Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP)

First, regarding the design and organization of the learning experience, the original course centered on a textbook and supplemental readings, which helped to guide discussions and facilitate assignments. There were instructional PowerPoint presentations for students to view throughout the course that focused on the cumulative final project and some information regarding course material about assessment. Also, included were a variety of YouTube videos that addressed assessment from professionals, as well as entertaining views. These videos were selected to highlight key ideas from the week's lessons. Finally, voice-over PowerPoint presentations were included in the original course. These weekly presentations provided students opportunities to hear the instructor's voice as she addressed the main points of the upcoming week on each of the slides. Minimal direct instruction took place in these presentations.

Second, in the original assessment shell, the devising and implementing of activities to encourage discourse was minimal. The weekly discussion board forums were the only purposeful way created by the instructor for students to interact with the learning community. Each student was required to post one original thought and respond to three of their peers' responses each week. The researcher/instructor did not participate in the discussion board forums.

Finally, according to Anderson (2004), in order to add teaching presence to the online classroom, instructors should add subject matter expertise in a variety of forms through direct instruction. Throughout the course, instructor engagement was limited. The instructor responded to student questions through e-mails and phone calls. The assignments in the course were building blocks for the final project, so the instructor gave written feedback on the rough drafts in order to help students improve each section for the final project. There was no interaction between the instructor and students on the weekly discussion board unless there were specific questions posted in the "Questions/Comments" folder, which was a general forum for students to ask questions and/or make comments about course content, assignments, graduation expectations, or any other personal/professional issues.

Modified Course Shell: Increased Teaching Presence (ITP)

In order to better understand whether creating greater teaching presence was a worthwhile endeavor for the researcher/instructor, an enhanced Assessment course shell was created. In the revised Assessment course shell, along with the information listed above, there were more deliberate choices made to interact effectively with students and create a greater teaching presence. Each week, there were videos recorded that allowed students to see and hear the instructor that not only addressed the weekly goals, but also touched on instructional topics that students were going to read/explore throughout the week. The instructor also participated in the weekly discussion board forums by exchanging ideas with students, asking in-depth questions about their posts, and sharing personal educational experiences.

Screenr.com, which creates instant screencasts, was an additional method of feedback used for student assignments that allowed the instructor to display the students' papers and give verbal feedback as she addressed each section of the assignment. This tool gave students the opportunity to see the written comments and hear the instructor elaborate on the changes suggested for the final project.

Finally, there was a stronger emphasis placed on communicating with the students. There was an additional discussion forum that asked the students to share a bit about themselves: Skype conversations, phone calls, and e-mails were encouraged. Throughout this modified course shell, the three areas of teaching presence (Andersen, 2004)—design and organization, devising and implementing activity to encourage student interaction, and adding subject matter expertise— were addressed purposefully.

Data Collection and Analysis

Data was collected over three semesters from the two courses during the fall of 2011 and the spring and fall semesters of 2012. Between the six courses, a total of 124 students participated in the courses. The MTP courses were taught with limited contact between student and instructor, while the ITP courses included deliberate actions and activities to increase the instructor's presence in the online classroom.

The following data was collected: student grades (from the grade book); student–instructor communication (through e-mail); discussion board postings (information specifically posted in the Questions/Comments folder); and course evaluations (both quantitative and qualitative data). When examining student grades, there were four assignments selected for analysis. The first three were rough drafts of three parts of the final project, and the fourth assignment was the completed final project. An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare grades between each of the sections over the course of the three semesters. Discourse analysis was used to identify trends and themes within the written e-mail and discussion board communication. Finally, an independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare the 13-item course evaluations from the assessment courses.

Limitations

As with all studies, there are limitations. However, the limitations of this study will encourage further research. Based on the fact that the instructor is the researcher and vice versa, there is concern about using self-reported data and losing objectivity during the data analysis. Despite these concerns, this choice of research methods offered the researcher/instructor the opportunity to more closely analyze her own courses and come to conclusions about the creation of a greater sense of teaching presence in *her* online courses. All over the country, online courses are taught differently, and there would be no way truly to replicate this type of research because of the many variables that come into play with students, instructors, institutions, and researchers. The purpose of this study was for one instructor, who faces many exciting challenges as a lone ranger in the creation and implementation of her online courses, to share the results and insight into her research and pose questions for others to answer.

