



Practicing teachers' responses to case method of instruction in an online graduate course



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Students used fewer affective responses than in previous studies of social presence.
- Students used affective responses more often when discussing family case studies.
- Course interactions were influenced by shared professional experiences.

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ABSTRACT

This is a study of two cohorts of practicing teachers enrolled in an online graduate course using Case Method of Instruction (a pedagogical technique based on realistic case studies) to facilitate students' learning. Social presence indicators were analyzed to demonstrate the effects of case studies in the online course on student interactions. This analysis revealed changes in types of interactions used during discussions of case studies. Both cohort groups showed changes in communication to include more emotional (affective) discussions when engaging in Case Method of Instruction.

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1. Introduction

As the field of education has moved toward online and blended instructional formats, the flexibility of degree programs and, by extension, the types of audiences that can be reached have greatly increased. For educators working full time, online coursework provides new avenues for professional development. Despite the promise of online learning opportunities, student retention and success have been persistent problems. Developmental Constructivist Theory (Kegan, 1982) suggests that active engagement with others is necessary for meaningful cognitive change. Further, research suggests that a mechanism for encouraging learners to co-construct meaning increases the effectiveness of learning activities and increases the likelihood that learners will remain engaged (Ice,

Gibson, Boston, & Becher, 2011; Vygotsky, 1979). Thus to be effective, instruction, including online instruction, should provide a mechanism for students to interact with peers online to co-construct meanings from coursework (Simmering & Posey, 2009).

This study examined an online graduate course in family engagement for teachers of children from ages four to eight. The course used case studies to help students learn to recognize and understand the perspectives of others, particularly low-income, culturally and ethnically diverse families. In this study, we analyzed the social presence of teachers participating in the course, that is, their prominence or willingness to make themselves noticeable as active individuals in an online environment. We used social presence as a means of determining the impact of the case studies as well as the collective response of the class to other course material. We hypothesized that students' stated affective (i.e., emotional and/or attitudinal) responses and other changes in online interactions would reflect improved understanding of family involvement in education for the practicing teachers participating

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in the course (Smith, Smith-Bonahue, & Soutullo, 2014; Kegan, 1982; Rogers & Scott, 2008). Given that a primary goal of the course was for students to use this new empathy to develop classroom and school environments that would be more conducive to encouraging family-school partnerships between schools and low-income families, we anticipated that an affective response to course materials would be critical for success.

2. Social presence

A persistent question in pre-service and in-service professional development is how to ensure that adult learners successfully master not only the academic content provided in courses, but internalize dispositional changes necessary to employ new skills. Kegan (1982) describes the Developmental Constructivist theory that extends the work of Piaget and Kohlberg to describe processes of adult's developing cognitions. Within this framework, adults are described as cycling through five successive stages of "development" based on their ability to conceptualize complex constructs within a social context. Kegan points out that this process is not linear, nor is it experienced in a vacuum. Rather, it is through our interactions with others within our social networks that we understand and apply ideas. In this article, we suggest that within an online learning environment, "social presence" provides a means of understanding adult students' conceptualization and internalization of course content.

Empirical evidence suggests that students are more successful in online environments when they are able to interact with and co-construct knowledge with classmates, which has been demonstrated in studies in Canada, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Taiwan (Garrison, 2011; Kehrwald, 2010; Swan, 2002; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). A study by Romanian researchers Draghici, Popescu, Fistis, and Borca (2014) demonstrates that feelings of membership in the online community and shared emotional connections are important for building community support. Social presence in online learning communities creates a level of comfort in which students feel at ease communicating with other students as well as with the instructor, thus facilitating the creation of supportive online communities. The construct of "social presence" in an online learning environment can be defined as the extent to which classmates express their own agency and individuality and recognize each other's agency and individuality in computer-mediated communication (Garrison, 2011; Kehrwald, 2010; Swan, 2002; Wei et al., 2012). In this way, social presence allows for individual participants in a "virtual" learning environment to recognize the "real" presence of other participants in the course.

Effective online communities, such as the one in this study, include a complex network of social relationships that develop over time (Rasulo, 2008). Further, this sense of community, which is indicated by the recognition of the social presence of others, is critical for learners to interact, sustain critical thinking, and build a community of inquiry (Ice et al., 2011; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Russo & Benson, 2005; Wei et al., 2012). Indicators of social presence in online communities, including humor, disclosure of personal information, references to the group as a whole, and references to the responses of others give students social cues to respond to in their online discussions (Rourke et al., 1999). This social exchange facilitates the development of relationships rather than a detached exchange of information and makes the process of learning more enjoyable (Rourke et al., 1999).

Social presence has a strong, positive relationship with perceptions of instructional effectiveness (Mayne & Wu, 2011). More importantly for our purposes, social presence facilitates building a community of inquiry that supports cognition through creative thinking and shared constructions of knowledge (Picciano, 2002;

Zhu, 1998). The group is able to perform at a higher level together than individuals can separately (Henri, 1995). In addition to facilitating shared knowledge construction, recognizing the presence of classmates allows for students to be more revealing and honest regarding their own emotions and the judgments they make about course readings, discussions, and assignments. Such awareness and reflection is critically important for reaching the primary course goal of increasing teachers' empathy and understanding of families (Allen & Porter, 2002). Specifically, the primary goal of this course requires teachers to become more aware of how their judgments and emotions affect their ability to empathize with families, and in turn, their interactions with families.

3. Literature

3.1. Online coursework

Online instruction provides multiple pragmatic advantages for students (e.g., the ability to attend university at a distance) as well as pedagogical opportunities for instructors. Asynchronous interaction allows more time to consider ongoing conversations and formulate responses. However, literature in online learning suggests that these advantages are not without weaknesses. Online students are significantly less likely to finish a course (Community College Research Center, 2013). Students must be self-directed and possess organizational skills for structuring time. Additionally, a study from the United Kingdom demonstrates that online courses do not support student diversity as they might be expected to (Hughes, 2007). At the same time that online learning's flexibility allows more non-traditional students to enroll, it masks demographic differences (Hoskins & van Hooff, 2005). Students must still adjust to the academic language and norms used in online instruction, and because demographic differences are hidden, instructors may not be aware that some students need additional support to adjust to the academic language and norms. Thus, while online instruction might appear to be more democratic than traditional classroom instruction, online courses do not support student diversity as might be expected (Hoskins & van Hooff, 2005; Hughes, 2007). Students may experience barriers to academic success that would be apparent to the instructor in a face-to-face setting, but are invisible online.

3.2. Case method of instruction

Case method of instruction (CMI) is a pedagogical technique that uses realistic, narrative case studies to facilitate students' learning (Snyder & McWilliam, 1999, 2003). In CMI, instructors ask students to read case studies relevant to potential issues they may face in future professions. These case studies are open-ended in that they do not resolve the dilemma presented; instead, the instructor facilitates discussion about issues raised in the case study (Snyder & McWilliam, 2003). Using CMI in a classroom has the additional advantage of providing a supportive, collaborative context for idea generation and the opportunity to evaluate potential outcomes of different decisions based on students' collective experiences and knowledge, critical thinking, introspection, perspective-taking, and awareness of others' beliefs (Snyder & McWilliam, 1999, 2003). With appropriate implementation, CMI has been linked to changes in students' attitudes, self-awareness, application of course material, analytical skills, and reflective decision-making (Snyder & McWilliam, 2003).

A core objective of CMI is to facilitate a link between theoretical knowledge and its application to a real-world context (Snyder & McWilliam, 1999). CMI has been traditionally based in the paradigms of professional schools, such as law, business, and medicine,

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