

Integrating the Intangibles into Asynchronous Online Instruction: Strategies for Improving Interaction and Social Presence

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Abstract

This paper considers how instructors of asynchronous online courses in the Humanities might integrate intangibles associated with face-to-face instruction into their online environments. It presents a case study of asynchronous online instruction in a philosophy and religion department at a midsize public university in the southeastern United States. Based on interviews with instructors and observations of course shells, it presents five strategies for improving interaction and social presence in asynchronous online environments: establishing an online community that is comfortable—yet structured, humanizing the course whenever possible, making feedback a priority, establishing clear expectations, then monitoring discussions, and making the course relevant to learners.

Keywords: Online instruction, asynchronous, interaction, social presence.

Interaction and social presence significantly influence the quality of online instruction. Three forms of interaction have become recognized as instrumental for online teaching and learning: learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner (Moore, 1989). Learner-content interaction refers to the learner's engagement with content to construct meaning, relate it to personal knowledge, and apply it to problem solving; learner-instructor interaction seeks to stimulate the learner's interest or motivate the student; learner-learner interaction refers to interaction among learners or learners in groups. Interaction has been identified as important to learner satisfaction and motivation in online courses (Cole, Shelley, & Swartz, 2014; Northrup, 2002; Berge, 1999), as well as cognitive engagement (Tamim, Bernard, Borokhovski, & Abrahmi, 2011). Three types of presence have been identified as important in online teaching and learning, as detailed in the "Community of Inquiry" model: cognitive, social, and teaching (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Cognitive presence refers to the construction of meaning through sustained communication and is a crucial element of critical thinking and knowledge construction; social presence was initially defined as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as "real people" – i.e. with their full personality – but has been more recently described as "creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, skepticism, expressing and contributing to ideas" (Garrison & Akyol, 2013); teaching presence refers to the design of the educational experience (course content, learning activities, assessment) and facilitation of that experience. The establishment of

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social presence allows cognitive presence to be sustained, and teaching presence enables integration of cognitive and social presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In online environments, text-based communication contains cues indicating such social presence, including personal histories (cultural background, education, etc.), personalities (attitude, humor, etc.), and current circumstances (location, profession, etc.). Several conditions are required in order to facilitate social presence, including the ability to send and read such social presence cues, opportunity for interactions, and motivation to engage in relational exchanges (Kehrwald, 2008). This study examined how instructors might integrate interaction and social presence into their asynchronous online environments.

Methodology

The study adopted a case study approach – a qualitative mode of inquiry suitable when “a ‘how’ or ‘why’ question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control” (Yin, 2003). While the results of this study are limited in the degree to which they are generalizable, the case study method allows one to capture the complexity of the case, including its multiple realities and different viewpoints (Stake, 1995). The case is a philosophy and religion department at a midsize public university in the southeastern United States, in which a significant number of faculty members teach asynchronous online courses – over half of all full-time faculty (9 of 17) and a third of all part-time faculty (3 of 8).

Participants

The entire population of online instructors in the department was interviewed, including eight men and three women, eight full-time faculty members and three part-time faculty members. They have taught on average 15 sections – with the mean being 12 sections – of asynchronous online courses from 2008. Of the total 187 sections of online courses taught from 2008-2015, 183 were lower-level courses and 90 were upper-level courses. The average number of sections for each course was 13; the median number of sections was 12.

Data Collection & Analysis

The study employed various data collection methods to allow for methodological triangulation, including 1) archival records about online instruction within the department, 2) interviews with all faculty members who taught online courses in the department (eleven total), which were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed, and 3) observation of course shells as well as course documents including syllabi, learning activities, and assessments. Interviews focused on the perspectives and experiences of the instructors. Each participant was interviewed once: eight interviews were conducted face-to-face and three interviews were via email. The length of the face-to-face interviews ranged from 14-65 minutes; most were a half hour long. Interviews sought to uncover the various levels of meanings embedded in the situation – online instruction – that might enable a better understanding through “a structural analysis of what is most common, most familiar, most self-evident” (Van Manen, 1990) to those who engage in online instruction. They were

all semi-structured interviews: although there was a set of questions that guided the interview process in a consistent manner, allowance was made for probing, rephrasing of questions, or asking the questions in a different sequence than the interview guide. Interview questions addressed perceived challenges, strengths, and strategies of online instruction.

