

Does Teaching Presence Change Over Time?

Petrea Redmond
Faculty of Education
University of Southern Queensland
Australia
redmond@usq.edu.au

Jennifer V. Lock
Faculty of Education
University of Calgary
Canada
jvlock@ucalgary.ca

Abstract: This paper investigates ways in which pedagogical practice or teaching presence changes over time by sharing the experiences of two instructors as they move from teaching face-to-face to teaching online within a collaborative project. A self-study methodology provides the theoretical background where two instructors share their stories describing their perspectives and teaching presence based on five iterations of an international online collaborative project. Reflecting on their collaborative teaching and changes in their teaching presence, resulting student outcomes, and feedback from critical friends, the authors share their learning, impact of this work on learners, educators and the educational field, and subsequent implications.

Introduction

Teaching and learning in higher education have changed dramatically over the past 30 years. To accommodate the increased economically, geographically, socially and culturally diverse student population and to increase efficiencies universities have embraced online education as a way to provide great flexibility and access. In addition, changes have occurred to curriculum and working conditions of academics (Nixon, 1996). These changes have had an impact on the role and the expectations of university faculty. As the work of academics moves increasingly to online spaces, it is essential that there is a greater awareness and understanding of the roles and practices that comprise online teaching presence.

Moving from face-to-face teaching to online teaching adds a layer of complexity to an already complex job of teaching. The dynamic nature of online learning challenges the role of instructors and self-concept of academics. The authors have set out to investigate within this complexity the changes to their teaching presence in an online learning environment. This paper explores the changing nature of instructional work completed by academics through the lens of a self-study for the purpose of examining teaching presence.

Literature Review

Transition to Online Teaching

It has been suggested by Jackson (1984) that place provides people with their identities. “So if educators are changing teaching places, they need to redefine themselves in light of the change in landscape” (Meloncon, 2007, pp. 37-38). There is a difference between teaching face-to-face and teaching online and many academic’s identity is encapsulated by their past face-to-face teaching. Further, Meloncon (2007) commented that for the most part

universities “did not provide a way for an educator to self-select or to explore in depth one’s readiness, willingness or preparedness for the online setting” (p. 38). The decision to move teaching to a blended or online mode is rarely in the control of the academic. With limited resources to assess the readiness of the academic and provide suitable training the resulting teaching often falls short of what was expected from both the faculty members and students perspectives.

The move from face-to-face to online and blended learning has been problematic for many faculty members. Without training and time to reconsider their pedagogical approaches they fail to “make a transformational shift in their approach to teaching from one of dissemination information to one of creating learning environment where students co-construct knowledge through interactions with the process, their peers and the course content” (Vaughan, 2010, p. 61). Faculty members may very well consider themselves an expert in face-to-face instruction, however they return to being a novice educator in blended or online instructional environments.

The technology itself changes regularly, returning all users to the position of novice, as does the ways in which information can be formed, modified, distributed and utilized (Lorenzo, Oblinger, & Dziuban, 2007) using technology. However, it is not the technology itself which makes a difference, it is the way it is used (Laurillard, 2000; Mehan, 1998) that impacts learning. Laurillard (2000) suggested that “technology is a positive driver towards improving higher education” (Laurillard, 2000, p. 133). These changes appear to impact on the pedagogical practices of academics and reflect the changing nature of their teaching presence.

Palloff and Pratt (2002, 2003) identified that following characteristics of successful online instructors: flexible; capacity to learn from others (including students); student centred approach; participate in collaboration; change in faculty role. “The challenge is to systematically explore the integration of pedagogical ideas and new communications technology that will advance the evolution of higher education as opposed to reinforcing existing practices” (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, p. 31).

The move towards online instruction offers new opportunities but also new challenges for both instructors and students. Such challenges for online instructors include the change in roles and responsibilities, adjustments to beliefs and thinking about teaching and their role as instructors, increased requirement for technology skills, change in relationships, perceived lack of prestige, and democratization of teaching where both the learner and the teacher take on both learning and teaching roles (Yang & Cornelious, 2005).

