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## Sage, guide, both, or even more? An examination of instructor activity in online MBA courses

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## ABSTRACT

This study examined faculty characteristics and behaviors in 46 MBA courses conducted over a two-year period. We found that both formal instructor activities, referred to in the online learning literature as teaching presence, and informal instructor activities, known as immediacy behaviors, were positive predictors of student perceived learning and satisfaction with the educational delivery medium. We also found that instructor login intensity, the average amount of time spent per login session, was a negative predictor of perceived learning. Collectively, these findings suggest the need for instructors to structure and organize their courses beforehand so they can focus on efficient engagement with their students while the class is in session. Although teaching presence and instructor immediacy were significant predictors of delivery medium satisfaction, they explained only 6% of the variance. This finding should help instructors avoid taking unnecessary responsibility for students' attitudes toward online learning. The paper concludes with a discussion of implications for training of online instructors and the appropriate use of multilevel analytical tools in online learning and education research.

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### 1. Introduction

Over the last decade, the pace of research on technology-mediated management education has increased dramatically (Arbaugh et al., 2009). However, in the quest to examine students and their learning, online management education researchers generally have neglected to examine the other participants in an online environment: instructors and their teaching (Alavi & Gallupe, 2003). This perceived minimalization of the role of instructors in technology-mediated environments is a target of increasing criticism by educators and scholars (Arbaugh et al., 2009; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Shedletsky & Aitken, 2001).

Scholars that have examined faculty in online business education to date have tended to reflect the online education literature's interest in the increased attention that the medium appears to place on the instructor's interaction behaviors and discussion facilitation skills (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Eom, Wen, & Ashill, 2006). However, appreciation for the roles of content and course designer, and even content expert (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Ke, in press; Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, & Su, 2005; Nemanich, Banks, & Vera, 2009), also are beginning to emerge. As an early departure from the consideration of these formal instructional roles in online management education, Arbaugh (2001) examined the extent to which instructor informal behaviors influenced course outcomes in online MBA courses and found them to be a significant predictor of students' perceived learning. Although this work has received attention from online learning scholars (151 citations to date according to Google Scholar), to date few if any studies have considered the relative importance of formal vs. informal instructor roles and behaviors in online business education.

Striking an appropriate balance between these roles and behaviors is necessary for several reasons. First, although there is debate regarding actual time requirements relative to classroom-based instruction, the prevailing perspective in the literature suggests that, at minimum, the development and instruction of online courses is a time-intensive activity for business school faculty (Alexander, Perrault, Zhao, & Waldman, 2009; Berger, 1999; Ke, in press; Yoo, Kanawattanachai, & Citurs, 2002). Therefore, if informal behaviors are a primary, or even significant, predictive influence on course outcomes, perhaps faculty might be able to devote less time to pre-course preparation to pursue other activities. Second, if formal roles such as course designer or content expert are the most important for course success, this

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information could be useful for encouraging business schools to invest more in faculty development and support to raise the quality of their online programs (Alavi & Gallupe, 2003; Blignaut & Trollip, 2003). Third, although there is increasing evidence that learner–instructor interaction is important for the success of online business courses (Arbaugh & Benbunan-Fich, 2007; Arbaugh & Rau, 2007; Eom et al., 2006; Kellogg & Smith, 2009), we know little about the specific nature of this interaction. Further insights into the nature of instructor interaction would provide useful guidance to those seeking to engage their students appropriately and effectively.

This study seeks to initiate a dialogue toward identifying an ideal balance of formal and informal instructor behaviors by examining the characteristics and behaviors of eighteen faculty in a sample of 46 MBA courses conducted over a two-year period. We use the construct of immediacy behaviors (Gorham, 1988) to capture informal instructor interaction and the construct of teaching presence from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework to measure formal instructor roles and behaviors. Fig. 1 presents the study's conceptual framework.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. After a brief review of the general literature on online instructors, we describe our constructs for assessing faculty roles and behaviors. Following the presentation of the study and its results, we provide possible explanations of these findings and their liberating potential implications for online educators.

