TEACHING DISTANCE EDUCATION TO STUDENTS FROM EMERGING MARKET COUNTRIES

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ABSTRACT

Several studies have shown that instructor-student interaction is essential in any educational experience regardless of the learning environment, i.e., traditional face-to-face, distance education or blended learning (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Andresen, 2009; Daly, Bolivar & Burke, 2010; Dennen & Smith, 2007; Eyal, 2012; Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011). Interaction is a critical element in any educational process. While interaction between instructors and students is explicit in the traditional on-ground classroom, it is not always the case in online learning environments (Comey, 2009).

Many educators feel confident that online learning will continue to account for a larger share of the way instructors teach and students learn in the coming years (DeSilets, 2013; Gwynne, 2013; Keohane, 2013). An effective learning environment should be supported by various kinds of interactions between teachers and learners (Moore, 1989). Our paper focuses on the importance of teaching presence, its interactive nature with students in the context of distance learning, and its pivotal role in determining the success of the online learning experience.

INTRODUCTION

A decade ago, distance learning was not seen as a likely alternative mode of learning that would displace traditional forms of education (Keohane, 2013). Today, the outlook is very different. Successful and robust online courses are being delivered and many more are in the process of development (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Anderson & McGreal, 2012; DeSilets, 2013; Hosler & Arend, 2012). Many educators feel confident that online learning will account for a larger share of the way instructors teach and students learn in the years to come (DeSilets, 2013; Gwynne, 2013; Keohane, 2013;). A survey conducted by Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2013) revealed that in 2012, the number of students taking at least one online course has now surpassed 6.7 million, an increase of over 570,000 over the past year. Another key finding of the survey was that thirty-two percent of students in higher education had taken at least one course online (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

The relationship between teaching and learning can be described in very simple terms: Good teaching leads to good learning (Rodgers & Raider Roth, 2006) and very often, good learning is equated with consistent and meaningful interaction with and among the instructor, content and peer learners (Fig. 1).

FIGURE 1: The Three Types of Interaction (Moore, 1989)
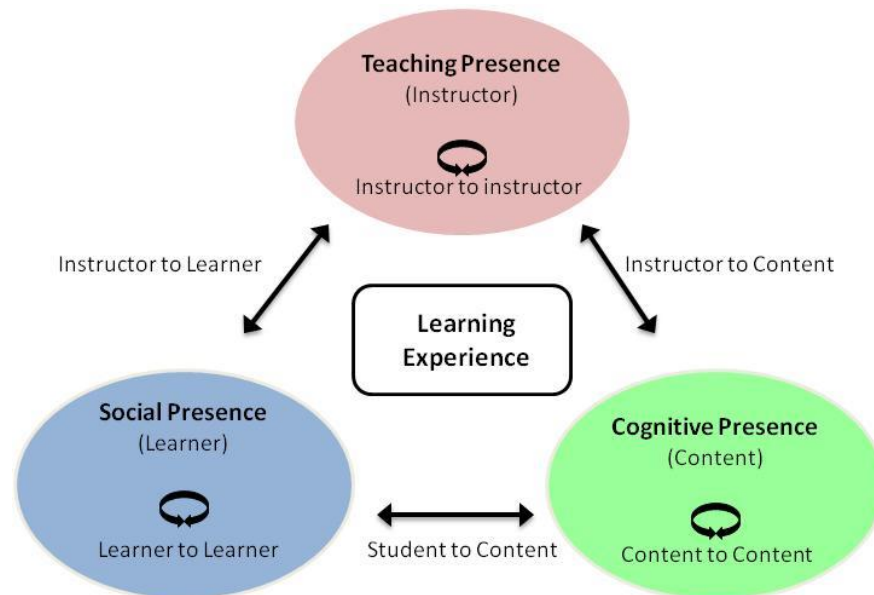
Several studies have shown that teacher and student interaction is vital in any educational experience, regardless of the learning environment: traditional face-to-face, distance education or blended learning (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Andresen, 2009; Daly, Bolivar & Burke, 2010; Dennen & Smith, 2007; Eyal, 2012; Joo, Lim, & Kim, 2011). Interaction is a critical element in any educational process. The challenge of teaching distance learning to students from emerging countries is that while interaction in the on-ground classroom is always explicit because of the face-to-face relationship established between instructors and students. Unlike the on-ground classroom, interaction is not always the case in online learning environments (Comey, 2009).

