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Educator's Voice

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Improving Student Learning: Thoughts and Reflections

Increasing Instructor Presence in an Online Course

Instructors who are new to online teaching often fear that their courses will be impersonal and that connecting with their students will not be possible in an online environment.

Online students also fear this "missing instructor" (Gordon and Taveras, 2005), and feel isolated if they don't sense that others are out there sharing their learning journey (Rovai, 2000). However, this isolation is not the fate of all online courses and it is certainly possible for an instructor to be "present" in their online course.

Be Involved from Course Creation

Increasing instructor presence actually starts with course creation. "Online course construction also requires the instructor to build virtually what are often conveyed through physical or vocal cues such as, setting, tone, time parameters, communication style, etiquette – *even humor or encouragement -- must all be designed and transferred quite consciously and deliberately into a primarily text based world*" (MacGowan, 2007; emphasis added). Beyond this, instructor presence can be created and maintained through the instructor's actions during the course.

Research has been carried out regarding student perceptions of instructor presence and those factors that are important in creating this presence. For example, students in a study by Dennen et al. (2007) thought the most important instructor actions within a course

involved checking e-mail, posting in discussions, providing examples, providing timely feedback, responding to student inquiries, providing appropriate course materials and activities, communicating rules and expectations and modeling communication protocols. In a study by Young (2006), students identified the following traits as the most highly ranked for online teacher effectiveness: adapting to student needs, using meaningful examples, motivating students to do their best, facilitating the course effectively, delivering a valuable course, communicating effectively and showing concern for student learning.

Based on these and other studies, some important ways instructors can increase their presence in online courses include paying attention to the frequency and tone of communication, having a strong presence in threaded discussions, providing feedback and expectations and increased instructor personalization.

Communicate Often in a Friendly Tone

The frequency of instructor communication, as well as the tone and content of communication, are some of the most important elements in instructor presence (Rovai, 2000; Baker, 2004; Dennen et al., 2007). In terms of frequency, instructors should aim for regular announcements or e-mails, regularly participate in threaded discussions (as discussed below) and promptly respond to questions through e-mail or a virtual office. Instructors can also make chat or virtual office hours available (even if students choose not to use them).

It is estimated that 60% of communication is nonverbal (Baker, 2004), which generally is not relevant in an online class. Instead, the instructor must make an effort to create verbal immediacy. Paying attention to the content and tone of the communication is important. Instructors should aim to use a student's first name in communications (when possible), include occasional personal information, use humor, ask questions and write in first person (using words like "we"). These types of behaviors can create verbal immediacy and decrease the psychological distance between instructor and student (Baker, 2004; and Gorham, 1988, cited in Baker, 2004).

An interesting study by Huett et al. (2008) compared the effect of motivational e-mail messages on student motivation and completion rates in two sections of an online course (which were identical except for the motivational e-mails sent in one of the sections). The e-mails were sent every other week throughout the semester and generally used the following template: introduction with enthusiastic tone, goal reminders, general words of encouragement and a closing with reminders of multiple ways to contact the instructor. The section receiving the motivational e-mails had greater student motivation and lower failure and withdrawal rates than the other section.

This study illustrates that a simple instructor practice (that of sending bi-weekly motivational e-mails) can have a significant impact on student motivation and performance.

Stay Involved in Threaded Discussions

Threaded discussions are an important part of the online classroom, as these areas allow for instructor-student, student-student and student-content interaction. It is essential that instructors be present in the online discussions, as "online instructors need to be 'seen' in order to be perceived by their students as present in the course" (Mandernach, 2006: 249). Additionally, online students need to feel that others are reading their posts (Rovai, 2000).

However, there is little guidance about how much an instructor should actually participate in their online discussions (Mandernach, 2006). In certain discussions, such as introductory discussions, instructors should reply to every post. However, in topic discussions, too much instructor presence actually inhibits student participation. For example, Dennen et al. (2007) show that student messages become shorter and more infrequent as the instructor becomes more involved in the threaded discussions. Instructors must find the right balance in their own participation in different types of discussions to allow students room to explore the topic, and yet show that they are present and actively following the discussion.

