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Faculty Perception of "Presence" in the Online Environment

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Abstract: Like students, faculty also experience isolation in the online learning environment. This session presents the findings of a pilot study into faculty sense of alienation and the strategies that faculty have employed to "be there" and "be together" with their students in the online environment.

Introduction

Online learning is gaining popularity with adult learners who appreciate the flexibility of this learning modality. These online learning courses are characterized by separated learning groups that utilize interactive technology to connect "learners, resources, and instructors" (Schlosser & Simonson, 2009, p.1). This separation creates a transactional distance (Moore, 1993) of space and time, as well as psychological and communication spaces between learners and the instructors. Transactional distance is experienced by all the participants in the online environment – instructors and learners.

Improvements in technology have made it possible for participants to step beyond the virtual separated aspect of the online environment and feel connected to each other. Lehman and Conceição (2010) describe this sense of connection between participants as a sense of "being there" and "being together" or experiencing a "sense of presence". The sense of presence helps alleviate participants' feeling of isolation and is an important factor in student success within the online learning environment.

Faculty in the online learning environment

The popularity of the online learning environment has placed new demands on traditional higher education faculty. Most faculty who are now being asked to teach in the online environment lack experience in this learning environment and it is a new paradigm for them. As Prensky (2001) notes, "our Digital Immigrant instructors, who speak an outdated language (that of the pre-digital age), are struggling to teach a population that speaks an entirely new language" (p. 2). Faculty are called on to master new technological skills, learn new pedagogical strategies, and work in an environment that does not provide the forms of interactions they are used to. As Treacy and Director (2007) note, the online environment is devoid of face-to-face interactions and physical and verbal cues. This creates an unfamiliar teaching environment for most higher education faculty.

Teaching online therefore requires faculty to engage within an environment that predominantly lacks physical and verbal cues resulting in a sense of alienation and isolation. Among various factors that dissuade faculty from teaching online, a recurring theme is the lack of physical interaction with students (Schultze, 2010). Communicating and interacting with students and providing and receiving feedback from students is realized primarily through text-based exchanges within the online environment. This poses a challenge for online faculty as it distances them from their students (Sammons & Ruth, 2010). This sense of isolation is concerning as it frustrates faculty (Wasilik & Bolliger, 2009), and has the potential to affect

faculty satisfaction and motivation to teach in the online environment (Childers & Berner, 2000; Henning, 2012).

One strategy to address the feelings of alienation in the online environment is to create a sense of presence (Joyce & Brown, 2009). Boettcher and Conrad (2010) identify presence as the most important practice in online education. At many universities, faculty are tasked with creating their own online courses. They are often the designers, implementers, and assessors of online courses (Schultze, 2010; Seaman, 2009) making them responsible for appropriate instructional design and interaction procedures that can overcome transactional distance (Moore & Kearsley, 2011, p. 200). It therefore falls on faculty to create a sense of presence for their students. However, if faculty themselves feel isolated and do not feel presence in the online environment, how can they create presence for their students?

Creating a sense of presence in the learner requires the instructor to create opportunities and environments that will enhance the sense of presence. Faculty perception of presence informs their choice of pedagogical strategies to create presence. Only by considering how faculty understand the concept of "presence" can we comprehend the strategies they employ to create a sense of presence within their courses. A qualitative study was therefore designed to research the following questions –

1. How do online faculty perceive a sense of "presence" in the online environment?
2. How do online faculty incorporate a sense of presence into their courses?

Theoretical framework

Shin (2002) postulates that perceptions of presence should not be limited to a sense of presence through time and place but should also reflect a "connection with learning resources and sources of support" (p. 123). It is these elements of "learning resources and sources of support" in combination with time and place, that are brought together into one comprehensive construct in the Lehman and Conceição (2010) Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence. The Framework of designing with a Sense of Presence (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) identifies six determinants of presence - Content, Format, Strategies, Instructor Role, Technology, and Support. Lehman and Conceição (2010) present these determinants of presence as a guide for instructors when they design their online courses. In this study, the determinants of presence were used as a comprehensive framework to analyze how faculty experienced presence in the online environment.

Research Design

Faculty members who were teaching or had taught more than one online course in the past were contacted to participate in the study. They were sampled from the online course-offering schedule of a four-year university in the Midwest. Four faculty members consented to participate in the study. These faculty had all designed their own courses for delivery in the university's learning management system. They had autonomous control over the activities they selected for their courses and the pedagogical strategies they employed within their courses. This autonomy in course design made them best suited for this study as their course creation strategies could be analyzed in depth. Table 1 provides an overview of the participant demographics.

Table1: Participant Demographics

		Gender	Race	Adjunct/ Full-time	Training received	Subject
1	Blake	M	Caucasian	Adjunct	On-going	Education
2	Jane	F	Hispanic	Adjunct	Minimal	Education
3	Charlie	M	Caucasian	Full-time	Minimal	English
4	Nancy	F	Caucasian	Adjunct	Extensive	Education

This study was conducted solely through face-to-face semi-structured interviews which were conducted at locations that were most convenient for the participants. Each interview lasted between 60-90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and yielded 75 pages of text in four primary documents. Identifying information was removed from the transcripts and they were then open coded. The theoretical framework of the determinants of presence (Lehman & Conceição, 2010) – Content, Format, Strategies, Instructor Role, Technology, and Support - broadly informed the analysis of the data. In addition, other major themes were developed from the various codes. Faculty perception of the online environment for education and faculty engagement with the online environment emerged as two other major themes.

