# Chapter 7.2
# Instructor Presence in Online Distance Classes

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## INTRODUCTION

*Instructor presence* are words that call to mind a professor at the front of a classroom lecturing to a room full of students. Today the image associated with instructor presence is quite different. The vision is one of an individual engaged with the student, leading, and mentoring students, and facilitating classes either visibly in the classroom or invisibly in the online environment. Instructor presence is a broad phrase that refers to the instructor's jobs of structuring and presenting the materials as well as providing feedback and engaging with the student academically through e-mail, by telephone, or by instant messaging either text or video.

The roles are different but the outcome is the same, student learning. Gone are the days where the instructor was the center of the class, lecturing and passing along knowledge to students. Because today's learner is actively involved in the building of new knowledge, learning is more student-focused. As the environment changes, the instructor assumes a variety of roles from designer to facilitator to mentor. The new roles are the same for both instructors in the face-to-face classroom and instructors in the online environment. Instructors for classes in the online environment cannot just compile a site for the class with materials available to the students. Instructors need to have an online presence as they facilitate the class mentoring students, providing activities, encouraging students, and communicating with student on a regular basis.

Online instructors should be willing to provide the leadership and mentoring necessary for students to become engaged and flourish. Distance education literature discusses the importance of both interaction and sense of community to student learning and the part that the instructor plays in creating the learner-centered environment. Developing a classroom community online, then, is a process that begins with social interactions among individuals and progresses to developing a sense of belonging and trust so that learners will engage with the instructor, their peers, and the subject matter in an active way. In the beginning the instructor is the common denominator, and the instructor's ability to be present without being visible holds the class together while the students become acquainted. As the class progresses, the instructor's presence keeps the conversation moving and the subject matter interaction on track.

## BACKGROUND

As early as 1997, Sherron and Boettcher (1997) discussed the changing role of the instructor. Later Morris, Xu, and Finnegan (2005) reviewed the literature and found the roles included managing online communications and encouraging and providing activities to build community. Because instructors in the online environment play an important role in online learning through the structure they provide as well as their interaction with students, their presence in an online environment is just as essential to the online classroom as it is to the face-to-face classroom.

The various roles are defined in the literature for online learning. Students may do the learning, but teachers are at the center of this process as they provide instructional leadership fostering motivation, creating activities, and creating the supportive and encouraging environment agreed Hoy & Hoy (2003). If students are to grow as independent learners in the online environment, instructors should provide structure, leadership,

and a respectful environment (McLoughlin & Luca, 2002; Jiang, Parent, & Eastmond, 2006; Waltonen-Moore, Stuart, Newton, Oswald, & Varonis, 2006). Lewis & Abdul-Hamid (2006) interviewed faculty members teaching in an online environment and found fostering interaction, providing feedback, facilitating learning, and maintaining enthusiasm and providing organization were all important functions. They concluded that the role of the online instructor "is neither static nor one dimensional" (96).

Instructor now have several tasks including creating the online classroom, providing the interaction, and motivating students to become active participants in their own learning. In addition, instructors must also energize students "when the going is tough" (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, 7). Palloff and Pratt (2003) also encourage instructor presence in their principles of good practice with four suggestions—encouraging student-faculty contact, encouraging student cooperation, giving prompt feedback, and communicating high expectations.

Moore defined three levels of interaction for online education—learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction, all of which relate to the instructor in some form. The instructor facilitates the learner/content interaction through assignments and presentation of material. The instructor is directly involved in the interaction with the student through synchronous and asynchronous communication providing feedback and motivation. The instructor plays a significant role in the learner/learner interaction through group projects, discussion board opportunities, and the virtual group responsibility for helping their peers (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

## INSTRUCTOR PRESENCE

If the role of instructors is changing as the literature suggests, what is the role of the instructor in online courses? Is instructor presence important

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