**ASSIGNMENT 07: REVISE AND WRITE YOUR RESEARCH**

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#### **Abstract**

This study addresses a critical gap in current understanding of effective online education practices by investigating how faculty members help foster instructor presence in the online learning environment. The study uses a qualitative approach, in which semi structured interviews were conducted with 12 students placed in online group in different disciplines. Analysis of the interview data is thematically analysed to shed light on student perceptions of instructor presence, its influence on student learning, and best practices for its execution. According to the findings, instructor presence is built by communication tools, interaction plans, and individualized instructor interaction. The learning experience depends largely on course design and students' attitudes towards online learning. Online learning has its benefits of flexibility, but it has its down sides as well such as motivation and information retention. Furthermore, instructor responsiveness and timely feedback are found to be critical factors in keeping student engagement. The contribution of this study is to provide a better understanding of how effective online teaching strategies such as communication, engagement, course design, and responsiveness are utilized to establish a strong instructor presence in virtual learning environments. Implications for institutions in the support of instructors and students in the online learning process are drawn from these findings. This research further develops our understanding of instructor presence as a complex, multifaceted construct, and contributes to the body of knowledge on how to design and deliver engaging, effective, and meaningful online learning experiences that will ultimately improve the quality of online education.

#### **Introduction**

Rapid growth of online learning environments due to technological advancements and demand for flexible education, has revealed the importance of instructor presence in providing quality and effectiveness in online education. This research explores how faculty members create instructor presence in online learning environments to fill a critical gap in our knowledge of effective online teaching practices.

The ability of instructors to project their personality and expertise into the virtual classroom, which we term instructor presence, is necessary for student engagement and satisfaction and for learning outcomes. Although its importance is acknowledged, the ways in which to establish and sustain presence in virtual classrooms are still being developed.

Feeler (2012) notes the unique challenges in establishing online instructor presence: "In online classes there is no inherent means of enabling instructor presence, and students know without doubt that they are isolated in a remote spot where there is no professor" (p. 4). The observation here implies that presence in the online environment requires deliberate strategies.

Instructor presence is based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework that effective online learning experiences are created through the interaction of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). In this framework, instructor presence is defined as the design, facilitation and direction of cognitive and social processes in a manner that enables meaningful learning outcomes.

To fill a gap in current literature, and to inform best practices, this study seeks to explore how faculty members provide instructor presence in online environments. This research focuses on student perceptions and experiences of instructor presence, providing a nuanced, qualitative understanding of instructor presence from the learner’s perspective.

The primary research question is: "How do faculty members facilitate instructor presence in the online learning environment?" Semi structured interviews with students are used to obtain in-depth understanding of students’ perceptions and experiences of instructor presence, and we utilise a qualitative approach in doing so.

With online education becoming the norm, understanding what an effective instructor presence looks like is more important than ever. The findings of this research are timely and relevant and hold the potential to inform pedagogical practices, guide faculty development initiatives, and add to the ongoing discourse about effective strategies for online teaching. This study aims to improve our understanding of instructor presence, a multifaceted construct, and how to create engaging and effective online learning experiences.

#### **Literature Review**

The concept of instructor presence in online learning environments has gained significant attention in educational research over the past two decades. This review examines key studies and theories related to instructor presence, its importance in online education, and strategies for its effective implementation.

The theoretical foundation of instructor presence is rooted in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). This framework posits that effective online learning experiences are created through the interaction of three core elements: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. Within this model, instructor presence is a crucial component of teaching presence, encompassing the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes to achieve meaningful educational outcomes.

#### Numerous studies have highlighted the significance of instructor presence in online learning environments. Stone and Chapman (2006) found that it positively influences student satisfaction, engagement, and learning outcomes. Their study emphasized that instructor presence goes beyond mere visibility, including active participation, timely feedback, and personalized interactions. Martin, Wang, and Sadaf (2018) further demonstrated that students who perceived higher levels of instructor presence reported greater engagement with course content and higher satisfaction levels.

#### Feeler's (2012) grounded theory study supported these findings, noting that "Students perceived a correlation between their engagement in an online class and the instructor's online presence" (p. 156). This underscores the importance of instructor presence in creating a supportive and interactive online learning environment.

#### Despite its importance, establishing and maintaining instructor presence in online environments presents unique challenges. Baran, Correia, and Thompson (2011) found that many instructors struggle with translating their teaching presence to the online environment and require institutional support and professional development. Sheridan and Kelly (2010) identified technical issues, lack of immediacy in communication, and difficulties in conveying nonverbal cues as common barriers to effective instructor presence in online courses.

#### Feeler's (2012) study provides additional insights into the nuanced nature of instructor presence, describing it as a dynamic process that evolves throughout the course. He states, "The perception of instructor presence results from the student-instructor relationship, that it is established and sustained through four phases of instructor activity and student response" (p. 91).