Given the current educational technology and trends, teaching presence is an element that needs to be reconsidered. This concept paper seeks to explore the issues that have developed from the research on teaching presence in distance learning in emerging countries. It is framed around the importance of teaching presence and its pivotal role in determining the success of the online learning experience.

**A CONCEPTUAL UNDERSTANDING OF TEACHING PRESENCE**
Teaching presence is defined as "the design, FACILITATION and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5). Teaching presence can be seen from the perspective of engagement with the students where educators "know and respond with intelligence and compassion to students and their learning" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266). Teaching is a practice that demands presence both in the background [planning, preparation and assessment] and the foreground [active delivery and implementation of the course content]. John Dewey (1938) suggested that educators must make his/her presence felt within the learning environment by connecting with the learners at all levels: through the content, pedagogy and the student themselves. While Dewey (1938) may have sounded like he espoused the formation of a in-depth relationship with each student, it is important to differentiate teaching

presence from personal relationships. Noddings (2003) further refined Dewey's definition of student engagement by distinguishing between teaching presence from personal relationships. According to Noddings (2003):

> I do not need to establish a lasting, time-consuming personal relationship with every student. What I must do is to be totally and non-selectively present to the student - to each student - as he [she] addresses me. The time interval [of the interaction with the student] may be brief but the encounter is total. (p. 180)

With the emerging educational models, Fried (2013) observed that the instructor's role might be redundant. This perception may be borne out of the change in the delivery of the online course. In the traditional on-ground environment, the teacher is usually expected to lecture on topics and facilitate discussions within the classroom every time the class meets. In the online environment, lectures are replaced with pre-recorded lectures, videos, and other media-rich materials. Discussions are posted online for other students to view and respond. When students do not physically see their instructor, but rather interact with the content posted online, they might feel like their online class is on autopilot and that there is no need for an instructor. However, teaching presence does not begin and end with a class or course. Teacher presence encompasses the three phases of instruction: planning preparation, implementation and assessment (Fig. 2).

FIGURE 2: THE THREE PHASES OF TEACHING PRESENCE
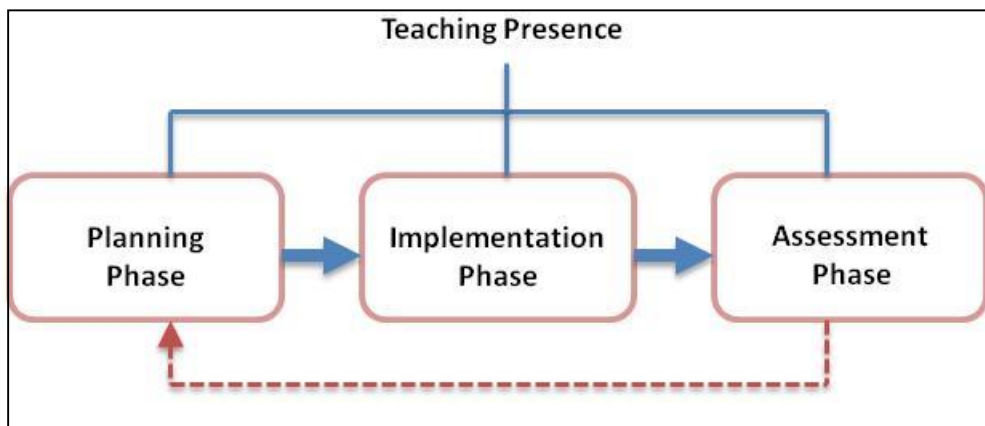
The **planning phase** or preparation refers to the phase prior to the start of a course. Teaching presence begins with the instructional design process in which a teacher gets involved in the curriculum and content development (Shea, Li & Pickett, 2006). The instructor constructs the learning process, structure, assessment system and the designs the interaction components of the course. The instructor thinks through and designs the learning activities and lessons that would engage students and stimulate interaction.   The instructor also makes the decision on the pedagogical method and selects the type of delivery that would be most appropriate to deliver the learning outcomes of the course: face-to-face, blended/mixed mode or online (synchronous or asynchronous).

