PROXIMITY IN THE ONLINE CLASSROOM: ENGAGEMENT, RELATIONSHIPS, AND PERSONALIZATION

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ABSTRACT

For those who have taught in the traditional classroom at any level, proximity is understood as a best practice in managing classroom behaviors. The farther away the teacher is from the student the more likely the student is going to pay less attention and find themselves off task. Likewise, the inverse is true, the closer the teacher is to the student the less likely the student will be off task. In its simplest form, proximity can be described in two ways: classroom arrangement and teacher mobility. In the virtual modality, instructors have little control over classroom arrangement, but they can influence the perception of mobility by applying certain actions, that may impact the manner in which students perceive the proximal space within the classroom through various strategies to engage students, creating viable relationships with students, and personalizing the online classroom space. Appendix A outlines approaches and techniques to allow instructors to promote community, formative assessment, and critical thinking, and to clarify and create resources that close the proximal gap.

Keywords: feedback, instructor, learning communities, technology, formative assessment, online education, social presence, personalization, relationships, engagement

INTRODUCTION

Teaching in an online, asynchronous modality creates a challenging classroom management experience to maintain proximity. Proximity does exist in the online classroom and can be achieved through applying several best practices and learning theories. The question that needs to be asked is, "What does a controlled online classroom look like"? One could look to classrooms where students and the instructor are in community and are participating in a substantial way. Instructors often comment on the students' lack of attention to detail when responding to discussion questions and their peer's responses. This focus on student participation is important and should be reviewed, but instructors also must consider their personal presence in the classroom.

Increased discussion within online classes may influence student satisfaction and learning. According to Maddix (2012), success in online courses is dependent on the quality and success of the discussion in the course. Quality online discussion requires careful and intentional instructor behaviors. In facilitating communication that models the proximity of a traditional classroom, instructors need to be engaged, relational, and personal. If done correctly, these interactions can lead to higher-level learning as students broaden their own knowledge while reflecting on the knowledge and experiences of their peers and instructor (Gonzalez, 2010).

Social presence, an important component of

online facilitation, can be viewed as the ability of one to establish personal and meaningful relationships. In other words, social presence may decrease the proximal gap between students and instructor. Social presence is conveyed through effective communication, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison, 2007). Social presence, or the ability to establish instructor-student and student-student relationships, can be improved and enhanced based upon the teaching methods employed by instructors (Alonso, Manrique, Martinez, & Vines, 2015). Providing personalized feedback, encouraging engaging discussions among classmates that allow knowledge creation, and integrating technology can enhance social presence in the online classroom.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Engagement

Engagement is an important aspect of the teacher-instructor relationship. According to Revere and Kovach (2011) "the engagement of students in an online course is especially important because without intentional engagement of students, little, if any, learning will take place" (p. 114). Instructor presence is at the heart of a successful and manageable online course. While the online platform does not allow for physical presence, online instructors who are intentional in their practice can model proximity in the online classroom. Online students know when instructors are engaged in the class through their interactions in the course. These interactions can be accomplished through activities such as posting in the discussion forum, assignment feedback, phone calls, and emails.

Several learning management systems utilize a discussion forum that allows instructors and students to interact in meaningful ways on a weekly basis. Nandi, Hamilton, and Harland (2012) share that three types of student communication may be present: "student-student interaction; student-instructor interaction; and student-content interaction" (p. 6). Students enrolled in online programs, in many instances, are held to a participation requirement in which they not only respond to instructor questions but must interact with peers.

Engagement in an online classroom can be fostered through establishing learning communities. Learning communities are stronger when participants are able to establish common ground personally and professionally (See Appendix A). Garrison and Anderson's (2003) discussion model addresses the importance of community and Dixon (2014) proposes including a "get-acquainted" phase into her proposed model for evaluating online discussion.

Discussion Forums

Active participation and instructor facilitation in the discussion forums has been shown to be one of the more effective ways to personalize the online environment. Student and instructor interactions support an effective online learning environment (Garrsion & Anderson, 2003). Arslanyilmaz and Sullins (2013) found that online discussions provide students with the opportunity to actively engage in discussion without feeling inhibited by the presence of classmates. Ellis, Calvo, Levy, and Tan (2004) noted that online discussions allowed for deeper reflections on learning objectives and issues.

Mazzolini and Maddison (2002) determined that the degree of facilitation provided by an instructor in online discussion forums greatly affected the student experience, and they recommended that instructors provide meaningful responses to students. Mokoena (2013) suggested that instructors identify student interests and tie them into the discussion, thus providing students with opportunities for personalized and meaningful engagement.