Interviews were then transcribed and coded for emergent common themes using the constant comparative method – an iterative process of examining data and theory concurrently – that consists of four stages: 1) comparing incidents applicable to each category, 2) integrating categories and their properties, 3) delimiting the theory, and 4) writing the theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Some (such as “social, cognitive, and instructor presence”) of the categories derived from literature in the field of Instructional Technology, others (such as “intangibles”) were “in vivo” categories that came from the interviewee’s vocabulary (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After discovering uniformities in the original set of categories, delimitation involved formulating a theory with a smaller set of higher-level categories until the point that they became “theoretically saturated” (Glaser & Strauss, 1967).

Observation of course shells on the university’s Learning Management System (LMS) allowed greater understanding of online instruction from the perspective of the learner. It enabled one to experience the interface encountered by students, gave access to course documents, assignments, modules, discussion forum topics, and assessments, and it included threads and posts of former students, which gave a sense of the breadth and level of discussion in the course. Course documents were analyzed to understand how instructors communicated their expectations, approached their learning goals, and implemented their vision of best practices. They were taken from a variety of courses, and alongside the course shells they gave insight into the way in which the learner’s online experience was structured and how course expectations were communicated.

Results

Social presence was largely superficial, with discussion boards in which learners projected themselves and their personalities, but rarely raised probing questions or critical comments in response to their peers’ discussion board posts. This may stem from the fact that only two instructors posted a rubric or expectation for what constituted a good discussion board post, specifying that “I agree with you,” “I don’t agree with you,” “Yes,” “No,” or “Ditto” were all unacceptable posts to their peers. Because social presence was lacking, interaction with the instructor became a more influential factor in determining the quality of online instruction. In fact, one could argue that the three most frequently cited challenges of online instruction were exacerbated by the absence of social presence (Table 1 below).

Intangibles: The Challenge of Replicating Classroom Dynamics

“Intangibles” was an “in vivo” category that surfaced in several interviews in reference to classroom dynamics, which many participants found difficult – if not impossible – to

Table 1 Challenges of Online Teaching.

	Number of responses
Replicating the classroom dynamic	10
Facilitating interactions	7
Time management	4
Technology	3
Assessment	3
Language and wording	3
Rigid structure	2

replicate in an online environment. All but one respondent said that face-to-face classes were better than online courses because of such “intangibles.” The one exception clarified that while online classes were better for some non-traditional students, face-to-face classes were better during the academic year because, in his words, “we’re going to fumble our way to a better understanding of what’s going on here.” He said, “There’s just something about that. I mean I use the term ‘intangible.’ Something intangible, but intangibly valuable for those students, that I know when some of the students leave the room, they got something. Even if it was only an exercise, it was a good exercise in thinking, in critically evaluating...” He suggests that something intangible arises when students are in a classroom, around a table, thinking through topics together with an instructor. Similarly, another instructor wrote, “I think many students need to see critical thinking modeled in person, not just be told to think critically. It is useful for them to see “experts” think through issues and be puzzled along with them in the classroom, a valuable interaction that can get lost in online classes.” All but one respondent mentioned similar sort of “intangibles” from classroom dynamics that they claimed could not be replicated in an asynchronous online environment, including spontaneous questions, tangential discussions, “ah ha” moments of realization, delving into issues, or teasing out subtleties in the moment. One instructor explained, “It’s difficult to mimic the student-teacher interaction in the physical classroom. There are ways to create group discussion and participation online, but nothing I’ve found comes close to the spontaneous questions, discussion, and other intellectual ‘tangents’ that can emerge in the classroom.”

Another aspect of classroom dynamics identified as an important by four respondents was the ability to read cues from students’ verbal inflection and body language, which they saw as critical when discussing complex issues. As one instructor related:

I deal with *very* difficult issues. And when you’re having discussions I can see *immediately* on the faces of students what their reactions are, how I’m going to have to react, how they’re interpreting what another student says, to see if I need to intervene, to redirect it or reinterpret or say, ‘calm down.’ It’s much harder on discussion boards: you don’t know how people react, they’re not using emoticons or little smilies to say, ‘I’m kidding,’ or ‘This is serious.’ Some people interpret a statement as being yelling, even if it isn’t in all caps. And they don’t know the students as well. And that’s a problem.