#### While existing research provides valuable insights, several gaps remain. There is limited research on how instructor presence is perceived and experienced by students in different cultural and educational contexts. Most studies focus on asynchronous online learning environments, with less attention given to synchronous or hybrid models. Furthermore, there is a need for more qualitative research that explores the nuanced experiences of both instructors and students. As Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) argue, much of the existing research relies heavily on quantitative measures, which may not capture the full complexity of instructor presence in online learning environments.

#### The present study aims to address these gaps by providing a qualitative exploration of how faculty members facilitate instructor presence in online learning environments. By focusing on student perceptions and experiences across various disciplines and course types, this research seeks to contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of instructor presence. This approach will help expand our knowledge of effective strategies for enhancing instructor presence and ultimately improve the quality of online education.

#### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design to explore how faculty members facilitate instructor presence in online learning environments. The qualitative approach was chosen for its ability to provide rich, detailed data on participants' experiences and perceptions, illuminating the complex nature of instructor presence in virtual classrooms.

The approach aligns with Feeler's (2012) study, which used Active Interviewing theory and a Straussian grounded-theory design. While our study doesn't employ grounded theory, it shares the goal of generating rich, descriptive data to understand the phenomenon of instructor presence.

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method, offering a balance between consistency across interviews and flexibility to explore unique perspectives. The interview protocol, developed from the research question and literature review insights, included open-ended questions about participants' experiences with instructor presence, their perceptions of effective strategies, and challenges encountered.

Participants were recruited using purposive sampling, consisting of 12 students from the McDaniel ANA 525 course. This strategy ensured participants had recent, relevant experience with online learning and could provide informed perspectives on instructor presence. Recruitment was conducted through Group tool messages and WhatsApp.

Interviews were conducted via video conferencing software, lasting 30-40 minutes each. They were audio-recorded with participant consent and transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis approach, chosen for its flexibility and ability to identify patterns of meaning across datasets. The six-step process included familiarization with data, initial code generation, theme searching, theme review, theme definition and naming, and report production.

To ensure trustworthiness, several strategies were employed. Member checking was conducted, where participants reviewed interview summaries and provided feedback. Peer debriefing was used, with a colleague not involved in the study reviewing coding and themes. An audit trail was maintained throughout the research process to document key decisions and reflections.

Ethical considerations were carefully addressed. IRB approval was obtained before data collection commenced. Participants received informed consent forms detailing the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. All data were anonymized, and pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities.

This qualitative methodology allowed for a comprehensive exploration of instructor presence in online learning environments, providing insights into effective strategies, challenges, and student perceptions. These findings can inform both practice and future research in online education.

#### **Results/Findings**

In exploring thematic analysis of how faculty members facilitate instructor presence in the online learning environment, four main themes were identified from the analysis of the interview data: The four categories were Instructor’s Participation and Interactions, Online Learning Experience, Challenges and Adaptations in Online Learning, and Instructor Effectiveness.

##### 1.Instructor’s Participation and Interactions

This work shows that communication tools and interaction plans are key to building instructor presence in the online environment. One of the respondents stated, “Having a group chat is definitely good… drop-in sessions are one of the best ways to communicate with students.” This highlights the need to engage the learners and use different communication media in virtual learning environments. The role of individualized instructor interaction was also stressed by the participants. A student said, “I think more one-on-one contact hours, like the drop-in sessions that we are supposed to attend and then getting actual feedback in form of videos would be helpful.” This suggests that learners have a positive perception of those teachers who attempt to build relationships at online.

The data also showed that some courses may need the instructor to be more involved than others. One student noted that, “maybe the classes that have a lot of discussion may not need the instructor to be as active because you’re already talking a lot in the chat.” This means that the instructors require designing their presence based on the need of a specific course.

##### 2.Online Learning Experience

In other words, the collected data analysis shows that the concept of online learning is expressed in the design of a course and the attitude of students to it. Several participants reflected on course design, with one participant highlighting the following: “The course must be designed in a way where it’s interesting…” This means that, the consideration that goes into developing an effective course is very important if students are to be motivated in the online classes. The students also asked for more discipline during the online learning process. According to one of the participants: ‘I think the most important thing is time management so that you can be studying and not wasting time on other activities at home.” This means that for online learning to be effective, the learner must have good self-management skills.

The results also indicate that students’ attitude towards online learning may affect their experience. One of the participants said, ‘I think it is quite comparable in that regard, in that you have to consider it as an online course or a face-to-face course’. This means that students who are consistent in their learning modalities may do well during online learning.

##### 3.Challenges and Adaptions in Online Learning Environment

The study reveals that although online learning promotes flexibility it comes with its own difficulties. Another said, “I think I learn in person better,” which seems to be a common problem among students who have challenges in undertaking online classes. However, another interviewee pointed out the career benefits, “I do believe that online learning has impacted my career in some way and for the better.” This has particularly helped me with taking courses and working at the same time which has helped in enhancing my knowledge and skills in the workplace. The data shows that solving these challenges may depend on students being proactive. In the words of one participant, ‘It’s quite a challenge to remain motivated day in day out…’ This shows that motivation is a critical factor in online learning environments because students easily lose motivation.