Learning Communities

Relationships in an online classroom can enhance academic outcomes and student satisfaction, which are often the result of instructional/facilitation methods that emphasize social interaction. Social interaction can pave the way for open communications, meaningful relationships, and group cohesion. Teaching methods that desire to build relationships between learners and instructors can lead to the establishment of learning communities that provide students an environment in which they experience a sense of proximity with their peers and instructor. A learning community is a group of learners who share knowledge, values, and ideas in the context of a supportive environment (Yuan & Kim, 2014). These communities, while made up

of students, should be supported by instructors. Learning communities provide students with an opportunity to be a part of a dynamic process that allows information exchange and communication to be key components of knowledge creation (Alonso, et al., 2015).

Learning communities can be encouraged through discussion in online forums. Online discussion allows students to be active in the learning process, and as Tucker (2012) explains the assumption that students will work together within these forums is the pedagogy behind online classrooms. Akyol and Garrison (2008), found that participation was particularly powerful in establishing a sense of community in the learning environment.

Learning communities are fostered by instructional methods that incorporate socialization. Socialization, a specific teaching strategy involving fostering a Community of Inquiry (COI), can lead to developing learning communities in the classroom. COI relies heavily on the interaction of students, and the establishment of learning communities thus increasing the perception of proximity. The COI framework reveals that higher order learning is best supported by a community of learners who, when part of a community, are able to engage in critical discourse and reflection (Tucker, 2012). This framework is formed by a bridge of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. These three components lead to student satisfaction and perceived learning (Akoyl & Garrison, 2008). (See Appendix A).

Role of the Instructor

The perception of instructor proximity in the online classroom is at the heart of this discussion. One of the roles of the instructor is to provide feedback (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007) and students value regular feedback that carry conversations forward (Nandi et al., 2012). Instructors also have a responsibility to encourage a classroom that provides meaningful opportunities for students to have vivid conversations that drift far from the consistent "I agree" retort.

Participants in an online classroom, whether the instructor or students, need to value four approaches: "discuss to comprehend; discuss to critique; discuss to construct knowledge; and discuss to share" (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013, p. 471). Following this productive online model can allow for a diverse and active online classroom experience (Figure 1). According to Drouin (2008) there is a positive correlation regarding a student's view on interacting with instructors and classmates in the discussion forum and their engagement in the class. Though correlation does not imply causation, it does signify that quality discussion in the online classroom may lead to active engagement (See Appendix A).

Proximity in a traditional classroom does not just rely on a teacher-student juxtaposition; timing is a factor as well. Instructors must engage students early and often. Some students will naturally be active in the online discussion while others may shy away for various reasons. The more active an instructor is in the discussion forum, the greater the ability to pinpoint students who may need to be engaged. Instructors can meet students where they are through active exchange. Gao et al., (2013) emphasize the importance of questioning to help students understand and retain new information and then share thoughts and experiences with peers.

Posing questions that elicit discussion is essential. Open-ended questions asked during online asynchronous discussion may promote the perception of proximity and deeper knowledge construction (Wang, 2005). Discussion questions in the form of formative assessment, or key weekly objectives (KWLs), help the instructor identify "what a student knows," "what they want to know," and "what they learned" (Steele & Dyer, 2014, p.10). (See Appendix A).

Feedback

While the previous sections address the need for online discussion, the importance of feedback in the online environment cannot be discounted. Leibold and Schwarz (2015) posit that effective feedback is a vital skill for online instructors as it is a part of the learning process and guides student development. Gallien and Oomen-Early (2008) found that students who received personalized feedback from instructors felt more satisfied in their learning experience and had higher academic gains than students who did not.

The usage of holistic and frequent feedback can help increase social presence within the classroom because it is a part of the instruction process. A student's sense of community with

peers and instructors is closely connected to social presence (Yuan & Kim, 2014). Feedback should be clear and have enough details that the student can comprehend its meaning. Kim, Kwon, and Cho (2011) determined that quality instruction, along with interactivity and media instruction, increased the students' perception of social presence and heightened their learning satisfaction. Quality feedback can enhance the instructor-student relationship, which can lead to a larger social presence in the online classroom (Portolese-Dias & Trumpy 2014). Furthermore, Cerniglia (2011) noted that students tend to feel valued when their questions are addressed personally in a prompt manner.