Findings and conclusions

First, faculty defined presence and engagement in terms of physical interaction. Second, the various strategies that the participants utilized to create presence, largely involved trying to include elements of physical interaction within their courses. Finally, the dimension of physical interaction also deeply affected faculty's personal sense of presence in the online environment.

Physical interaction emerged as a major theme in relation to presence. All the faculty participants strongly felt that presence, which they also interpreted as engagement, could only be established with physical interaction. They perceived "presence" to be a result of face-to-face interaction. The lack of physical interaction in the online environment translated to a perception that students were unable to interact freely online and that they were less engaged in this environment.

> Because it [online environment] can be the best that it can be and still feel not like a classroom and they [students] still would like the interaction. It [online environment] still isn't quite replacing that[traditional classrooms] no matter how you do it. (Blake)

Charlie viewed the online environment as a "box" and felt that he was communicating with a box rather than real people. For three of the faculty, this lack of physical interaction made it almost impossible for the online learning environment to be truly engaging for students. In an effort to bridge the distance, they all tried to incorporate face-to-face interaction in their courses to create a sense of presence. Their perception of presence clearly informed their choice of pedagogical strategies.

Creating engagement

Participants incorporated face-to-face interaction in some form within the six determinants of presence – content, strategies, instructor role, technology, support, and format. Videos and voice over powerpoints were used in courses to convey content in a more interactive manner. Assignments included interviews that students conducted, which was another way to create face-to-face interaction for students. As Blake said, "They [students] have to interview, they have to collaborate, they have to get out and make face-to-face contact. So that's part that's

built into it. So all the assignments have that element." The faculty participants also resorted to phone calls and face-to-face meetings in order to "be there" for their students and to create an engaging and responsive environment.

Flexibility, responding to student needs, being available and approachable to students were important factors for all four faculty participants. In addition, they felt that students needed support and each participant provided support in various ways – through tutorials, links to content resources and support services, as well as directly answering student queries. All these activities were seen as being a part of being a good instructor and this, in their opinion, created a sense of presence for themselves and their students.

Personal response

Just as the faculty felt that the lack of interaction affected student learning, they also felt that the lack of interaction distanced them from their learners and affected their ability to teach. The faculty participants felt disengaged due to the lack of immediate feedback from their students. The lack of physical cues was a big drawback and this affected their emotional connection with their classes. Blake commented that, "This is the first time I've really kind of taught completely online and it feels kind of funny. It's really kind of odd. I think that that's the reality." Charlie was forthright, as he noted, "I just don't like the lack of interaction. I think it's difficult...I don't think it's as rewarding for me and I think it's difficult to make it as rewarding for the student."

The notable exception to this was Nancy. Nancy not only taught online courses but she had also taken classes in the online learning environment. She was familiar with both sides – that of being a student and an instructor. In addition, she trained other faculty on how to use the online environment and had more experience within the online learning environment than the other participants. She was the one participant in this study who did not experience distance or alienation. She was confident in the strategies she used to connect to her students and though communication was primarily asynchronous and text-based, she felt that she had a deep understanding of her students.

The majority of participants in this study were, however, trying to recreate the physical classroom within the online environment. They were assessing their performance online in comparison to their performance within the traditional classroom and in this comparison they found the online environment lacking. While they articulated the advantages of the online environment, including increased participation by all students, they were primarily perceiving and defining presence and engagement in terms of physical interaction.

Implications for adult education

Adult education, in settings such as institutions of higher education and in workplace training, is moving to the online environment. As online learning gains popularity, faculty find themselves under increasing pressure to offer their courses in the online medium (Sammons & Ruth, 2007) and teaching online requires a different pedagogy from traditional teaching in order to account for the transactional distance. The curriculum needs to be reorganized and presented in a format that is easily accessible to online learners; assessments need to be modified or re-created to best suit the online environment; and, online faculty need to leverage web technologies in order to create successful courses.

While increasing numbers of students are enrolling for these courses, faculty remain reluctant to teach online courses and interaction is a significant predictor of faculty satisfaction in the online environment (Shea, Li, Swan & Pickett, 2005). When faculty perceive that the online

environment lacks interaction, they are more reluctant to teach online. The participants in this study acknowledged the lack of interaction and perceived a lack of total engagement. While they attempted to step beyond this limitation and create presence using technologies that were available to them, they still felt that they were not performing at their best. They felt that they were not being their "best" selves and Charlie admitted that he felt he was a better teacher in a face-to-face class.

Just as students feel disengaged in the online environment, the participants also experienced this. Students look for feedback from the instructor to feel connected and acknowledged and instructors also sought feedback. Within the online environment, they found this feedback lacking and this affected their sense of connection with their classes. They lacked a sense of presence and did not feel that they were "being there" and "being together" with their students. Only the more experienced participant did not share this feeling.

This study only had four participants which was a very small sample. These findings need to be tested with a larger participant base. Further research also needs to consider the idea of how faculty experience engagement within the online environment and how this affects their teaching and interaction with their students. Studies with larger samples could also highlight strategies that practicing faculty use to engage with their students that can inform the practice of novice and reluctant online faculty.

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