The **implementation phase** or delivery refers to the phase of the actual instruction. During this phase, instructors provide direct instruction to the students, when required, and also act as facilitators of learning by moderating online discussions and encouraging student interaction with their peers and the course content (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). If the course requires papers or research projects to be submitted, instructors also act as mentors and guides to the students. There are several different indicators of teaching presence during the course

delivery. Some of these include timely feedback on student contribution, acknowledgement of student participation, responding to student queries, summarizing student discussions, creating an environment for collaborative learning between students, regularly posting questions about the course contents and introducing relevant knowledge from various sources (Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2003; Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010). Depending on the type of coursework and knowledge delivery, the instructor's role throughout the course could vary from being a lecturer to a facilitator, or even a mentor.

The **assessment phase** or evaluation is done after the course has ended. There are two types of assessments that need to be conducted: student performance and achievement of learning outcomes. Students' coursework are measured against the course objectives and based on their accomplishments, a grade is given to reflect the level of their performance. The more important measurement is the assessment of learning outcomes. Teachers have to reflect on their own teaching experiences, as well as the online learning experiences of the students as indicated in the course evaluations. The results of this process will serve as critical inputs to the design and delivery of subsequent similar courses in the future, as indicated by the red arrow circling from the assessment phase back to the planning phase in Fig. 2.

Many studies have reflected on the importance of teaching presence for online learning success and most agreed that one of the most critical functions of a teacher is to develop the structure of the educational experience to achieve learning outcomes (Abedin, 2011; Baker & Taylor, 2010; Burnett, Bonnici, Miksa & Kim, 2007; Garrison, 2007; Shea & Bidjerano, 2010; Snyder, 2009; Swan, 2004). In most learning environment, students have traditionally expected to learn from their teachers through direct instruction and interaction with the contents of the course. However, as students progress through the course, they may discover that they also learn from their classmates. This peer-to-peer learning does not "accidentally" occur. The teacher designed the course and put the pedagogy in place that would foster cognitive, teacher, and social interaction. Teaching presence during the course delivery is important to facilitate learning, particularly in a distance-learning environment in which peer-induced participation is lacking. The instructor has to simulate the same classroom-type environment by posting leading questions to engage students to participate in class discussions. At the same time, the instructor is also expected to provide timely and supportive feedback on submitted coursework to let the students know about their progress in learning and whether or not they are on the right track. The online interactions yield a teaching presence that is felt by students, leading to a more effective and meaningful distance learning experience.

TEACHING PRESENCE IN THE CONTEXT OF DISTANCE LEARNING
In recent years, higher education saw the arrival of a new approach to learning pioneered by faculty from the traditional academic centers (Anderson & McGreal, 2012; DeSilets, 2013; King & Sen, 2013). Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) were offered to students anywhere in the world with access to an Internet connection (Martin, 2012; Snyder, 2012). At first glance, this new programmed learning approach seemed to support the perception that teaching presence may be rendered redundant in E-learning (Popescu, 2012). However, a survey conducted by the Chronicle of Higher Education revealed that instructors involved in MOOCs are more engaged in their courses (Kolowich, 2013). In the various interviews conducted during the survey, the instructors revealed that they spent double or triple the time designing and conducting a MOOC, as compared to the time it took them to conduct a traditional face-to-face class (Kolowich, 2013).

MOOCs are aiming to combine the knowledge and expertise of the faculty with a unique online platform and pedagogy to deliver courses (Popescu, 2012). Although there are only a limited number of courses are available, more are in the process of development. What makes the

MOOCs unique is that it is catered for a huge mass of learners. The impact of these new approaches on traditional higher education remains to be seen, but one thing is certain: the innovations on educational technology will certainly transform teaching and learning (Kumar, 2012; Lukman & Kranjnc, 2012). It will change the dynamics of cognitive, social and teaching interaction between and among the teacher, the content, and the learner.