## 2. Literature on online instructors

Research that directly examines instructors has tended to focus on instructor roles and course design. In an interview-based study of novice online instructors, Coppola, Hiltz, and Rotter (2002) found that effective instructor practices included the ability to shift from a lecture-based to a more Socratic approach to course conduct to integrate online materials seamlessly into the course, and to draw from a broader pool of potential online guests. Hartman, Dziuban, and Moskal (2000) found that instructors reported increased course interaction, and that even though they thought web-based courses required more work, they were excited about doing more of them in the future. Studies of instructors also have found that they tend to develop stronger one-to-one relationships with students in on-line courses than in face-to-face ones (Hiltz & Wellman, 1997). These conclusions from early studies of North American instructors recently have been extended globally. In an interview study of 11 instructors with at least two years of online experience, Hsieh (2010) identified three globally shared perspectives: 1) interactive activities where students were engaged with each other and the instructors' attempts to create such activities; 2) evaluation criteria that fit both their course content and regional expectations; 3) self-expectations to make online teaching work effective by acquiring technological acumen, designing course materials, etc.

Although much of the prior literature on instructors has tended to be based more on conceptualizations, anecdotes, and interviews than on data analysis, recent research on faculty has begun to glean insights based upon robust samples. Mahdizadeh, Biemans, and Mulder (2008) examined factors that most influenced instructors' use of e-learning environments. From a sample of 178 of 404 instructors surveyed at a Dutch university, these authors found that these instructors used e-learning tools primarily for presenting course materials and Power Point presentations, which also were seen to be the primary value added of e-learning rather than online discussion or online collaboration tools. Mahdizadeh et al. then developed an empirically-derived model of instructor e-learning usage, which showed that instructor usage was a function of instructor perceptions of value added of e-learning, which in turn is influenced by instructor prior experience with e-learning, and instructor opinions about computer assisted learning, web-based activities, and ease of use of e-learning tools.

Reflecting the importance of the impact of increasing instructor experience with e-learning, studies that have examined more experienced instructors have yielded more positive results. In a multi-method study of 386 faculty from 36 schools in the SUNY System, Shea (2007) identified primary motivators and demotivators of instructors for online teaching. He found that flexibility, the opportunity to acquire new pedagogical knowledge and skills, and the ability to provide educational access to broader populations of potential students were prime motivators for teaching online, while inadequate compensation relative to workload and the potential implications of those time requirements for other professional activities were cited as primary demotivators. He also found that female faculty were more likely to be motivated by the schedule flexibility online teaching affords, and that the extent to which online teaching was a voluntary rather than required activity. However, because faculty from North American community colleges and specialized schools comprised about 60% of his sample, Shea's (2007) findings may not be fully generalizable to business school faculty. Green, Alejandro, and Brown (2009) recently found

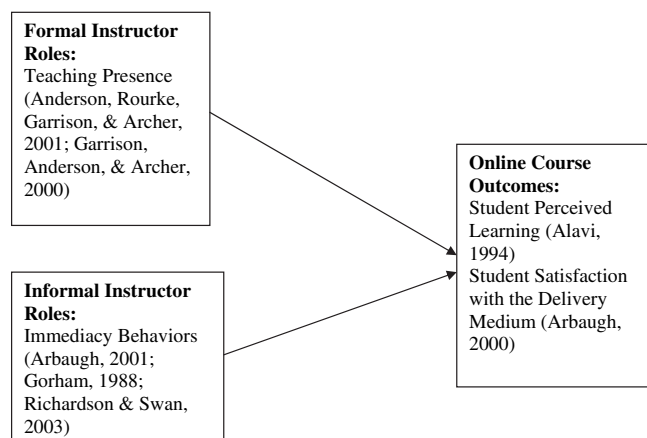


Fig. 1. Conceptual framework.

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