Teaching Presence

Vaughan (2004) suggested that the roles and functions required to create and sustain a dynamic learning environment and facilitate higher levels of learning is known as teaching presence. This requires the instructor to manage and monitor the cognitive and social dynamics. The concept of teaching presence has been expressed in a number of different ways. Shea and Bidjerano (2010) identified teaching presence as the “online instructional orchestration” (p. 17) where as Jones, Naugle and Kolloff (2008) talked about it as an instructional relationship in that the instructor designs, communicates and models the intellectual climate of the course. They go on to suggest that teaching presence is established at the beginning of a course because “students form opinions and make assumptions about the instructor, and the organisation of the course, from the first meeting” (Jones, et al., 2008). However, the design aspect of teaching presence must occur prior to students entering the learning space to ensure that learning materials are created.

Students however, might consider teaching presence to be how visible the instructor is in the online space. The quantity and quality of teaching presence is important in designing and facilitating the construction of knowledge. However, it is more than being present or visible in the educational space. It is also what the instructor does when they are there in the online environment. Teaching presence requires the instructor to focus on the learner, the learning materials, the content, the learning design and the learning interface.

According to Garrison et al. (2000) teaching presence has three key roles: Design and organisation, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. Shea, Hayes and Vickers (2010) expanded this to four constructs adding assessment as a separate role. Other researchers (Berge & Collins, 2000; Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001; Morris, Xu, & Finnegan, 2005) have also attempted to categorise the role of an online teaching presence and include roles such as manager, editor, fire fighter, assessor, adviser, technologist, and process facilitator.

Online instructors' teaching presence needs to shift from the traditional role of content provider or the sage on stage; to a more facilitative approach or the guide on the side; and ultimately, to the sage on the side. For some academics this move from "intellect-on-stage and mentor towards a learning catalyst" (Volery & Lord, 2000, pp. 222-223) is a philosophical shift in addition to a pedagogical shift. In practice, many academics who believe in constructivism tend to practice transmission type of teaching practices so there is a conflict between their philosophy and their practice.

The move to online can often be the catalyst for questioning and reflecting one's philosophy and practices about teaching. What worked for instructors in the traditional face-to-face classroom may no longer be effective in the online space. Oliver (2001) suggested that a lack of teacher readiness results in instructors trying to replicate their face-to-face teaching online and not capitalizing on the capacity of the online environment. Some instructors may not have the technological competency and often fail to move towards new technologies to enhance their teaching. Working online requires instructors to redesign and rethink alternatives to the traditional transmission model previously used. It also requires them to reflect on their practice and the learning experience in ways that allow them to continue to enhance their online teaching presence for the purpose of fostering a healthy learning environment.

Research Design

A self-study was initiated to explore the changing teaching presence with two teacher educators. Self-study methodology "is a stance that a researcher takes toward understanding or explaining the physical or social world" (Samaras, 2011, p. 86). A self study has been used to investigate how two teacher educators' teaching presence has changed as a result of their ongoing participation in an international collaborative project with pre-service teachers and in-service teachers.

Self-study involves a strong personal reference in that it involves study of the self and study by the self...Self-study is constructivist because it includes elements of ongoing inquiry, respects personal experience, and emphasizes the role of knowledge construction. The collaborative component of self-study acknowledges the important role of the social construction of knowledge (Samaras & Freese, 2006, p. 14).

According to Samaras (2011), self-study methodology involves the following five components which were used as a lens to explore the teacher educators' change in teaching presence through their experience with an online international collaborative project:

- 1) Situated inquiry – initiate a study of a teacher's own inquiry in his/her classroom. This paper is the result of an inquiry into two teacher educators' work as online instructors in an online international project which they designed and facilitated.
- 2) Critical collaborative inquiry – teachers working in a safe and supportive community so to improve practice. The teacher educators in this study have worked collaboratively over a number of years and have explored their change in perspectives and practices as supportive colleagues.

- 3) Improved learning – questioning the status quo of one’s own teaching and school politics for the purpose of improving and impacting on learning and teaching. From their work in the project, the learners’ and other online experts’ voices have influenced changes in the project and how the teacher educators take up the work.
- 4) Transparent and systematic research process – documentation of dialogue and critique of the research process. The process of design and implementation has been researched over several iterations of the implementation of the project. However, in this case the research has a personal focus where the teacher educators are studying and exploring their practice.
- 5) Knowledge generation and presentation – findings of the study are made public and available for review and for critique. The outcomes of the research processes above have been shared in presentations at both universities, in international peer-reviewed journals and at conferences.