Distance learning, unlike the traditional face-to-face learning, relies on network technology to deliver knowledge, information and instructions to the students (Alarcia & Bravo, 2012). Although substantial research has followed the growing academic interest in distance education (Allen & Seaman, 2013; Fried, 2012; Keohane, 2013; King & Sen, 2013; Rorissa, 2012; Stephen, 2012; Wang, 2012; Wildavsky, 2012), there are still questions about the quality and effectiveness of this approach.   For instance, do students actually learn the material online as well as in traditional classroom settings? How can educators effectively structure the environment to make sure that all the necessary core components for learning and interaction [cognitive, social and teaching] are in place?

As the field of education moves from the traditional learning modes to the new approaches, it is worthwhile to pay attention to the relationship between instructor presence and student learning and engagement. It should not be forgotten that students enrolled in any course, whether traditional face-to-face, blended or distance learning environments, generally expect to have some sort of interaction with their classmates and teacher (Lear, Isernhagen, LaCost, & King, 2013). Interaction fosters learning (Cao, Griffin, & Baj, 2009), and in this context, teaching presence becomes a critical factor in the success of the online learning experience. Teachers should recognize that as the learning environment changes, their roles as instructors would also change (Pollard, Blevins, Connor & McGovern, 2013).

The combination of the availability of high quality online content and emerging technologies in education allows most educators to act as facilitators of learning rather than as lecturers. Since the distance learning environment often lacks the physical teaching presence, instructors need to have their presence felt in a variety of forms. Instructors manifest their teaching presence through the course structure, course design, course content (Burch & Nagy, 2007) and communication with the students (Belair, 2012). When the physical presence is reduced, a greater emphasis should be placed on compensating for the non-presence of the teacher so that the learners would feel supported in their learning.

THE EVOLUTION OF TEACHING PRESENCE
Online teaching, as a new approach to learning, should not imply a replacement of instructors, but rather a review and re-evaluation of their functions, roles and tasks. During the delivery of the course, instructors are no longer simply transmitting knowledge and monitoring the students' progress. To teach well, instructors are now expected to have the ability to guide, facilitate and motivate students in their learning to keep them engaged. In addition, instructors should also have some working knowledge of technology and be adept at using some of the emerging technology tools for collaborative learning such as web conferencing, wikis, lecture capture, blogs, social network, emails, file-sharing and other collaborative tools (Bradley, 2010).

The role of the teacher in an online learning environment is more demanding compared to the traditional face-to-face mode (Bradley, 2010; Cook-Wallace, 2012). In any learning environment, the expectations from teachers are similar. The teacher is expected to be a resource of knowledge as well as a facilitator of learning, whose task is to guide and support the students in their learning. The teacher is also responsible in creating the necessary structures to support

students in their learning. However, in an online learning environment, the delivery these expectations are taken a notch higher.

For instance, in a traditional face-to-face class, students are aware that the time they spend with the instructor is limited to class time and office visiting hours. If needed, they can also contact the instructor through email and wait for a response.   In the online learning environment, this time boundary is blurred. Students expect feedback in an extremely short time. If a teacher does not respond to a query or email in a few hours, repeat or follow up, the student asking for the response sends more messages. The students have an implicit expectation that the instructor is constantly connected to the computer and should be 'on-call' anytime. In a traditional on-ground class, discussions can be facilitated spontaneously by starting with a few questions then go from there based on the student responses in class. In online discussions, the instructors have to spend more time writing and rewriting the discussion questions to make sure that students will not misunderstand the requirements. Facilitation is also challenging, particularly if the course is asynchronous.   There is a lag time between the responses and spontaneity is somehow lost. These are just a few examples of the challenges in managing the online learning environment. The instructor has to be constantly aware of the dynamics of the online learning environment and create the necessary support structures to encourage student interaction with the content and their peers.

