Teaching Presence Online Facilitates Meaningful Learning

By Patrick Lowenthal, Assistant Professor, CPS School of Education and Counseling and Tina Parscal, Associate Professor, CPS Distance Learning

Introduction
A teacher plays a central role in any formal learning environment. As those of you with online teaching experience know, teaching online involves a different skill set (Palloff & Pratt, 1999). Effective online teachers take on the role as a facilitator of learning rather than an instructor who conveys information through directed instruction. That is, they become more of a “guide-on-the-side” rather than the “sage-on-the-stage.” However, this cliché can be taken to extremes; there is a fine line between being a guide on the side and being absent (Anderson, 2004).

Teaching Presence
The concept of teaching presence evolved out of the research on social presence and teacher immediacy. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) initially described social presence as a quality of a communication medium that can affect the way people communicate. They claimed that some communication media had a higher degree of social presence (e.g., video) than others (e.g., audio). Mehrabian (1966, 1969, 1972) developed the concept of immediacy as non-verbal behaviors that can reduce the distance between two or more people. His work was later used to explain teacher behavior in the classroom (Andersen, 1979); Andersen illustrated that teacher immediacy is a predictor of teaching effectiveness.

Researchers now claim that online communication can be just as personal, if not more, than non-computer mediated communication. The literature on social presence suggests that students create and maintain a sense of social presence through the following strategies:

1. Expression of emotions
2. Self-disclosure
3. Continuing a thread
4. Quoting from other messages
5. Asking questions
6. Questioning
7. Complimenting, expressing appreciation
8. Expressing agreement
9. Vocatives (i.e., referring to participants by name)
10. Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns
11. Phatics / Salutations (i.e., communication that is indirect, indirect, and not clearly intended to be taken seriously)

Further, research has shown that social presence is a predictor of student satisfaction in online environments (Gusnowardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003), that it is directly related to learner to learner interaction (Tu, 2004), and finally that “there is a definite, consistent and strong relationship among student perceptions of interaction, social presence, and learning” (p. 30).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) were the first to differentiate social presence from teaching presence as part of the Communities of Inquiry model (Figure 1). While they understood social presence to be...
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At Regis University, we take pride in the focus we place on the intentional and collaborative design and development of our online courses. Therefore, we feel confident that the first component of teaching presence (i.e., the design and development of courses) is regularly achieved. It is within the second component of teaching presence, the facilitation of the course, where Regis facilitators get their chance to focus on their own teaching presence and the social presence in the course.

Strategies for Creating Teaching/Social Presence

There are many strategies for creating teaching presence within an online course. The following table highlights strategies related to instructional design, teaching, and student learning for creating teaching and social presence.

### Instructional Design:

- Develop overviews
- Provide opportunities for student and teacher profiles within the learning management system
- Incorporate audio and video within the course content following best practices for teaching and learning activities
- Limit class size
- Structure collaborative learning activities
- Utilize group work strategies
- Develop open-ended, critical thinking discussion questions
- Incorporate reflective activities
- Utilize continuous and authentic assessment strategies

### Teaching:

- Post introductions and expectations documents before the students are given access to the course.
- Contribute to discussion forum throughout the week
- Provide suggested due dates for initial postings that promote mid-week engagement as opposed to weekend only postings
- Launch discussion threads and summarize each thread at the end of the week
- Promptly answer e-mail
- Provide frequent feedback
- Send progress reports on participation and quality of postings
- Strike up a conversation
- Share personal stories and experiences
- Ask open-ended questions that promote discussion and require critical thinking
- Use expressions of emotions, e.g. (smile) or (grin).

### Student Learning:

- Contribute to discussion forum throughout the week as opposed to waiting for the weekend
- Promptly answer e-mail
- Strike up a conversation
- Share personal stories and experiences
- Ask open-ended questions that promote discussion and require critical thinking
- Use expressions of emotions, e.g. (smile) or (grin).

### Spotlight: An interview with Marcel Dumestre, Academic Dean, College for Professional Studies

**By Dave Suger, Instructional Designer, CPS Distance Learning**

Dave sat down with Marcel Dumestre, CPS Academic Dean, and asked a range of questions, from growing up in Louisiana, his early business career, what brought him to Regis, and a few facts that might surprise you. Below is part of that interview. To read the full interview visit [www.regisfacultyonline.org](http://www.regisfacultyonline.org).

**TLC:** Most people know you’re from Louisiana.

**Marcel:** I was born and raised in Louisiana. I lived there with my parents until I was a senior in high school when we moved to Pensacola, Florida. I attended a community college for two years at Pensacola Junior College and then went on to Florida State and did a Bachelor of Science in Economics degree. After college I went to work for Pfizer Pharmaceutical, followed by Schering Plough. After Schering Plough, I moved back to Louisiana and was part of a start-up pump and manufacturing company.

**My wife said let’s do something more meaningful with our lives. So, I went to Loyola University and earned a Master’s Degree in Religious Education and a Master of Pastoral Studies.**

**TLC:** What is your vision for the Distance Learning unit and the future of online learning at CPS?

**Marcel:** The role of Distance Learning right now is absolutely crucial to the future of the college and the individual programs within the schools. We can view the Distance Learning unit to be more inclusive than online courses. This will include involvement in classroom courses and methods of instruction because our instructional designers and our media experts can be of tremendous assistance to faculty in the classroom. In a very strange sort of way, our online programs are much more advanced in terms of incorporating active learning and outcomes-based approaches than our classroom classes.

**TLC:** Any final thoughts?

**Marcel:** The realignment that we’re undergoing right now makes Regis extremely unique in Jesuit higher education. Regis has been unique in its dedication to adult learning in the past 25 years. Without a doubt we have the most sophisticated, androgogically-oriented system, and certainly the most number of students of any of the Jesuit institutions. What this realignment does is it makes us even more unique in having four schools within a college that’s dedicated to the adult learner. Only about one-third of the Jesuit institutions even have colleges dedicated to the adult learner. This system positions us in a way that, in the eyes of those who are not familiar with quality adult higher education, makes us look more credible than the rest.

**TLC:** What is your vision for the Distance Learning unit and the future of online learning at CPS?

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**TLC:** Any final thoughts?

**Marcel:** The realignment that we are engaged in right now will help us to get back to what has made us successful from the very beginning. That is a thorough dedication to the accelerated format as being an active participatory way of learning in an accelerated mode. This is one in which instructors are engaged in creative teaching methodologies and are grounded in their discipline and the outcomes of those courses are things of which both the student and the faculty member are proud.

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