Another limitation of the research is the type of students that took part in the research. These were graduate students in their final course of a graduate degree program. The results will be different depending upon the group of students (undergraduate vs. graduate) and where they are in their program (beginning, middle, or end). The students in this research could have had the mindset that they did not need the presence of the instructor because they simply wanted to complete the course and receive their degree.

Online education is moving forward at an alarming pace, and there is great desire for presence in these settings. This research, though small in size and subjective given that it is one individual's teaching

methods, examines whether presence is a needed component from the instructor's point of view. Since it is a rarity to look at teaching presence from the instructor's point of view, it is hoped that others will follow along the lines of the type of self-study in order to better understand if creating presence in online education is a valuable use of time and effort.

Results

In this mixed method research, data were analyzed from student grades, discussion board postings, e-mails, and course evaluations collected from two courses. Tables A–C highlight themes that emerged through thematic analysis of the student–instructor communication via discussion board postings and e-mail. Table D includes the analysis of the four large course assignments, and Table E displays the comparison of the course evaluations. The written analysis highlighted comments that addressed teaching presence through specific keywords, such as *personal* and *connection*, *hearing your voice*, and indication of *thanks* or *appreciation*. This study addressed the areas of thanks and appreciation because, from the vantage point of the instructor, appreciation and gratitude can validate the work that goes into creating a greater sense of teaching presence.

Table A: *E-mail Communication (Over the Course of Three Semesters)*
Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP) Groups: 208 E-mails Sent to Instructor
Increased Teaching Presence (ITP) Groups: 181 E-mails Sent to Instructor

Type of comment	MTP	ITP
Referencing instructor facilitation/direction as <i>personal</i>	0 comments	7 comments
Referencing <i>hearing instructor voice</i>	0 comments	13 comments
Indication of <i>thanks/appreciation</i> to the instructor	13 comments	10 comments
Referencing feedback/guidance	22 comments	32 comment
DUH! questions	12 questions	7 questions

Table B *Discussion Board Postings (Posted to Questions/Comments Folder Only)*
Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP) Groups: 58 posts
Increased Teaching Presence (ITP) Groups: 122 posts

Type of comment	MTP	ITP
Referencing instructor facilitation/direction as <i>personal</i>	0 comments	0 comments
Referencing <i>hearing instructor voice</i>	0 comments	1 comment
Indication of <i>thanks/appreciation</i> to the instructor	0 comments	0 comments
Referencing feedback/guidance	6 comments	1 comment
DUH! questions	4 questions	9 questions

Table C *Instructor Evaluation Comments*
 37 Comments From 124 Students Over the Three-Semester Study

Type of comment	Minimal Teaching Presence	Increased Teaching Presence
Referencing instructor facilitation/direction as <i>personal</i>	1 comments	0 comments
Referencing <i>hearing instructor voice</i>	2 comments (referencing voice-over PowerPoints)	2 comments
Indication of <i>thanks/appreciation</i> to the instructor	0 comments	0 comments
Referencing feedback/guidance	11 comments	10 comments

There were 606 pieces of student–instructor communication analyzed. For the MTP courses, there were 58 discussion board postings, and in the ITP courses, there were 122 discussion board postings. Over the course of three semesters, there were 208 pieces of e-mail data collected from the MTP courses and 181 pieces of e-mail data collected from the ITP courses. Also analyzed were the comments listed in the course evaluations. Of the 124 students that participated in the courses over the course of the three-semester study, 37 students made comments on the evaluations.

Tables A–C highlight comments directly related to reference of teaching presence in various ways. Content analysis of e-mail communication, Question/Comments discussion board comments, and comments on the course evaluations were completed to examine the ways that students acknowledged teaching presence during each of the courses.

Based on the focus of the research and throughout the analysis of data, five areas emerged within the analysis of the e-mail communication and the discussion board postings. First, when examining comments regarding the facilitation and direction of the course, the researcher specifically looked for comments that would indicate a personal connection to the instructor. Secondly, with the personal connection through instruction, comments regarding hearing the instructor’s voice became evident in the e-mail communication. Prior to the updates of the assessment shell, there were minimal opportunities to see and/or hear the instructor.