In terms of guiding the students in their learning process in the online learning environment, the amount of guidance and communication really depends on the knowledge level and experiences of the students (Wilson and Stacey, 2004). Bullen (1998) discovered that some students needed consistent communication [at least daily] and interaction with the instructor online. On the other hand, there are students who only expect the instructor to provide the learning structure, directions, and assessment of their work through timely, supportive and corrective feedback (Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2003).

An important issue around the delivery approach of online versus classroom teaching concerns the theory of media richness. According to the media richness theory, communication through face-to-face interaction is more effective rather than through other media channels such as emails, telephone or written letters (Daft & Lengel, 1986). Face-to-face interaction is much richer because affords both teacher and the student the ability to communicate more effectively through verbal and non-verbal communication cues, such as gestures and facial expressions, which may not be evident in other forms of media. With the aid of emerging technology, instructors are now able to make teaching presence felt by communicating with the students through web conferences, emails, instant messaging, discussion forums or virtual reality worlds such as Second Life. Advancements in technology make it possible to produce the desired effect of the media richness theory to make communication more active and animated. Teachers are also now able to transform course content from static text into a media-rich format that is highly engaging, and interactive. All these tools help the instructor establish a more meaningful online teaching presence.

Much has been written about teaching presence and most researchers agree that teaching presence include the facilitation and direction of the cognitive and social processes to achieve the required learning outcomes. The instructor needs to build, manage and nurture the online learning environment to ensure that the learning process will be productive for the students. Out of the three major phases of teaching presence, the delivery phase is one where the most contact with the students occur. During this phase, the instructor is actively teaching, guiding, assessing and supporting students in their learning. Most problems relating to online learning often deal with the delayed feedback from the instructors and their classmates (Andresen, 2009). This causes

anxiety and irritation in some students and may have a negative impact on their participant and involvement (Baker & Taylor, 2010).   Thus, it becomes necessary that both the instructor and the students find a common way of effectively communicating with each other and to work out a feedback system that would minimize the feeling of isolation of the students whenever they do not receive any responses about their submitted coursework.

A study conducted by Shea, Li and Pickett (2006) demonstrated that high levels of instructional design, organization and organization correlated with high levels of student engagement and learning. The students in the study equated the level of teaching presence with amount of discussion facilitation and direct instruction by the instructor (Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006). Comey (2009) supported the theory that in distance learning, the students' engagement in and perception of learning were directly related to the level of student- lecturer interaction.

IMPLICATIONS

This concept paper has discussed the importance and meaning of teaching presence in any learning environment and how this meaning changes in the context of distance learning. An issue that needs to be addressed is the maintenance of the quality of knowledge acquired through the distance learning process in comparison with traditional face-to-face environment. In the traditional learning environment, the students regularly see the instructor and constantly interact with each other and the teacher. The online learning environment is very different – it is more fluid and complex, and composed of an instructor who is not physically present and students who work in isolation.

The burden of duplicating an effective pedagogy in an online learning environment lies with the instructor, and to do this, instructors should adopt a different perspective on teaching and develop new skills that would take advantage of the emerging technology. The availability of technology and media provide the instructor with various opportunities to enhance teaching presence, provided that that the correct combination of the methodology and tools are used.   To create an effective online learning environment, it now becomes necessary to design and develop instructional methods that include emerging educational tools such as blogs, wikis, web conferences, collaborative webtools and virtual worlds. Students in an online learning environment perceive teaching presence through the course design [teaching methods, course content and learning goals]. Teaching presence can also be felt through the frequency of communication and timeliness of feedback. Without a good learning structure [design of the course] and leadership [facilitation and direction] driven by the instructor, students will feel lost and isolated. That being said, understanding the role of teaching presence is critical to distance learning because of its practical pedagogical implications. As the movement toward online learning accelerates, there will be other issues and challenges that would come up about teaching presence in distance learning. Now, while we are still at the cusp of the teaching evolution, is the right time to start documenting these emerging issues for researchers to address and build upon.

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