Findings

The authors, as teacher educators, have extensive experience working in online environments, pondered the question that formed the foundation for the self-study, does teaching presence change over time? If so, what causes it to change? To what extent does it change? Using the first three components of Samaras’ (2011) self-study approach they set out to address these questions. They have shared their insights, experiences and what has been learned from their ongoing research that accompanied each iteration of the international project.

Situated inquiry: Context of the international online collaborative project

We are teacher educators from the University of Southern Queensland and University of Calgary who have designed, developed and facilitated a dynamic online international project for our pre-service teachers. Using an inquiry-based approach within a technologically-enhanced learning environment, the aim of the project was to advance educational thought and practice and provide pre-service teachers an opportunity to live the experience of being online collaborators investigating real-world teaching issues. Within this cross-institutional project, the pre-service teachers and teacher educators were joined by in-service teachers as experts, to create an online learning experience which provided an opportunity to develop global relationships, increase understanding of diversity and inclusivity, and to learn how ICT can be integrated in meaningful ways to enhance and enrich teaching and learning (see Lock & Redmond, 2006; Lock & Redmond, 2009; Redmond & Lock, 2008, 2009).

We used social constructivism and connectivism as the theoretical framework for the project. This was further supported by the need to have authentic content and authentic dialogue. Critical to the work was social constructivism where learners were to make meaning through dialogue, communication, collaboration and interaction (Jonassen et al., 1999; Swan, 2005). Connectivity was enhanced by the technology providing a flexible learning environment which enabled pre-service teachers, experts (e.g., in-service teachers) and teacher educators from both institutions to access and interact with a plethora of resources and people to support innovative ways for curriculum to be taken up and to foster dynamic discussions as part of a rich learning experience. This learning experience was designed to provide flexibility and promote critical inquiry among pre-service teachers as they asked and investigated their inquiry questions within an online community environment. As teacher educators, we played a key role in facilitating and scaffolding learning so to empower all participants to share knowledge, to find and integrate new information as they constructed meaning, to provide meaningful access to and interaction with resources and to explore multiple perspectives within a global context.

Critical collaborative inquiry: Our stories and our critical friends’ feedback

Using pseudonyms, this section presents our individual stories as teacher educators along with feedback collected from the online experts as part of both the research process, but also part of the ongoing process for improvement of the design and implementation of the learning experience. Each of our stories is a result of personal and shared

reflection as we construct knowledge about what type of online instructor we are and how we might improve our teaching presence.

Louise's Story

Although I have been teaching in blended or online environments for a number of years I would not consider myself an expert online educator. Information from the literature and formal and informal feedback from students, peers and my own reflections continually guide the modifications in my course design, facilitation and instruction. I enjoy discussing pedagogical practice and sharing my own experiences with others. I perceive myself as a social-constructivist educator, however, I admit to sometimes falling into a teacher-directed mode and need to focus on specifically design online experiences for a constructivist approach.

In terms of teaching presence, I use a range of methods and mediums within the online space to establish and maintain my teaching presence. For example, the use of synchronous text, audio and video opportunities in addition to static and online discussions. I monitor students' engagement especially at the beginning of a course by making deliberate contact with students who are not engaged or interacting online. As an online instructor, I feel I am a proactive educator providing encouragement and further questions and also respond to emerging issues during the course.

Over time I have found that I am now more easily able to establish a more student-centred approach to learning, where the learners' own questions and concerns guide the content and conversation. When I provide students with clear instructions regarding the expectation of their online interaction and online presence and discuss sample or model posts students posts are more constructive and support collective meaning making.

The online conversations are seen as opportunities for students to engage with content, peers, myself and others (e.g., online experts) as they construct their personal meaning. I am active within the discussion forums through the whole semester. However, do not respond to every student post. I have designed activities and assessment in the course to enable students to engage in critical thinking and for the work to be authentic so to gain improved learning outcomes.

When engaging online, I see myself as both a learner and a teacher. I commonly use online experts within my courses, and seek to learn from other educators and often learn from students. My online discussion contributions are often more of a conversational style although after working with other educators I now endeavour to justify comments from past experiences or from literature. I have also found through working with other educators and reading literature in the field that significant benefits can be found in designing activities and assessment which promote the integration of multiple sources and different perspectives when looking at problems or issues.

The opportunity to collaborate with another teacher educator and in-service teachers through my engagement in this project has shown me alternative models of designing online learning and interacting with students online. It has also strengthened my teaching presence online and increased the range of strategies that I use. What I have gained from this experience has affected other courses that I teach. For example, I now use triggering texts or questions for each discussion forum and provide opportunities for synchronous online activities and discussion in addition to asynchronous discussion.