Another instructor concurred about the value of nonverbal communication in face-to-face courses. He said, “You can tell with the look on student’s faces if they got it... I like saying stuff with a straight face and waiting for students to get it. I can’t do it [online].” While both instructors described using humor frequently in their face-to-face courses, they described their reticence to bring such humor into the online environment for fear of being misunderstood by their students. One remarked, “Our university lawyer is fond of saying, “Nothing is as funny on the witness stand as it is in an email.” So you always have to think of, “What would this sound like, outside of, you know, with no context, someone is just reading what you said. That’s how somebody is going to hear it, the worst possible way. I find that tricky, with the topics that we deal with.” Another instructor echoed this concern saying, “Online everything is LOUD. Everything you write, even if you write a student a gentle email, it could crush them. So, I don’t know, the impact is different. I think that’s hard.” She also shared her concern that she could not pick up on cues as readily as in her face-to-face classroom, saying, “The kind of stuff that you can pick up on when you can smell the person is something. You miss cues. You know, you miss cues anyway, and I’m not the best judge of people so I miss all kinds of cues, but I’m even missing more cues. I don’t know what to make of it.”

Since nonverbal communication is important for gauging student comprehension, reactions, and emotions, it impinges upon the types of topics that you can address in an online environment. One instructor remarked about his face-to-face class:

It’s uncomfortable. There are people in the class that have sat like this [*taking a guarded position, with his legs crossed*]. But I think it’s valuable for them. And I’m challenging the others, the more smug individuals who are skeptical about any kind of reconciliation between the two. So, that bit of uncomfortableness I think is really crucial to good education. The climate has to be comfortable enough so you can talk, but not so comfortable that you can just relax, knowing I’m clearly right. Instead that you’re open to being challenged, and being challenged in front of other people, where heads are going to swivel, and they’re going to say, Okay what are you going to say now? It’s hard to see how that’s replicated online.

For this reason, the instructor said he would never dream of doing his upper-level classes online. In his words it would “verge on heresy” to do so. Most instructors expressed a similar opinion that they would never do an upper-level course online because it was difficult or impossible to replicate the dynamics of a seminar.

In this way, “intangibles” cut across the three types of presence identified as important to an educational experience in a community of inquiry: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Instructors associated “intangibles” with all three types of presence: the spontaneous questions and “ah ha” moments that indicate cognitive presence, the degree of discomfort and comfort that facilitates a “social presence” conducive for critical inquiry and discussion, and the relationships built between students and instructors via humor, nonverbal cues, back-and-forth exchanges, and organic classroom dynamics. Research has shown that “instructional im-

mediacy” – behaviors that enhance closeness including verbal interactions (humor, use of students’ names, encouragement and follow-up in discussions) and nonverbal interactions (smiling, eye contact, body movements) – encourage students to value the learning task, which in turn enhances cognitive learning (Rodriquez, Plax & Kearney, 1996). Since asynchronous online environments can only resort to verbal immediacy to elicit such learning, scholars note the importance of instructors using verbal interactions in online environments. However, as we saw above, some instructors were reluctant to engage in humor for fear of being misunderstood.

Interaction: Discussion Forums and Their Discontents

Instructors primarily discussed the difficulty of facilitating quality interactions among students in asynchronous online discussion forums, but they also mentioned challenges of interacting with their students individually, which accords with previous studies of faculty perception of online instruction (Chiasson et al., 2015). In regards to the former, some instructors described online discussions as not worth the effort – “an impossible waste of time,” “the blind leading the blind,” and “ten times more work” – while others displayed skepticism about the depth of engagement that occurs in discussion forums. To encourage substantive posts, one instructor said: “I gave them specific instructions that they had to be substantial, i.e. none of this, “I agree with her” [or] “I agree with him.” You actually had to say something. And – this was the most labor intensive part – I graded *each one, every week.*” Although two respondents suggested that discussion forums allowed students to think through their responses, and another participant said students were less inhibited in online settings, most instructors expressed concerns about the quality of online discussions, and they contrasted those discussions with the deeper level of interaction and relationships established in face-to-face classes. One instructor observed there is “a quasi-social or quasi-political aspect of what goes on in the classroom. You’re learning to respect others’ points of view, take them seriously, and interact with them in a well-reasoned courteous fashion.” He questioned whether it was possible to do online. Another instructor remarked that the level of anonymity possible in online classes makes some weary because posts can become disrespectful.