Provide Timely Feedback and Clear Expectations

As might be expected in any class, it is important for the instructor to clearly articulate expectations and to provide timely feedback on coursework. Instructors should aim to give students both quantitative and qualitative feedback and to articulate clear expectations and guidelines about what to do (particularly about discussion or participation requirements) (Dennen et al., 2007). This is an area where course design is involved, and this important information should be included in multiple areas within the course. In online courses, students can't just raise their hand to ask a question and they must rely on information within the course shell (or from instructor communications) for guidance. Instructors can keep track of questions received – if questions are repeated often enough, it is likely that the answers to these questions (including course information or expectations) are not presented clearly in the class. This could help to identify areas of the class to update for future terms.

Be a Human Being Teaching a Course

A final factor that's important in instructor presence is to personalize the instructor. "In the absence of a physical instructor, students

look to whatever text and image-based presence might be available to learn more about who will be guiding and assessing their educational experience" (Dennen, 2007: 96). This increases instructor immediacy and communicates to a student that there is a human being teaching their course, not just the "Internet." Some ideas include posting an instructor bio (written in a personal tone, not just copied from CV), including an instructor picture, self-disclosure in communication, including instructor voice recordings in the course, using humor (see Krovitz, 2007) and first person writing in course communications (using words like "we") (Baker, 2004: 11).

By following these suggestions for increased instructor presence, online instructors can further connect with their students. The examples outlined above promote the importance of instructor presence in online courses and the included suggestions for improvement provide some good (relatively easy) ways to increase instructor presence in online courses.

- Gail E. Krovitz, Ph.D.

Senior Academic Trainer & Consultant

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Instructor's Tip

Usage of PowerPoint-Created Learning Trees in Online Courses

Often referred to as "Choose Your Own Adventure" or "Decision Trees," a Learning Tree PowerPoint® presentation is simply one where students are given multiple options on a slide/page. Each option takes them down a different path and, potentially, to a different answer. An easy way to interject a learning tree content item into your course is by using PowerPoint and uploading the presentation into a content item using the Pearson eCollege Microsoft PowerPoint converter tool.

For example: Create a slideshow about the Cuban Missile Crisis. On Slide 1 give the context of the time, characters and so on. Tell learners that they will be acting as the President.

On Slide 2, give students the information that missiles were believed to be on a ship headed for Cuba. What should the President do? Then, provide them with multiple options such as:

- Option 1: Wait for more intelligence to come to light.
- Option 2: Send in a military strike force to take out the missiles.
- Option 3: Begin heavy negotiations with the Cubans using diplomatic channels.

Each option listed here should link students to a different slide in the presentation (more information on this procedure below). For

example, if the student clicks on the Option 1 link, it might take them to a slide that explains, "Intelligence officers are unable to find more information. In fact, the missiles seem to have disappeared from all satellite images!" The Option 2 link would give them a completely different scenario.

By the time the student has gone through the presentation, they have used various Bloom's Taxonomy skills (knowledge, evaluation and so on) to help them contextualize concepts. Upon completion of the PowerPoint, a journal, paper or discussion may be a nice way to wrap up the exercise.

How To Do It:

1. Create your PowerPoint® slides in any order. (The only exception is your first slide, which should be the very first thing you want students to see.)
2. On your first slide, ask students to view the presentation in "Full Screen" mode for optimal effect.
3. Create links from slides to other slides. To do this:
    1. Highlight a word/phrase/sentence on the slide.
    2. Go to Insert → Hyperlink.
    3. Choose to Link to: Place in this Document.
    4. Choose which slide the link sends students to.
4. You might want to create links on some of the "final" slides that allow students to go back to the start.
5. Once you've done all of this, TEST THE FILE in full screen mode.
6. Upload the PowerPoint to Pearson eCollege using the Microsoft PowerPoint converter.

A learning tree is a nice way to help students evaluate and synthesize information they already have. It's also a nice way to break up the content! (See the past Educator's Voice article on the importance of differentiation!) Good luck and good teaching!

-- Jeff Borden, M.A.

Senior Director of Teaching & Learning

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