Where to next for me? I want to encourage enhanced participation and increased critical thinking for all students. Further, I want to motivate students to see value in interacting online beyond that of assessment driven participation.

Violet's Story

As I look back over time, I acknowledge that I have years of experience as both a distance learner and as a teacher working in blended and distance learning environments using various technologies (e.g., teleconference,

videoconference, learning management systems and audiographics). When working in a distance learning environment, creating and fostering a learning community is a critical component in my work. I want to design an environment that brings all voices into the work and to nurture the power and potential of what can occur if instructor and students work as members of a learning community.

My teaching presence has changed over time. As I reflect on each course that I have taught and the feedback that I received it has helped me to affirm what is working well and to carefully consider what can be refined or changed for the next online experience. Further, I have used the literature to inform my practice and appreciated the opportunities that I have had to learn from colleagues and to learn from my students about my teaching and my teaching presence. It has helped me to position myself and how I design the work to foster greater interaction and engagement.

As I reflect on my teaching presence in the online international project, I have identified three key learnings. First, I model academic rigor in my postings where I draw on the literature to support or extend the point being addressed. I provide starting points for where students can focus their readings based on the questions asked and the nature of the discussions. Second, I have learned that we need to find more opportunities to personalize or customize the online learning environment. For example, all the students work in Blackboard™ in various discussion forums, as well as the project provides a videoconference for all to attend. However, using feedback from experts in our last iteration, we create Café Conversation sessions where one expert, two teacher educators and students joined a one hour Wimba session to take up issues and topics in relation to the expert's field of study. This more intimate and personal synchronous space has given greater voice to the students, as well as it became more of a free-form discussion where experts and students discussed and debated. Third, at times I find myself questioning how I can do a better job of being a facilitator and not always the expert who comes in with the information. That ability to choreograph the online discussion to probe, to question and to nurture the work to help students formulate informed understandings is an essential, if not a critical skill. As I observe my colleague and some of the experts, within a few sentences or through sharing of information, they are able to empower students to push forward with the work or react in a way that takes the discourse to the next level. This is a skill that I find that I am continually learning from others and working to refine for myself.

The work is public to everyone in who is enrolled in the project. Pre-service teachers, experts and my teacher educator colleague, all are able to read and respond to my work. Putting my thoughts and work out in this public forum is a way to model how we can learn with and from each other. It may take courage to make one's practice public, but what can be gleaned from working within a learning community environment is very powerful and fulfilling personally and professionally.

Critical friends' feedback: From the experts

In an interview, experts were asked in what ways did they feel they were able to contribute to the pre-service teachers' theoretical and practical knowledge. The majority of the experts felt through their work in the discussion forums that they had contributed through asking questions, sharing resources and personal perspectives, and providing suggestions. One expert commented that the students

really did an excellent job of engaging one another and through some of the comments that I was able to make as an expert, more students engaged, it brought forth further questions from the students so I think there was a lot of give and take from both the students and experts.

Given their experience with the project, experts were asked to share recommendations that we could use to improve the project. The following are a few examples of suggestions shared. First, to include a novel that addressed a separate contemporary issue. Second, to add a synchronous session for each one of the areas may provide another way to give the discussion more depth. Third, to extend the discussion time with the experts was noted. One expert

commented that it would give her “more time to respond back and forth to some people and go deeper, respond back with questions, rather than just wanting to make sure that I responded to them.” Fourth, an expert acknowledged the project was “exceedingly well organized and effective” but was disappointed in that this person would have liked to have seen more responses from the experts. This individual recommended that more clarification with regard to the number or frequency of responses for the experts, along with some guidelines for what might be expected may be helpful.

It has been exciting and rewarding to know that many of the experts were pleased with the experience and would volunteer for the project again. The experts supported the project goals and overall design. They commented that they gained personally and professionally from their participation in the project.

Improved learning: Feedback from our students

As part of the learning experience the pre-service teachers were asked to share their reflections on the learning process and their personal learning outcomes. This data has been used to inform redesign decisions over the five iterations of the project. When mining their reflections, the authors found that the project has resulted in improved student learning.

