

The Role of Enhanced Teaching Presence In Bridging The 'Distance' In Distance Education

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AIB Review, Issue 10

Distance education, which includes the online environment as a key component, has gained popularity in recent decades. The COVID-19 pandemic forced many higher education providers worldwide to offer online education, and the benefits of this mode of delivery were quickly realised. Consequently, institutions have continued to offer courses online that were previously only available on campus. Online education provides several advantages for universities and students, including greater accessibility and flexibility, availability of teaching and learning resources, and (arguably) cost-effectiveness. Nonetheless, distance education poses unique challenges, including a lack of face-to-face interaction, which is essential for socialisation and building relationships with instructors and peers. Another challenge is reduced motivation among students, leading to low levels of engagement, procrastination, and a resulting poor performance. Additionally, ensuring academic integrity in an online environment can be challenging. However, by viewing [education as a social experience](#) and implementing strategies to foster interaction between students and instructors and among students themselves, many of these challenges can be effectively addressed. Specifically, this article explores the role of enhanced teaching presence in bridging the distance in online higher education and creating a more engaging and effective educational experience for students.

In an online learning environment, since the instructor's physical presence is not possible, it becomes crucial to foster a sense of visibility and identity by creating a community in which students feel supported and connected to the instructor and their peers. This approach encourages them to engage with the course content and remain motivated to achieve their learning objectives. This is in line with the [Community of Inquiry framework](#) (Col) (proposed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer in 2000). The Col framework is based on the premise that successful online learning depends on the creation of a community of learners who engage in critical inquiry and discourse and consists of three interdependent components. Namely social presence (the extent a student feels connected to others and perceives them as real persons), cognitive presence (the extent to which students engage in conversation/dialogue) and teaching presence ("[the virtual "visibility" of an instructor in an online learning environment](#)").

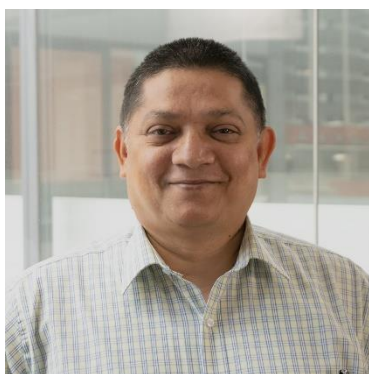
Teaching presence is a critical component of effective online education. According to [Garrison, Anderson, and Archer \(2000\)](#), teaching presence refers to the ways in which an instructor fosters a sense of community, supports learning, and manages the course environment. There are many ways in which teaching presence can be enhanced in the online education system, such as:

- **Ensuring effective course design:** Online courses should be structured, designed, and delivered in a way that is clear, easy to navigate, and engaging for students. Instructors can promote their teaching presence and inspire students to learn by [developing courses](#) that are

user-friendly, include a variety of interactive features, offer clear and consistent directions, define explicit expectations for assignments and deadlines, and provide timely and constructive feedback on student work.

- **Building understanding:** Building understanding can be challenging for online students who may not have the benefit of face-to-face interactions. However, instructors can deepen students' understanding of course content by providing real-life examples and explanations, asking thought-provoking questions, and encouraging student reflection. In addition, [instructors can engage students](#) with course content by using multimedia resources like videos, podcasts, or interactive simulations to explain complex ideas.
- **Recognising and addressing students' feelings of isolation:** Online courses can sometimes feel isolating, so it's important for instructors to create opportunities for students to interact with each other (as a part of [the learning community](#)). Various empowering collaborative learning strategies could include online discussion forums, group projects, or peer review assignments.
- **Being innovative with the use of direct instruction methods:** Direct instruction in online courses encompasses various mediums such as live/recorded lectures, interactive webinars/presentations, and recorded videos. To create immersive learning experiences that extend beyond passive listening, instructors should utilise technology. For instance, PowerPoint presentations can incorporate interactive quizzes, multimedia resources, gamification, interactive simulations, and collaborative tools such as live chat. The ultimate aim is to facilitate active and participative learning through effective networked technologies, as proposed by Gilly Salmon's "[E-tivities](#)" framework.
- **Being responsive and approachable:** In online courses, it is essential for instructors to be approachable and responsive to students. This involves being available to answer questions, promptly responding to emails and messages, and providing clear and supportive guidance throughout the course.
- **Exploring the power of social media:** [Social media platforms](#) like Facebook and LinkedIn can be powerful tools for fostering a sense of community and engagement among students. Instructors can use these platforms to share course updates, facilitate discussions, and connect with students outside of the learning management system (LMS). When thoughtfully integrated into an online education plan, social media can help students and teachers stay connected, increase student engagement, and make remote learning seem less remote.
- **Providing personalised feedback:** In online courses, providing timely and personalised feedback on student work is crucial for keeping students on track and fostering a sense of connection with the course. To achieve this, instructors can utilise various tools such as rubrics, voice comments, and video feedback to provide detailed and supportive feedback to students.
- **Recognising cultural diversity of students:** Online education is a platform for boundaryless learning that attracts a diverse student body. Recognising the importance of this diversity and [integrating diverse perspectives](#) into course materials and discussions can enhance teaching presence. Instructors can achieve this by using diverse readings and resources, inviting guest speakers from diverse backgrounds, and encouraging students to share their perspectives and experiences.

As distance education gains popularity, it also presents unique challenges, such as the absence of face-to-face personal interactions and social experiences. Also, students must be more self-motivated and self-directed compared to traditional face-to-face courses. Therefore, enhancing teaching presence remains a critical component in ensuring that students feel connected to their instructors and peers, fostering a sense of community and motivation. Essentially, thoughtful strategies are needed to create a sense of community and connection in the online environment to overcome the physical distance. This article discusses such strategies, and the authors welcome any comments or suggestions in this regard.



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Cite this article:

Ala, M & Kaur, K 2023, 'The role of enhanced teaching presence in bridging the 'distance' in distance education', *AIB Review*, Issue 10.

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