Instructors mostly expressed frustration or wariness about facilitating student-student interactions in online discussion forums, but several also described difficulties pertaining to instructor-student interactions. Three participants said that they did not have as good a rapport with their online students, or that they were unsettled by the relative anonymity of their online students – that they would not recognize them if they passed by them on campus. Three other respondents – all part-time instructors – remarked that instead of interacting with a group of students in a classroom, they tended to interact with students one-on-one. As one of them put it, they moved from “one instructor to twenty-five students” to twenty-five “one-on-ones.” This relates to another perceived challenge of online instruction: time management. Several instructors struggled with the expectation and pressure of maintaining constant communication with their students. As one instructor noted:

So there's a feeling that I *always* have to be online, *always* have to be available. I certainly have gotten that. Some people have made it explicit in their syllabi that I will get back to you in 24 hours, but don't expect anything sooner, or don't hassle me until after 24 hours. But I certainly see that as one of the most troubling aspects of online classes, is that there *is* a sense in which the class is *always* running, and that can feel especially burdensome to faculty – at least those who haven't learned a degree of “cut yourself off and just not going to be bothered.”

Technology and assessment were also identified as challenges of online instruction: after having students repeatedly encounter technical issues while taking tests, instructors said they resorted to open-note and open-book assignments, giving students 24 hours to complete them. However, student-student and instructor-student interactions – and the time required to facilitate them – were cited more frequently as challenges of online instruction

Feedback: The Best Practice of Online Instruction

In the absence of social presence and quality learner-learner interaction, a greater onus fell upon teaching presence and instructor-learner interaction. This was reflected in the third theme that emerged from data analysis, namely the importance of prompt responses and constructive feedback from instructors. Seven of the eleven instructors described it as a best practice for online instruction (Table 2 below). One instructor explained that prompt responses were essential because “the only connection they have with you is through this interface, so the more human you can make it, the better.” Another said that he learned the importance of quickly responding to student emails from a positive student review that said, “It seemed like he cared because he responded *so fast*.” He emphasized that students are looking for quick feedback, to see you connected, and not simply “throwing class up and coming and grading every couple of weeks.” In this way, students connect with their instructor – see him or her as more caring and human – if they receive prompt responses to emails and assignments.

Table 2 Best Practices of Online Instruction.

	Number of responses
Timely response and feedback	7
Frequent monitoring of students	5
Different modes of presentation	4
Establishing clear expectations	3
Encouraging student accountability	3
Being professional	1
Including a non-evaluated venue for student expression	1
Encouraging students to ask questions or make comments	1

Not only should one be prompt in giving responses or delivering feedback, but another instructor also emphasized the importance of giving ample constructive feedback. When he spoke with his students about their online learning experiences, he said:

Their single biggest complaint couldn't have been more underlined: I don't get feedback from the professor. I don't hear back. I get a number, I don't get a grade, and there's no explanation as to why. I suppose in one sense this is a general rule, whether online or face-to-face. That feedback from their professor is all the difference in the world for them, but I think in particular for online, because in the online setting, if it ain't for the feedback, you get nothing. You don't even see the person talking. Where it's one thing to go to class, and at least you know there's a human being there. In the online class, I suppose from their perspective it might be a kind of Turing test, wondering whether or not there's a live conscious being on the other end. For all you know it's just a system. So they really appreciate that.

Acknowledging that it takes substantial time to generate ample feedback, he described how he developed shortcuts to make feedback "both substantial but also less than burdensome." Anticipating the range of potential responses to a particular assignment, since he has used it in previous courses, he developed canned responses to each of the potential responses and adds a sentence or two of specific comments for each paper.

Monitoring Student Activity

Five respondents mentioned the importance of monitoring student activity in online courses. One instructor emphasized the importance of laying out expectations and having students acknowledge those expectations by signing a netiquette agreement. Other instructors emphasized the value of monitoring student activity to keep track of student participation. One instructor emphasized the facility of monitoring student activity via the Learning Management System, and he identified it as a distinct advantage of online courses. In addition to monitoring student progress, instructors recommended making students aware of their own responsibility for keeping up with course assignments, especially since students tend to underestimate the work required for online courses. Three instructors said it was important to encourage student accountability, acknowledging that students who were not strong independent learners tended to fall behind in their coursework.

Relevance

Relevance – the fifth and final theme that emerged through data analysis – refers to the ways instructors designed and delivered their courses that were relevant to learners. It includes, but is not limited to, content, assignments, as well as modes of presentation. Four instructors emphasized the importance of going beyond just having students read material and testing them on their comprehension. They emphasized the importance of different modes of presentation, for example posting videos that incorporated pictures and videos, not simply a recorded lecture. Those who used sequenced or staged assign-

ments described how they would share a resource or video or reading, then include prompts to answer, and respond to prompts either individually or in groups. One instructor described his sequence as either “Read, Write, Watch” or “Read, Write, Discuss, and Watch,” meaning that students would either: read an article, answer questions about it, then watch the lecture, or read an article, post to a discussion board and respond to others.