Third, communications indicating thanks or appreciation were also evident. These comments connected to the focus of the research because through analysis of these comments, it could be determined whether or not the efforts made by the instructor to increase teaching presence had an impact on students. The fact that students took the time to mention gratitude for improvements made or lack thereof impacted the way the researcher/instructor viewed her efforts to create a greater sense of teaching presence.

A fourth theme that clearly emerged from the data analysis centered on feedback and guidance from the instructor. Based on previously mentioned research (Beaudoin, Kurtz, & Eden, 2009; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010), this is a part of online teaching that students find important. One of the goals in this research was to increase presence through increased feedback, and students commented on feedback/guidance in all areas of communication.

Finally, within these communications, the researcher noted that there were DUH! questions. These were questions that students asked that had seemingly obvious answers if students read the syllabus, weekly announcements, and/or e-mails, or viewed or listened to voice-over PowerPoint presentations, and weekly videos (ITP groups). These questions also impacted the instructor’s view of her work because fewer DUH! questions would indicate that the instructor’s efforts through the use of audio, video, and the written word were thorough and complete. The researcher identified how many of these questions were asked between the MTP and ITP groups because it could be assumed there would be fewer DUH! questions if there were more communication and presence in the course.

Grade Comparison of Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP) and Increased Teaching Presence (ITP) Groups

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare grades (Table D) between each of the sections over the course of the three semesters. In Assignments 1 and 2, there was a possibility of 20 points. Assignment 3 had 10 possible points, and Assignment 4 had 100 possible points. Based on this analysis, Assignment 3 was the only one of the four major assignments that was significant at the .05 level between the MTP and ITP groups.

Table D *Assignments: Grade Comparison of Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP) and Increased Teaching Presence (ITP) Groups*

	MTP	ITP	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Assignment 1	18.9 (2.5)	18.5 (3.6)	.626	60
Assignment 2	18.4 (2.5)	19.03 (1.8)	-1.6	60
Assignment 3	9.3 (.24)	9.8 (.71)	-2.04*	60
Assignment 4	95.4 (5.9)	95.9 (5.2)	-.56	60

Note. *= $p \leq .05$

Instructor Evaluation Comparison of MTP and ITP Groups

An independent sample *t*-test was conducted to compare course evaluations (Table E) from the assessment courses. Of the 13 evaluation criteria, one was statistically significant at the .05 level between the MTP and ITP groups throughout the three semesters: *The instructor clearly communicates course objectives and how they relate to the program’s goals and mission at the beginning of the course.*

Table E *Instructor Evaluation Comparison of Minimal Teaching Presence (MTP) and Increased Teaching Presence (ITP) Groups*

	MTP	ITP	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>
Question 1: The instructor clearly communicates course objectives and how they relate to the program's goals and mission at the beginning of the course.	1.6 (.84)	1.3 (.61)	2.06*	53
Question 2: The instructor follows the syllabus and/or explains when a deviation is necessary.	1.4 (.8)	1.3 (.55)	1.1	53
Question 3: Course material/presentations/discussions clearly relate to the course objectives.	1.5 (.64)	1.4 (.71)	.78	53
Question 4: Course material/presentations/discussions were well organized and clearly presented.	1.5 (.86)	1.4 (.69)	1.1	53
Question 5: Exams/assignments clearly relate to the course objectives.	1.4 (.72)	1.3 (.51)	1.2	53
Question 6: Exams/assignments are well organized and clearly presented.	1.6 (1.05)	1.5 (.7)	1.2	53
Question 7: Grading criteria is clear.	1.7 (1.08)	1.6 (.88)	.7	53
Question 8: Graded assignments are returned within a reasonable time.	1.4 (.63)	1.4 (.52)	.42	53
Question 9: Appropriate feedback is provided on graded material.	1.4 (.66)	1.3 (.48)	.69	53
Question 10: The instructor responds effectively to questions.	1.6 (1.02)	1.4 (.57)	1.5	53
Question 11: The instructor is available for individual help.	1.7 (.99)	1.5 (.64)	1.4	53
Question 12: The course is intellectually challenging.	1.6 (1.15)	1.5 (.7)	1.3	53
Question 13: The instructor teaches this course effectively.	1.5 (.91)	1.4 (.6)	1.4	53

Note. * = $p \leq .05$

Discussion

The results of this study indicate two findings regarding the creation of teacher presence in the online classroom from the instructor's point of view.