Personalized feedback can consist of aa array of methods. Leibold and Schwarz (2015) state that instructors have an opportunity to empower students through affirmations and by posing challenging questions. Affirmations can be a useful source for personalized feedback. Wolsey (2008) reported that students found complex affirmations (e.g., excellent work, the right idea is presented because . . .) from instructors to be "very useful" and simple affirmations (e.g., great job!) only to be "useful" (p. 318).

Another method of personalization is through the medium of feedback used. Portolese-Dias and Trumpy (2014) noted that the online learning environment utilizes innovative technology that allows for quality feedback to take several forms: written, audio, and video. Written feedback is typically used in the online learning environment, but there are benefits to using audio feedback. Bougault, Mundy, and Joshua (2013) found that the benefits included positive student perceptions of constructive feedback and instructor proximity. Students report that audio feedback is more personal and relational than written feedback (Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014). Asynchronous video feedback can provide visual cues, such as facial expressions and body language, that the other two types of feedback lack. Parton, Crain-Dorough, and Hancock (2010) determined that video feedback increased student involvement and heightened instructor presence (See Appendix A).

Relationships

In addition to proximity through engagement, establishing relationships with learners in any

setting is an important practice; however, in an online classroom there are inherent obstacles to doing so. A relationship is a social interaction that can promote learning and satisfaction among students, yet it must be intentional on the part of an instructor in an online setting. As Laffey, Guan, and Yimei (2006) explained, online classrooms compare negatively to traditional classrooms due to a perceived lack of vitality and spontaneity, despite the flexibility they offer. This view emphasizes the importance of establishing relationships between learners and instructors in the online classroom.

While students may negatively compare online education to face-to-face education, intentionally building upon relationships can significantly improve their perception of online education. As Bryant and Bates (2015) explain, online learning can offer unique ways to build community and foster positive student habits like questioning and challenging each other to build new knowledge. In addition to new knowledge, relationships can foster information exchange, and lead to joint task performance, conversation, and ultimately emotional as well as cognitive connections (Alonso et al., 2015). Instructors who take the time to establish a dialogue with their students provide reassurance that increases student learning and confidence (Portolese-Dias & Trumpy, 2014). Proximity through relationships can be found in social presence and components of socialization.

Social Presence

Relationships between students and instructors can be boosted through social presence. Garrison (2007) defined social presence "as the ability to project one's self and establish personal and purposeful relationships" (p. 63). Most research has focused on the traditional classroom, but due to innovations in online learning, a greater emphasis may be placed on social presence in the virtual environment.

While proximity may exist regarding performance in a traditional classroom versus online environment, Hofmann (2002) noted that there is no significant difference between student outcomes with regard to online versus traditional learning modalities. From an online and asynchronous perspective, Tu and McIsaac (2002) identified social presence as a level of feeling and reacting to others within a computer-mediated

environment. In the context of the online learning environment, social presence is equally important as it provides opportunities for instructors and students to connect through quality means of communication and it cements the perception of proximity.

The construct of social presence in the asynchronous environment is a necessity that helps facilitate student learning. As Vygotsky's Social Development Theory notes, social interaction is a fundamental part of cognitive development. Accordingly, Jin (2010) found that social presence is important as it provides support for cognitive and affective learning objectives. As Mytoka (2015) noted, individuals learn through personal experiences and through observations, imitation, and other socialization methods like the interaction between learners and role models (instructors and peers). The learner-role model interaction develops cognitive, affective, and psychomotor abilities (Bandura, 1986). When there is an environment that increases social presence in the online learning environment, it can lead to a reduction in feelings of isolation and an increase in student-teacher interaction and cognitive learning (Mayne & Wu, 2011). Furthermore, Reio and Crim (2006) found cognitive and affective learning objectives were supported when high levels of social presence were used in the online learning environment.

Socialization

Socialization is a key component of education, and that emphasis is highlighted in an online classroom, and, as explained by Gulati (2008), is a socially constructivist experience. Socialization within a classroom has been shown to take several forms; however, as Holley and Taylor (2009) posit, there are several core elements, including involvement, knowledge acquisition, and investment. Although students in an online setting have no physical contact, the importance of active and collaborative learning remains. Learners who are able to feel comfortable and familiar with their teacher and peers embrace and share information more willingly (Hoskins, 2007). Facilitated by the instructor, socialization can appear in the form of posting biographical information within the class and using discussion forums and group activities. These social interactions can be facilitated through the instructional methods of the instructor

and when established they can help learners avoid feeling isolated. A sense of community is critical to engaging students and creating new knowledge. Occasions of learning and education are social practices (Laffey et al., 2006). As Tucker (2012) explains, socialization is the ability of learners to identify with a community and build meaningful relationships. While several theories have looked to establish a framework for teaching methods in an online setting, one theory is the Situated Learning Theory, which postulates that the learning environment has an influence over the way a learner draws upon or makes sense of the learning materials (Irwin & Berge, 2006). This theory holds that instructional practices are used to promote community within the classroom through social interaction among students.