These themes – Intangibles, Interaction, Feedback, Monitoring, and Relevance – were the primary themes that emerged in the data analysis. Before discussing these results, I would acknowledge a final theme that did not emerge frequently in my analysis of interviews, but applied particularly to my observation of course shells: Professionalism. One instructor suggested that many instructors overlook the need for professionalism in their online instruction. Just as one might dress as if one were doing a face-to-face interview in preparation for a phone interview – to put one into the right frame of mind – he suggested that instructors should put on the professor uniform while answering emails, giving feedback, or posting responses. He said, “They’re not treating it as professionally as when you’re walking into the classroom, you know 30 eyes are on you, and you say, “I’m going to do the best I can do right now.” So you really do need the right *kind* of person who can say yes, this – my website, my Blackboard thing, how professional it looks – *this* is how they’re judging me. This is the equivalent of not wearing ripped jeans to class.” He was the sole instructor to identify course shells as significant – as the primary interface between instructors and student. Observation of course shells further substantiated his claim: the entry page for many course shells consisted of a list of documents, and only one entry page personalized the interface by including a video welcome from the instructor. In regards to usability, the toolbars for many course shells appeared haphazard or were not streamlined, for example, one had the link of “Start Here!” embedded halfway down the toolbar; and only one course shell explained to students how to navigate the website

Discussion

The case study results suggest that when instructors fail to accommodate social presence in the design and delivery of their courses, their instruction lacks the dimensions of cognitive, social, and teaching presence that facilitate a community of inquiry, and instructor-learner communication and interaction become even more crucial to online instruction. The following sections consider five strategies for improving interaction and social presence in asynchronous online courses.

Establish an Online Community that is Comfortable—yet Structured

Social learning theory claims that learners construct knowledge by experiencing multiple perspectives of others through social interactions and collaboration (McCombs, 2015; Bryant & Bates, 2015; van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). Instructors should create a community in which students feel comfortable interacting with their peers, raising spontaneous questions, sharing “ah ha” moments, and exchanging social cues since they do not have access to nonverbal cues. To create this type of community, we can refer to research on social presence in online instruction. For example, a simple and clearly labeled course

menu can facilitate better interaction (Harris, Nier-Weber, & Borgman, 2016), and a course orientation that includes a welcome letter, an explanation of how to navigate the course, netiquette rules, etc. has been identified as crucial for establishing a safe and comfortable environment for such interactions (Lehman & Conceição, 2010).

Not only does such course structure enhance students' sense of community, but structured discussion also encourages complex reasoning and higher-order thinking skills (Goldenberg, 1993; Tsui, 2002). Since most instructors view critical thinking as an important learning outcome, they can follow guidelines for creating structured discussions in their online courses, including using a modular approach to topical coverage, using limited set of open-ended questions, allowing sufficient time, and assuming the role of facilitator (Sautter, 2007). Effective facilitation of asynchronous online discussion forums depends on instructors clearly describing expectations about the depth of posts (Williams, Jaramillo, & Pesko, 2015), providing a participation rubric and/or examples of quality student interactions, and including forums for both socio-emotional discussions as well as content or task discussions on authentic topics (Rovai, 2007). Open-ended questions might follow the MANIC strategy of what students found Most important, Agreed with, did Not agree with, found Interesting, and Confusing (Curry & Cook, 2014), the four-question technique to encourage analysis (i.e. what was learned), reflection (i.e. why it is important), relating (i.e. how the material relates to the learners' personal lives) and generating (i.e. what questions they now have about the material (Dietz-Uhler & Lanter, 2009), or other effective online discussion strategies (Darabi, Liang, Suryavanshi, & Yurekli, 2013).

Humanize the Course Wherever Possible

This strategy addresses the importance (but difficulty) that instructors expressed about conveying their passion for the material, their reticence about being misinterpreted if they used humor, and their feeling of not knowing their students. Instructors should seek to humanize as many interfaces of the course as possible: the entry page of the course shell, course orientation, self-introduction, and office hours. Observation of course shells showed they rarely showed instructors in pictures or videos, instead presenting text or narrated Power Point slides, which prevents students from connecting with the instructor in a human way. Instead of relegating the contact between instructors and students to responses to emails or feedback about assignments, instructors can humanize as many interfaces of their courses as possible so that students can get a sense of their passion, personality or persona (Crawford-Ferre & Wiest, 2012; Major, 2010).