There Was Minimal Evidence From This Study That Demonstrated Creating a Greater Sense of Teaching Presence in the Online Classroom Was an Effective Use of the Instructor's Time and Efforts

Student/Instructor Communication According to Argon (2003), specific ways of increasing presence in the online classroom include incorporating audio and video, contributing to discussion boards, promptly answering e-mails, providing frequent feedback, and sharing personal stories and experiences. In the analysis of the student-instructor communication, the researcher specifically looked for conversations that focused on this information. Connected themes that emerged included referencing instructor facilitation/direction as *personal*, referencing *hearing instructor voice*, indication of *thanks/appreciation* to the instructor, referencing *guidance/direction*, and *feedback*. Some analysis from the study indicated that the efforts of the researcher/instructor to increase teaching presence were effective uses of her time, but other analysis did not indicate that the extra work was worth the time invested.

First, by creating a greater sense of teaching presence in one of the two graduate courses, it was assumed that there would be a greater sense among students of personal connection to the instructor as a result of seeing her and hearing her voice. There were a total of 595 e-mail and discussion board postings from both the MTP and ITP groups over the course of the three semesters. There were eight comments related to a *personal* connection with the instructor. Seven of the eight comments came from the ITP group. Similarly, there were 18 comments regarding hearing the instructor's voice through PowerPoint presentation and videos. Sixteen of these were from the ITP group. It makes sense that more of these comments would come from the group with increased teaching presence; however, there were not very many comments made that related to a personal connection resulting from hearing the researcher/instructor. This representation of importance placed on hearing/seeing the instructor demonstrates support of the dichotomy of online instruction. Though some research (e.g., Cheawjindakarn, Suwannathachote, & Theeraroungchaisri, 2012; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010) demonstrates the value of instructor interaction, only 4% of the communication that occurred between the students and instructor in this study validated the desire or need for the instructor to be present.

A second observation is related to the comments that referenced feedback/guidance. The use of feedback is a significant part of online teaching because of the lack of verbal and nonverbal interaction between student and instructor (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). There were 39 comments made about feedback from the MTP group and 43 from the ITP group. Overall, there were positive comments regarding feedback/guidance from both groups, but there were more negative comments that came from the MTP group. This is consistent with having less teaching presence in the online classroom. The ITP group did have more comments relating to feedback/guidance, but the majority of these comments were solicited regarding Screenr.com. Most of these comments were very positive regarding the guidance and direction the feedback provided.

There were two areas that were somewhat surprising to the researcher/instructor, and these related to the comments that addressed thanks/appreciation and what were considered DUH! questions.

Each of these categories was similar for both groups. Comments that identified some kind of acknowledgement of the researcher/instructor's efforts in the course were a bit more prevalent in the MTP group at a total of 13, whereas the ITP group, where all of the extra effort was placed into increasing teaching presence, had only 10 comments expressing thanks/appreciation. This did have a negative impact on the researcher/instructor and how worthwhile she believed her time and energy were in creating a greater sense of teaching presence.

DUH! questions were questions that students asked whose answers were seemingly obvious if students read the syllabus, weekly announcements, and/or e-mails, or viewed or listened to voice-over PowerPoint, and weekly videos (ITP groups). One could make the prediction that the more exposure to the information, the more likely students would be to understand and be able to follow through with the expectations. Though the course navigation was similar for both groups, the ITP group received more direction and clarification through the weekly videos as well as verbal comments through the evaluation tool, Screenr.com. The researcher/instructor believed that by allowing the students to hear her, this would emphasize the written information, and there would be less confusion for the ITP group. There was no difference between the MTP and the ITP groups regarding the DUH! questions; therefore, the extra efforts to create the videos and use Screener.com were not validated from the instructor's point of view.

In summary, the increased student-instructor communication did not clearly validate the researcher/instructor's work to create a greater sense of teaching presence. There was not enough difference between the two sections, especially in the areas of thanks/appreciation and DUH! questions, to demonstrate that the efforts of the researcher/instructor made a difference. In other areas, such as personal connection and hearing the instructor's voice, the comments made regarding these two pieces creating a greater sense of teaching presence were minimal. The area of feedback/guidance was a stronger theme in both of the groups. Whether students were addressing it in a positive or negative way, both groups found this to be an important aspect to discuss.

