

# EFFECTIVE INSTRUCTION IN VIRTUAL HIGHER EDUCATION: ENSURING COGNITIVE, SOCIAL, & TEACHING PRESENCE

Sandra M. Rebeor<sup>1</sup>, Michelle L. Rosser-Majors<sup>2</sup>, Christine L. McMahon<sup>3</sup>, Stephanie L. Anderson<sup>4</sup>, Yolanda Harper<sup>5</sup>, Laura J. Sliwinski<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1-6</sup>College of Health, Human Services, and Science, Ashford University (USA)

## Abstract

Considerable research on effective instruction in the classroom exists. Yet, very little is known about the extent to which instructor presence (cognitive, social, and teaching) is related to effective online instruction. Low attrition rates and high retention, engagement, as well as student- and instructor- success rates are critical aspects of an effective virtual classroom and program of study. However, without adequate cognitive, social, and teaching presence in the online classroom, student- and program- success rates likely suffer. This workshop is designed to improve participants' knowledge of these constructs and share tools, as well as tips, for successful implementation. Armed with this knowledge, participants will be able to design and instruct online courses integrating best practices in cognitive, social, and teaching presence in order to bring their teaching to the next "level" in terms of effectiveness and enjoyment for students and instructors alike. Key points of this workshop entail a literature review, definitions and examples of cognitive, social, and teaching presence, tools and tips for integration, effectiveness highlights, presenters' experiences with design and teaching aspects, and participants' experiences, concluding with Q&A. This session will be conducted by full-time university faculty members who played an integral part in the design of seven self-paced instructor presence modules, which were disseminated to all faculty members aligned with the College of Health, Human Services, and Science at Ashford University. Following the lecture portion of this workshop, participants will be encouraged to exchange experiences and ask questions. This workshop is intended for faculty, course developers, and leaders of educational institutions with online course offerings. There is no limit for the number of participants.

**Keywords:** *Instructor presence, cognitive presence, social presence, teaching presence, instructor effectiveness*

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## 1. Introduction

Online learning has gained more attention in the area of higher education (Ward, 2018) but graduation rates remain under par (Jaggars, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2011). It is therefore imperative to develop and apply practical strategies to enhance student success and ensure thriving online classrooms in the future.

While various factors related to presence have been examined, such as video design (Fiorella, Kuhlmann, & Mayer, 2018), student-centered learning (Peneva, Djambazov, & Keremedchiev, 2017), student motivation (Cole et.al., 2017), student satisfaction (Ladyshevsky, 2013), and strategy identification (Watson, Watson, Janakiraman, & Richardson, 2017), noteworthy gaps in existing research appear to exist. For instance, sparse research is available pertaining to learning outcomes when the cognitive-, social-, and teaching- presence domains were effectively applied. Furthermore, no scholarly sources are available that assess the concrete personality characteristics of instructors who apply effective instructor presence strategies. The same is true for the effectiveness of self-paced modules that focus on developing instructor knowledge about presence.

This workshop will entail the examination of the three domains of presence, cognitive, social, as well as teaching, based on the Community of Inquiry (COI) model (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). Strategies that can be applied by online instructors and tips for success, based on the presenters' quantitative and qualitative study findings, will be covered and shared with all participants.

## 2. Brief Review of Literature

Learning via online modalities is continuously expanding; however, student success appears to be a growing opportunity for improvement for administrators and instructors employing e-learning options. Existing research suggests that effective instructors are intentional about presence, promote interactivity, and allow students to do most of the work (Pelz, 2004) but to foster success, the instructor's role must be carefully examined and instructor development should occur (Bonk, Kirkley, Hara, & Dennen, 2000; Hewett, 2015; Maor, 2003; Rose, 2012). Institutions have room for improvement in terms of fostering instructor development (Lehman & Conceição, 2014; Terantino & Agbehona, 2012) and increasing instructor knowledge on successful behaviors when facilitating online courses to enhance knowledge and learning (Goodyear, Salmon, Spector, Steeples, & Tickner, 2001; Revere & Kovach, 2011; Illinois Online Network, 2015).

Various studies have examined strategies pertaining to the traditional classroom; yet, many variables are different in the online platform (Bork & Rucks-Ahidiana, 2013; Relan & Gilliani, 1997). As instructors often lack expertise in developing, implementing, and facilitating online courses effectively, it is essential to equip instructors with effective strategies and tools to foster student engagement with subject content, peers, and the course instructor (Revere & Kovach, 2011; Paquette, 2016).

## 3. Research Questions and Hypotheses

Based on apparent research gaps, this team focused on answering the following research questions, prior to designing the workshop.

1. Will virtual instructor personality characteristics affect the level of presence applied to courses?
2. Will virtual instructor work load (i.e., number of students in the course, number of concurrent courses being taught, teaching in multiple higher educational institutions) affect the level of presence applied to courses?
3. Will the effects of consistent application of all three areas of presence, as defined by The Community of Inquiry (COI) within the online context, improve retention and success rates?
4. Will instructor perceptions affect the level of applying the COI presence variables within their courses?
5. Will student achievement improve in the courses that apply all three areas of presence consistently versus those that do not?
6. Will the dissemination of training modules, designed specifically for online instructors, improve the teaching practices applied?

The subsequent hypotheses were used as a base for this study:

1. Retention and student success will be improved in online courses where all three components of presence are consistently applied by the instructor.
2. Instructors completing specialized training in the application of Instructor Presence will increase these applications within their courses.
3. Personality characteristics will affect the level of application for at least one of the three areas of instructor presence.

## 4. Methods

Beginning 2017 through 2018, a series of seven self-paced interactive learning modules were created and disseminated to faculty at Ashford University. At the start of this dissemination, a consent form, for those wanting to participate in the formal study, was collected and archived to be used once all modules were available. The study followed OHRP guidelines (<http://www.hhs.gov/ohrp/>) for protection of human subjects.

A correlation matrix was constructed to ensure the selection of performance measures that do not overlap (i.e., capture the same variance). Regression analyses were then conducted on the selected measures to assess the extent to which specific personality characteristics predict performance. Triangulation method, using two to three researchers from this team, and a rubric assessment were used to evaluate the applications within designated courses. The findings have been assessed against the quantitative findings to better determine the potential student outcomes related to applications of instructor presence. This mixed method project allowed this research team to more effectively triangulate the findings.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

At the time of this paper submission, the research analyses are not yet finalized; however, concrete outcomes and recommendations for future research and practice will be discussed in the workshop. The main points of this workshop will encompass key literature review findings, definitions and examples of cognitive-, social-, and teaching- presence, recommendations for integrating success strategies in the online classroom to improve effectiveness and enjoyment among learners and instructors, and presenters' experiences on design and teaching aspects. Lastly, workshop participants are invited to share their own experiences and ask questions.

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