A simple way to do this would be including a video welcome on the entry page, in which the instructor speaks directly to the students. Each time the students enter the course shell they would see the freeze frame of their instructor – however unflattering it may appear – that could reinforce a sense of connection with their instructor. Secondly, one might have students upload brief introductory videos instead of limiting such introductions to threaded posts, which would provide further social cues that might facilitate student-student interaction as well as instructor-student interaction. Thirdly, instructors might upload clips of videos that convey a sense of their teaching persona – for example, when they

used humor in classroom settings and the students' reactions – which several of the interviews cited as a desideratum. Finally, when appropriate, instructors can use emoticons to convey their emotions, lighten the mood, or reduce ambiguity of discourse (Wall, Kaye, & Malone, 2016; Skovholt, Grønning, & Kankaanranta, 2014), or to encourage student perception of the online atmosphere as supportive and friendly (Wall et al., 2016; Reuschle & Mitchell, 2009). Some scholars argue that emoticons are best used in social-emotional oriented contexts such as social media and online discussion boards rather than task-oriented or professional contexts such as emails (Wall et al., 2016; Derks, Bos, & von Grumbkow, 2008). When used in appropriate contexts, instructors can model ways that their students might convey their emotions in order to improve interactions and contribute to a sense of online community.

Make Feedback a Priority

Prompt and constructive feedback is one of the most important practices for instructors of asynchronous online courses (Bryant & Bates, 2015; Shook, Greer, & Campbell, 2013), and by defining a specific timeline for responses to assignments and emails, instructors can establish boundaries and trust with their students (Warnock 2015). In their discussion of feedback, Graham, Cagiltay, Lim, Craner, and Duffy (2001) suggest that there are two types of feedback that online instructors can provide: information and acknowledgment. The former provides information or evaluation (e.g. comments and answers for an assignment), while the latter confirms that some event has occurred (e.g. assignments or emails have been received). Although the ideal is for instructors to give detailed personal feedback to each student, they acknowledge that time constraints may prevent such individualized feedback, in which case a general email to the class would suffice (Graham et al., 2001). Various technologies can usefully convey such feedback, including Google Hangouts, “message from instructor” mini podcasts, Youtube broadcasts, and email exchanges (Bryant & Bates, 2015).

Interviews with instructors confirmed that feedback was the most time and labor-intensive dimension of online instruction, but that they could use shortcuts to ensure that feedback was both prompt and constructive. For example one instructor, familiar with the typical responses students gave for a particular assignment, generated virtual sticky notes with general comments, which he would then cut-and-paste, adding a few sentences of more personalized feedback. He also generated videos in which he gave general comments in response to assignments, which he could then re-use in later courses, since students tended to adopt the same types of positions in response to the assignment.

Establish Clear Expectations, then Monitor Discussions

Instructors should make clear their expectations for asynchronous online discussions, ideally having students sign a “netiquette agreement.” Once those expectations have been clearly established, the instructor should frequently monitor discussion forums to ensure that students are following such guidelines. This will ensure that the online community remains comfortable yet critical – that students feel safe to voice criticism or questions without fear of offending their peers. Instructors can interject in instances where students

violate such expectations, but otherwise they should encourage students to be responsible for their own learning and seek ways to facilitate student-student interaction (McCombs, 2015; Warnock 2015; Sull, 2014).

Make the Course Relevant to Learners

Finally instructors should seek ways to make their courses relevant to learners. First, relevance means enabling learners to connect with the material by appealing to a variety of learning styles and using a variety of modalities (Ruefman, 2016; Limperos, Buckner, Kaufmann, & Frisby, 2015). In order to reach students with different learning styles, one should employ a variety of modes of presentation (audio, visual, text, etc.) to reach those learners, which can be facilitated by technologies such as Youtube, Powerpoint, Prezi, video games, and interactive websites (Ruefman, 2016). Second, instructors should make their material meaningful to their students by highlighting its relevance to them and the world around them.

While they are not the only strategies for effective asynchronous online instruction, they may be particularly useful for those who teach asynchronous online courses in the Humanities. They emphasize the importance of creating an online environment that allows for critical thinking, of humanizing interfaces to facilitate interactions, of giving prompt, constructive feedback, of establishing expectations, and ensuring relevance to learners.

Limitations

This case study involved a very limited number of participants, therefore additional research would be needed to verify whether its findings could be generalized. As a result, such strategies may not be universally applicable to all asynchronous online courses in the Humanities, but they could potentially be useful for instructors who find resonance between this particular case and their own institution.

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