##### 4.Instructor Effectiveness

This is what we gathered from the data that instructor course effectiveness is directly related to feedback and availability online. One student emphasized the importance of timely responses, “I assume that they will answer within a day because I always try to search for online sources to find answers to my questions if I don’t get it I will send an e-mail to my instructor”. This shows that timely feedback from the instructor is important especially in cultures to keep the students participating and assisting in learning in online classes. The findings have also given a new face that feedback should be personalized. This was echoed by one of the participants who deemed it helpful to receive feedback on assignment submission or in other words individual attention insisted that teachers play an important role in the online classes.

Furthermore, the results show for students, embracing the instructors who will use more creativity in their online lecturing. One of the interviewees stated that ‘‘The instructor pretty much relied upon common tools,’ hence, there is still a possibility of instructors to be creative when it comes to the use of technology and or strategies that are used in online courses.”

#### **Discussion**

The purpose of this research was to understand how faculty members create instructor presence in online courses. As Bryman (2015) notes, "Writing up your research will contain many other features, such as referring to the literature on which you drew, explaining how you did your research, and outlining how you conducted your analysis" (p. 662). In line with this guidance, this discussion will explore the implications of our findings and their relevance to existing literature.

The thematic analysis provides strong evidence indicating that communication customization and application of multiple media forms are important predictors of perceived instructor presence. Bryman (2015) emphasizes the importance of such analysis, stating, "Your writing should point to particularly salient aspects of the tables, graphs, or other forms of analysis you present" (p. 665). Our analysis highlights the importance of drop-in sessions and individual feedback in reducing the transactional distance of online learning.

These empirical results about course design and self-discipline in online learning confirm that both instructors and students have roles in constructing effective online learning experiences. This aligns with Bryman's (2015) advice that "You should make clear the implications of your findings for your research questions" (p. 668). Our findings imply that institutions may need to offer support for both instructors in course design and students in developing online learning skills.

The difficulties noted, especially concerning information retention and motivation, indicate that online instructors need to utilize a variety of instructional methods. As Bryman (2015) suggests, "You might draw attention to any limitations of your research with the benefit of hindsight" (p. 668). While our study provides insights into these challenges, future research could explore specific strategies to address them.

The emphasis on instructor responsiveness underscores the importance of clear communication expectations in online courses. This aligns with Bryman's (2015) point that "It is often valuable to propose areas of further research that are suggested by your findings" (p. 668). Future studies could examine which aspects of instructor behavior significantly affect online students' perceptions of presence and academic performance.

#### In conclusion, facilitating instructor presence in online learning environments requires a multifaceted approach. As Bryman (2015) advises, "A Conclusion is not the same as a summary. However, it is frequently useful to bring out in the opening paragraph of the Conclusion your argument thus far" (p. 667-668). Our study contributes to the understanding of effective online teaching strategies by highlighting the importance of communication, engagement, course design, and responsiveness in creating a strong instructor presence in virtual learning environments

#### **Conclusion**

This study explored how faculty members enact instructor presence in online learning environments, yielding significant findings that contribute to our understanding of virtual classroom dynamics. The results have broad implications for educational practice and policy.

Our findings emphasize the need for institutions to invest in robust technological infrastructure and faculty training to enhance communication tools and interaction plans. The importance of individualized instructor interactions suggests a need to consider optimal class sizes for online courses to allow for personalized attention.

The study's implications extend to curriculum development and student support services. Institutions should focus on creating engaging, interactive online courses while providing resources to help students develop self-management skills crucial for online learning success.

Identified challenges, particularly in motivation and information retention, indicate a need for innovative instructional strategies. Future research could explore interventions such as gamification techniques or adaptive learning technologies to address these issues.

Our research aligns with Feeler's (2012) conclusion that instructor presence stems from the student-instructor relationship and evolves throughout the course. This highlights the dynamic nature of instructor presence in online environments.

We propose several avenues for future research, including longitudinal studies on the evolution of instructor presence, investigations into the effectiveness of various communication technologies, comparative studies of synchronous versus asynchronous environments, and explorations of cultural differences in perceptions of instructor presence.

While providing valuable insights, this study has limitations, including a small sample size from a single institution and reliance on self-reported data.

In conclusion, this research underscores the multifaceted nature of instructor presence in online learning environments and its critical role in shaping student experiences. By emphasizing communication, engagement, course design, and responsiveness, our findings provide a foundation for enhancing online education quality. As online learning continues to evolve, ongoing research and adaptation of teaching practices will be crucial to realizing the full potential of digital education.