



The Problem of Teaching Presence in Transactional Theories of Distance Education

Jason Dockter*

Lincoln Land Community College Arts and Humanities 5250 Shepherd Rd. Springfield, Illinois 62794 United States

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges online teachers face in establishing a teaching persona. While many online teachers believe that they create and control their teaching presence, drawing on transactional distance theory and relational distance theory, this paper argues that such an assumption can result in increased distance between teacher and students. This increased distance makes it more difficult for online students to accurately sense who their teacher is. Problematically, this sense of who the teacher is can be a powerful element to help online students succeed within the course. To help students to perceive, more clearly, who the teacher of the course is, the article recommends frequent and varied communication between teacher and students, the utilization of multimodal communication methods to provide differing opportunities for students to make meaning, for teachers to share who they are with students, and to proactively encourage the formation of relationships between course participants through course design.

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“I was afraid to come in and talk to you,” one of my online students, Jill, said to me as we sat in my office after meeting for the first time. I was utterly speechless. She continued, “From the emails you wrote, I was worried about coming in to speak with you—I didn’t think you were very nice.” I recalled emailing back and forth with this student, in response to questions she had, but I never thought I came across as mean or scary. As we continued to talk about her project, I struggled to concentrate; my mind was stuck on “I was afraid to come in and talk to you.” I couldn’t get past the idea that one of my students was fearful of meeting me face-to-face (f2f). After our conference, I was horrified. I teach a 5/5 load at a community college, often working with nearly one hundred online students a semester. How many other students were out there, afraid to ask for help?

This experience led me to review much online teaching scholarship, to learn if others had experienced anything similar, and, hopefully, for advice on how to overcome these misinterpretations of who I was as the instructor. Numerous rhetoric and composition and distance education scholars have argued that participants in online classes can struggle with the virtual format of teaching and learning (Chris Anson, 1999; John F. Barber, 2000, p. 253; David E. Hailey, Jr. et al., 2001; CCCO OWI Committee, 2011; D. Randy Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Michael G. Moore,

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +12172206672.

E-mail address: jason.dockter@llcc.edu

2013; David Sapp & James Simon, 2005, p. 479). This format is a struggle, they argued, because both teachers and students lack the regular, f2f interactions of a traditional course. Most online students complete their coursework alone, distanced from other classmates and the teacher, both geographically and temporally. Because both teachers and students experience this sense of isolation, it is a significant impediment to both online teaching and learning. This isolation can lead to increased feelings of frustration, confusion, and hopelessness when problems or questions arise, resulting in decreased motivation to do the work of the course, potentially leading to students dropping out of the class (Sapp & Simon, 2005, p. 472). Similarly, many online teachers also experience feelings of isolation when teaching in this domain, which prevents some faculty from returning to teach online (CCCC OWI Committee, 2011, p. 13).

Part of the challenge of online education, for teachers and students, is feeling comfortable in the online domain. Based on their educational experiences in f2f classrooms, students and teachers have a clear sense of the roles that both should play (Terry Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5; Richard Beach, 1993, p. 108–109; Nancy W. Coppola, 2005; Wilhemina Savenye, Olina Zane, and Mary Niemczyk, 2001, p. 379); after all, these expectations “have been developed through decades of experience in traditional classrooms” (Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005, p. 2). However, when the domain of that class moves online, the participants are left to determine their new role either as online teachers or students, and then how to perform that role within the online space.

Further, they are left, often on their own, to understand who else is in the class and what those people are like. These f2f-based expectations about what a class should be often make the online experience less satisfying (Patricia Webb Boyd, 2008, p. 231). Because many students struggle with isolation while participating in an online course, and because online education is becoming more pervasive across higher education (not only entirely online courses, but also MOOCs, flipped classes, hybrids etc.), increased numbers of students, in particular, will experience these problems. Since first-year composition is a regularly required course at most universities, first-year writing faculty will increasingly teach in online formats and be expected to address the needs of online students.

In this paper, I discuss the importance of students’ perception of the teacher, which is often referred to as *teacher presence* in online classes, and how problems with the concept of *teaching presence* (often explained as something a teacher is responsible for creating) can negatively affect students, increasing the distance they perceive between themselves and the teacher. Using reader response theory, transactional distance theory, and relational distance theory, I argue that the term *teacher presence* is problematic because teachers neither create nor control how students construct their sense of the teacher. I argue that we need a richer conception of what teaching presence is and how it is created—a conception that accounts for the contributions of both teachers and students. Otherwise, teachers will continue to unknowingly create barriers between themselves and students within their online pedagogy and classes.

1. Changed pedagogy, unchanged results

Prior to my conversation with Jill, I had made significant changes to my online first-year composition course, implementing a rhetorical genre studies (RGS) approach to my writing pedagogy, and also basing the course around multimodal composition projects. I was excited by the prospects of what students would create for these projects and how RGS would impact their learning. Additionally, I created several short instructional videos of myself to help orient students to each module of the course, and to help instruct course concepts, attempting to assist students to more clearly envision who I was. My excitement, however, waned throughout the semester. With each passing assignment, some students didn’t meet the expectations that I had for their work, and I struggled with how to help them online—particularly after that meeting with Jill. While I incorporated some video media into the class, my composition pedagogy had changed, and the student projects had changed, but one major element of the online course had not changed: I still communicated with and tried to teach online students by writing to them, and this form of communication was not getting the results I wanted. I knew what I would do in a f2f class to reach students more directly and to encourage them through challenging times in the class, but online, I became more aware of how heavily I relied on email and other written texts to communicate with and teach my students. Worse, as I learned from Jill, students were forming a different sense of who I was as a teacher. What worried me most was that I had no idea who that perceived teacher really was. If I didn’t know myself, I could never know who my students thought I was.

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