Student Grades Most research on student success in the online classroom focuses on self-reported student learning (e.g., Jung, Choi, Lim, & Leem, 2002; Picciano, 2002; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). This research, however, examined student grades for four of the major assignments in the course. The first three assignments were rough drafts of three sections of the fourth and final assignment. It was important to examine whether or not there were differences in the scores of these assignments because of how the instructor/researcher taught the courses. In the ITP course, these assignments were explained through written word, voice-over PowerPoints, and videos. They were then submitted and assessed through the Screenr.com grading tool. The students in the ITP group received more direct instruction and verbal feedback on each of the three assignments. Despite the increased amount of teaching presence for the ITP group, there was only one assignment that was significantly higher between the two groups.

The efforts to create a greater teaching presence in the three areas of teaching presence from the community of inquiry framework did not lead to a significant difference between the two groups' assignments. Perhaps the use of audio/video was not embraced by the ITP group. Through the study, the instructor noted that not all students in the ITP group were watching the weekly videos. As an estimate, between 40%-60% of the students in the ITP group watched the videos each week. Though these numbers were not officially recorded, this could be a possible indicator of how worthwhile the videos were. A second indicator of the impact of audio/visual increase was the use of Screenr.com for the ITP group. Though this tool received many positive remarks, there were some who indicated that the basic written feedback was sufficient:

Listening to the voice over did not do anything for me further than what I got from simply reading the comments (e-mail communication, spring 2012)

Thanks [*sic*] you so much for e-mailing me the attachment [of my paper]. It was much easier to use that rather than the screenr. I did like the screenr, however the attachment is a nice way for me to make sure I don't forget anything (e-mail communication, fall 2012)

I enjoyed viewing the Screen. It has to take a lot of time to do that! I think it would be great to keep doing the Screenr, but I find the attachment of what you have entered in my paper to be the most beneficial (e-mail communication, fall 2012)

Though the ITP course was given more audio/visual directions for assignments and feedback during the eight-week course, only one of the four assignments was significantly different. The differences in student grades did not validate the work of creating a greater sense of teaching presence.

Instructor Course Evaluations Of the 13 evaluation criteria, only one was statistically significant at the .05 level between the ITP and MTP groups: *The instructor clearly communicates course objectives and how they relate to the program's goals and mission at the beginning of the course.* The MTP group was given information about the course objectives through the syllabus and voice-over PowerPoint presentations in Week 1 of the course. The ITP group heard about the objectives through these two methods as well as Weekly Welcome videos, which addressed goals and objectives for each week. At the onset of the course, it was believed that multiple evaluation criteria would have been significant between the ITP and MTP groups based on the efforts placed into creating a greater sense of teaching presence.

It is interesting that the only significant evaluation criterion was connected to feedback/guidance, as stated in the student-instructor communication above. The course objectives were stated in both written and verbal form each week for the ITP group, and this could have made them more secure in their understanding of the course plans and procedures each week.

Instructors Play a Key Role in the Creation and Facilitation of the Learning Process, but It Is Likely More Important for the Instructor to Simply Be Available for Students Through a Well-Structured Course as Opposed to Creating a Presence of Oneself in the Online Classroom

Based on the results of this study, it cannot be said that creating a greater sense of teaching presence was an effective investment of the instructor's time and energy. Based on the data, it appeared that students needed the instructor to be present regarding organization, communication, feedback, and assistance, but the creation of the teaching presence and the attempted connections associated with it did not appear as important. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) support this conclusion:

It is possible that the instructor attributes that students find important in online courses are not indicative that the teacher is present but are indicative of the teacher's presence. Teacher presence (i.e., personality traits and dispositions) may have little to do with the level at which a teacher is present in the course. (Discussion section, para. 5)

This research also suggests the need for an instructor to be *present* as opposed to having a *presence*. Perhaps it would be wiser to focus on quality or “best practice” online strategies that positively impact student learning.