Social interaction is a key component of socialization and an important part of effective online facilitation. To further foster social interaction, instructors employ three social instructional criteria: active learning, purposeful interaction, and meaningful evidence of acquired knowledge. These instructional practices help distance learning avoid devolving into an online correspondence course, and they enhance the perceived proximity among students and between students and the instructor. These instructional elements cannot be present without a socialized foundation, and therefore active learning cannot take place. Active learning can be facilitated through the use of open-ended questions as they provide opportunities for students to engage in open dialog with each other (Guelzdenzpoh, 2003).

Social interaction and enhanced social presence, exhibited by open communication, free expression, and group cohesion, occurs when socialization is used. When socialization is the foundation of instructional methods, group dynamics can begin to form and students may begin to perceive instructor proximity. It is important to keep in mind with socialization that participating in social units provides meaningful experiences and allows learners to engage in the world and share perspectives (Laffey et al., 2006).

Personalization

One concern associated with the online learning environment is the loss of personal contact and interaction between instructors and students

(Weiss, 2000; Wang, Shannon, & Ross, 2013). Students may feel a sense of isolation in learning environments where face-to-face instruction is eliminated (Borup, et al., 2014). Additionally, online learning may present a challenge as social cues are not as apparent as in the traditional classroom (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). One way to overcome these concerns and to increase virtual proximity is to use personalization techniques, particularly through the use of technology. Swinke (2012) notes that instructors who use digital material have the ability to "target each and every student individually" (p. 31).

Technology

Traditionally, online learning platforms have used text-based course delivery methods such as written lectures and announcements. Instructors often pull resources (videos, graphics, websites) from outside sources to enhance the learning process. However, instructors miss an opportunity to personalize their online classroom as Wang et al., (2013) found that online learning offers a variety of options for course delivery. Technological innovations have provided instructors with a wide array of Web 2.0 tools and multimedia that can be used to produce innovative resources that are specifically tailored to their classroom and students' needs. Students now use a variety of technological tools to produce and exchange information with family and peers (DeCosta, Palenque, Wakefield, Foy, & Walker, 2015).

According to Morris (2011) Web 2.0 technologies have successfully assisted instructors in facilitating knowledge construction and collaborating in the online learning environment. Arslanyilmaz and Sullins (2013) state that online instruction provides instructors with the ability to create a personalized learning environment through the use of multimedia. Mandernach (2009) found that instructor-personalized multimedia supplements led to higher reports of student engagement as multimedia has the ability to target a wide range of learning styles or cognitive approaches used by students (See Appendix A).

Instructors may need to consider addressing multiple learning styles in order to enhance student learning in the online environment (Mestre, 2010). DeCosta et al. (2015) noted that Web 2.0 tools can make the online learning environment feel fresh and exciting, thus piquing a student's interest in learning. In addition to piquing students' interest, these tools can be personalized for each class and interaction. As Dyer, Larson, Steele, and Holbeck (2015) determined, the use of technology can help students become invested and actively engaged in the classroom by making the material fun and appealing, and these tools are designed to fit the needs of each student's individual learning needs.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Progress has been made in the research on proximity within the online classroom, but there are still important research opportunities that remain, particularly the impact technology can have on facilitating proximity in the online learning environment. Dyer et al. (2015) indicated that online learning requires innovation from instructors through the development and utilization of web-based tools. This is largely because technology allows instructors to create customized content and learning resources that can meet student needs as well as aid in classroom management. For example, video discussion platforms such as Flipgrid can help increase social presence and help instructors and students work towards building a community through video dialogues. Text messaging apps like Remind can be used for quick communication purposes and aid in the instructor-student relationship. Future research can help determine which technology tools are effective in promoting proximity within the online learning environment.