The authenticity and depth of learning challenged pre-service teachers to understand both theory and practice of teaching within current 21st century classrooms. The following reflective remarks from the pre-service teachers indicate that they valued their participation in the innovative project and their participation has had an impact on how they will teach:

- “...very rarely are we presented the opportunity to participate across continents in a study surrounding some of the most important issues we face as teachers.”
- "Exposure to new ways to implement technology is fantastic as an aspiring teacher because it helps to develop confidence within us.
- “It has been of great interest to see changes in my personal teaching pedagogy and preparation for an up-coming prac....directly related to my learnings from this course.”
- “...this was a capacity building activity; I can use the information in other courses and in my own teaching.”
- “For myself, I find that a willingness to be open to the opinions of others is vital to becoming a successful teacher.”

Discussion of Findings

The goal was to explore if teaching presence changed over time. If it did change, what influenced the change and to what extent did the change occur? It is evident that both our teaching presence has changed. Three key influences have been identified. First, through our scholarly work and continuous exploration of the literature we use it to inform our practice. Second, the opportunity to work together online allows us to observe each others’ styles and ways in which we engage in the online environment and engage with students and experts. We are not working in isolation, rather by working in a public forum allows us to learn with and from each other. Third, feedback from pre-service teachers and experts has helped us to affirm what is working, as well as it has given us insight into what needs to be modified or changed. Through this feedback, we are able to reflect on our teaching presence for the purpose of acknowledging strengths and refining our online teaching presence.

Impact and Implications

It is one thing to consider teaching presence in terms of our own work but what can be gleaned from this self-study that can impact learners, other teacher educators, and the education field?

There are three key areas of impact on learners when there is a positive change in teaching presence. First, as teacher educators if we are modeling best practice in our teaching presence, the next generation of teachers will learn from this experience. They will have a frame of reference to work from as they move forward in their work online. This modeling will influence how they design and facilitate online learning experiences for their future students. Second, through the design and facilitation of the project that has a strong teaching presence, we have provided a rich learning opportunity for pre-service teachers to develop their content knowledge but also to develop their capacity as learners, as well as online learners. Third, the creation and facilitation of an international project has provided pre-service teachers the opportunity to be exposed to multiple perspectives on contemporary issues of teaching and learning which has required them to critically think about and engage in discussion with others as they develop their own understandings and meaning.

The impact of this work on teacher educators and the field of education are three-fold. First, the project was designed to have other teacher educators join as experts. From such an experience, they shared their research and expertise with an audience of pre-service teachers and other experts. The sharing of their expertise was used to help bridge theory and practice which is important for pre-service teachers. Further, this opportunity had an impact on what these teacher educators gleaned from others, as well as how they used the technology. An implication that needs to be considered is what do they require in terms of mentoring and support as they develop their online presence through the project? Second, the project showed other teacher educators the possibilities of working online. It opened the door for others to teach online collaboratively and to work in online global community environments. Third, from our experience and previous dissemination of our research, we are helping to inform how teaching and learning can be expanded through the use of technologies to embrace multiple perspectives and multiple resources in an online environment. The ability to work within an international context using technology is endless. However, care needs to be given to ensure supports and resources are in place to build the capacity of online instructors who can design and facilitate meaningful learning experiences for students. For example, who in the educational institutions will help others to develop their knowledge and skills in being online instructors and developing their online teaching presence? What types of supports need to be in place to help not only the novice as well as the experienced online instructor to continue to develop and foster a teaching presence that nurtures robust and meaningful learning?

Conclusion

From the two teacher educators' experiences and study of their own online work through the international project, teaching presence does change over time. What influences the changes rests with being a reflective practitioner, open and responsive to feedback from others, and being observant within the online environment in terms of learning *with* and *from* each other. It means letting go of some of the control that occurred in a teacher-directed environment and learning how to facilitate and negotiate the learning experience that empowers students to construct, co-construct and/or de-construct knowledge as part of the online learning experience.

As more universities move toward blended and online learning, consideration and resources must be given to helping faculty members understand the change in role and expectations when working online, but also the development of their capacity in terms of teaching presence. In this self-study, we, as teacher educators, came to this work with years of experience as online instructors and studied our practice for the purpose of strengthening our work and our skills. However, it can not be assumed that everyone who is assigned to teach online will have the same knowledge or skill set. As such, work needs to occur to build capacity of online instructors and support their ongoing learning in designing and facilitating rich online learning experiences where their teaching presence plays a critical role in nurturing the construction and co-construction of knowledge.

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