Regarding the written comments in the instructor evaluations, of the 37 comments (from 124 students) listed, 21 addressed instructor guidance/directions or feedback both positively and negatively. Findings from Sheridan and Kelly (2010) and Mupinga, Nora, and Yaw (2006) also found instructor guidance/direction and feedback to be important to students. The comments gathered for this study focus more on the *process* of guidance/direction and feedback rather than a connection to the instructor. For example, students said the following:

Very well-structured course. (Course evaluation, fall 2011)

There are discrepancies in due dates between Blackboard and the syllabus which makes it confusing. (Course evaluation, fall 2011)

Assignments are relevant to the course objectives. It was refreshing to have fewer restrictions/guidelines for DB posts- this made it much easier to apply relevant comments rather than ‘wordy’ comments to meet a length goal. (Course evaluation, fall 2012)

The instructor is extremely helpful in her feedback. She is in-depth and provided constructive criticism. (Course evaluation, fall 2011)

The only item to work on is responding to discussion board questions posted to her. (Course evaluation, spring 2012)

I’m absolutely amazed at how quickly this instructor grades and effectively responds to my work so I know how to do it better. (Course evaluation, spring 2012)

Sheridan and Kelly (2010) also found that students did not place a high value on synchronous or face-to-face communication; nor did they find great significance in hearing or seeing the instructor. This research explored this idea as well. E-mail and discussion board communications were examined for comments that addressed the videos posted by the instructor, including PowerPoints, the Weekly Welcome videos, and the use of Screener.com as a grading tool. Within these comments, there was minimal reference to hearing the instructor throughout the course. There were a total of 18 comments out of 606 total communications between students and instructor. It is important to note that many of these comments were solicited because the instructor specifically asked for feedback on the Screenr.com grading tool.

From the communication exchanges for both groups, there were 82 comments addressing teacher feedback/guidance. In comparison, there were more comments addressing teacher feedback/guidance than there were for hearing/seeing the instructor. With a total of 18 comments regarding hearing/seeing, there were over four times as many comments about feedback. It seems that the important aspects of the student-to-instructor connection came more from the professional interaction through grading rather than the personal connection that the instructor tried to create during these courses.

Of the 13 instructor evaluation criteria, only one was statistically significant: *The instructor clearly communicates course objectives and how they relate to the program’s goals and mission at the beginning of the course.* There were items that could have more clearly indicated the importance of presence if they had been significant. These items touched on topics such as instructor availability, communication and feedback, and whether or not the instructor taught the course effectively. It is

interesting that the one criterion that was significant relates to the literature that demonstrates that students find content organization important (Beaudoin, Kurtz, & Eden, 2009; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010). The organization of the course can allow for more flexibility for students because they know the expectations of the course and are able to complete the tasks in a manner that is suitable for them.

It is also important to readdress the idea of the dichotomy of online education. Research demonstrates that students take online courses for self-gratifying reasons—flexibility, accessibility, convenience, and the freedom to achieve goals from anywhere at any time. This research identifies with this idea and supports the thought that the researcher/instructor was a needed part of the course through organization, facilitation, and guidance, but her teaching presence was not a required part of success in the course. The data showed there was not enough difference between the MTP and ITP groups regarding student grades, student–instructor communication, and course evaluations to highlight the need for personal connection or community.

Conclusion

The results of this study indicate that the researcher/instructor’s efforts to create a greater sense of teaching presence were not an effective use of her time and energy. The statistics demonstrate minimally significant differences between student grades and the criteria of the instructor evaluations. Overall, the written communication indicated a need for feedback and guidance more than the need to see and hear the instructor.

Based on these conclusions, and Anderson et al.’s (2001) idea of teaching presence, instructors may want to focus more on the design and facilitation of online courses by developing and implementing more highly individualized cognitive activities and assignments. Feedback, especially formative feedback, was important to students in this study. Instructors may want to invest time in this type of progressive feedback to support students’ autonomous work throughout the course, as it was more important to students in this study than the other means of creating teaching presence. It is also important to further identify teaching strategies and methods that are considered “best practices” in online education. Effective online teaching addresses course elements such as clear goals and objectives, effective course management, timely and responsive feedback, quality discussion board opportunities, and a variety of learner opportunities to process information. In relation to this research, it is important to identify which strategies are the most effective for students and the best use of instructor time and energy.

The overall goal of this research was to share information and experiences that can positively impact online education. This study, which is unique to the vantage point of the instructor, can be a springboard for more research regarding the value of creating presence in the online classroom. The time and energy invested in online teaching by the instructor, especially if she or he is a lone ranger in the creation and implementation of the course, needs to be evaluated to find out what will result in the best rate of return.

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