Additionally, future research on proximity in a nontraditional setting can focus on how to increase the level of engagement and interaction among students and with their instructor through the use of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). Len Vygotsky coined the term ZPD as a way to describe how students develop independently as well as in collaboration with peers and the instructor. ZPD is "the distance between the actual developmental levels as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers" (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 86). In its simplest form ZPD can be broken down into a three-pronged approach: what the student cannot accomplish, what the student can accomplish with assistance, and what the student can accomplish on their

own (Figure 2). According to Jianzhong, Jianxia, and Xitao (2015) the trend in online education is to incorporate collaborative group learning opportunities. Numerous studies have indicated that students have a negative impression of online group work (Jianzhong et al., 2015). Future research can aim to determine if increased instructor presence at the beginning of group communication would have a positive effect on student perceptions and outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this theoretical framework is to express the importance increasing the perceived proximity between students and instructor. Active participation mimics proximity in the online classroom and can allow instructors the space and time to discover when and where students are lacking. According to Liang-Yi and Gwo-Dong (2009), instructor assistance consists of six activities: modeling, classroom management, feedback, instruction, questioning, and cognitive structuring.

Collaboration is a key element in taking students from what they cannot accomplish on their own to what they can accomplish with assistance. Successful instructors should emphasize the three elements discussed in this framework (engagement, relationships, and personalization) to scaffold students to higher level thinking and bridge the distance between students and instructors in nontraditional settings. Yongcheng and Zhiting (2007) believe this collaboration in the online classroom can be accomplished as a process of constructing meaning through debating, arguing, rebutting, defending, and assessing content in the course.

Instructors have the ability to enhance collaboration and establish a "community of inquiry" through the instructional methods that are used. By focusing on aspects of instruction that promote social presence and incorporate socialization, communities of inquiry can be established and the proximal gap between the instructor and the learner can be reduced. Once this gap is closed true learning communities can begin to exist in an online setting.

Learning communities are promoted through a variety of techniques that have been found to enhance social presence from instructor to student and between students. These learning communities can be fostered through the use of technology on behalf of the instructor, to personalize feedback and interactions and to establish the social presence that is critical to knowledge creation. Technology provides instructors with an opportunity to personalize the learning environment, adapt to learning styles, and enhance overall student engagement (Mandernach 2009). Personalization is also valuable as it pertains to feedback and student-to-instructor feedback. Personalized feedback has been shown to have a significant impact on student learning and student satisfaction (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008).

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Appendix A

Approach	Definition	*Instructor Actions	*Learner Outcomes
Promote Community	Creating community in a classroom is what all instructors should strive for. Students need to feel like the classroom is a safe place to share and express thoughts whether in a traditional or online environment. Student and instructor engagement in an asynchronous discussion promotes community and is necessary for student success (Gao et al., 2013).	Consistently strengthen and support student discussions. Direct student understanding based on previous interactions.	Students show support and appreciation for each other and the instructor. Mimic instructor action by inviting further discussion with peers.
Formative Assessments	Formative assessments can be a great way for instructors to check for understanding. In a study by Steele and Dyer (2014) they analyzed the effectiveness of KWLs in the online classroom as a formative assessment and whether they led to greater student and faculty participation. Formative assessments can increase motivation and attention by activating a student's prior knowledge. Recurrent participation by students and instructor can inhibit students from losing hope in the course.	Engage students in developing subjective thought process through interpretation and elaboration by making connections to prior knowledge.	Students begin to make connections to the learning material. Students elaborate on course topics by making connections to personal experience, other ideas, and outside resources.
Critical Thinking	Critical thinking in an expectation for students, however may need to be activated by instructors. Students desire to be challenged and pushed in their educational journey. Paul and Elder (2013) prescribe instructors to ask questions that allow students to be part of the conversation and meet the standards of critical thinking: clarity, accuracy, precision, relevance, depth, breadth, logic, and fairness	Consider other views and analyze students' views while being sensitive to conflicting perspectives. Avoid interacting with the same students all the time.	Students begin to build upon posting responses and add new insights or ideas. Ask questions that challenge the ideas in the learning resources. Students progress from simply agreeing with posts to challenging ideas and asking questions that lead to critical thought.
Clarify	The quality of the initial discussion question is important for student success. According to Morrison, Watson, and Morrison, (2012), discussion questions should lead students to multiple narratives. Student may become frustrated when questions lead to a single, expected response that creates redundancy in the online discussion forum.	Actively negotiate meanings and be ready to reconsider, refine, and sometimes revise student thinking.	Students will compare and contrast views from the course resources, instructor, and peer communication. Students own views may become refined and/or revised based on course material and participation posts.
Create	Mandernach (2009) found that students described an elevated degree of engagement when the added supplements were personalized by the instructor instead of coming from a publisher or professional supplement.	Integrate personalized content through the use of technology in the classroom and discussion forums.	Personalized content provides students with an opportunity to see a direct correlation between learning objectives and student learning that may increase student engagement and achievement.

*Adapted from (Gao, Zhang, & Franklin, 2013).