Using a Telephone Call to Increase Social Presence in Online Classes
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doi: 10.5480/11-569

Although perceived as a means of bringing people together, the online environment can also create isolation. Technology alone does not create a community of learning, and a learning community with critical discourse does not just happen. Rather, online, formalized learning carried out remotely using computer-mediated technology relies on good instructional design, a learning management system supported by technology, and a facilitator who sets the tone for participation and fosters social presence and teacher immediacy. Online instructors must be a powerful force within the online classroom.

The concepts of social presence and teacher immediacy are not new to education. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) developed the theory of social presence, defined as the degree of quality or state of being there when using an outside medium to communicate. Mehrabian (1967) conceptualized teacher immediacy as consisting of behaviors that reduce physical or psychological distance in interpersonal communication. Social presence and teacher immediacy have a positive impact on student satisfaction and learning (Christophel, 1990; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Wallace, 2003).

Social climates in computer-mediated instruction are far different than face-to-face environments. Building a community of learning in the online environment involves developing social presence across time and distance. To develop social presence between the students and instructors, the authors instituted a personal telephone call to students in the first week of class.

INSTITUTING THE FIRST-WEEK TELEPHONE CALL
When students log into class for the first time, they are faced with discussion boards, syllabi, and a host of other written instructions in which some students become lost or discouraged. Concerns about early course withdrawals triggered instructors teaching in the program to begin to use telephone calls in the first week as a way to develop rapport and initiate the beginnings of social presence. Since the process of developing social presence begins on the first day the course room opens, a call to the student early in the week was seen as a way to support students and build community.

The call personalizes the instructor and helps dispel the impression that online classes are just interactions with technology. Instructors use a Call Tracker to record student questions and problems identified in the telephone conversation. This approach allows the instructor to follow up or refer students to other institutional departments as needed, such as advising, technical support, or financial aid.

Even though class orientation activities include careful listing of the syllabus and calendar, as well as a written welcome and description of the class, students have expressed appreciation for the telephone call as part of these orientation activities. This positive feeling may be carried throughout the course, as was evidenced when students discussed the first call in the last week of course reflections and in course evaluations.

The instructor has many issues present before the online interaction begins. Bradshaw (2009) noted that students may come to nursing education with diverse learning styles. A visual learner may be comfortable in the online setting while an auditory learner may tend to lose interest and not do as well. Since it is not always evident which learning styles are present, the telephone call may provide extra resources for the auditory learner. Not all students are successful in a virtual environment, so the initial creation of rapport and teacher support has the potential to prevent some online failures and promote student retention.

Teacher immediacy and methods for reducing interpersonal distance require timely, constructive feedback, a means of reinforcing the instructor’s social presence. The personal call in the initial week of the course helps students understand that the instructor is a real person and is interested in the student’s success and development. This, coupled with traditional online introductory methods, such as a photograph, recorded welcome announcements, and email greetings, creates social presence and sense of community.

An instructor’s willingness to listen gives the students a sense of partnership in the learning experience and awareness that there is someone to help with problems. The faculty member also gets a sense of who the students are and whether or not they have issues that may not be readily apparent in the online classroom. A voice connection between teacher and student provides a mental image of the other and creates a foundation on which to build.
THE CALL TRACKER

The nursing program chairs developed the Call Tracker, a chart with specific questions to guide the telephone calls made during the first week of class. The chart serves as a record of students' responses about issues and concerns, not just within the classroom, but any other problems that might interfere with learning. Interventions and follow-up efforts to resolve the identified concerns are documented on the tool. The form serves as a reference to the instructor throughout the term.

Students need a contact person to help with problems. Faculty members in online classes assume this role and attempt to be proactive in preventing problems and alleviating fears. The call is an opportunity to point out important class projects, dates and expectations, and gives the student the opportunity to ask questions, ensuring better direction and understanding. The following are some areas covered during the initial call:

- Were there any difficulties logging into the course?
- Are there questions about the course or how to find needed information?
- Does the student know how to reach academic advising?
- Is the student having any issues with textbooks, financial aid, the library, or transcripts?
- Does the student know how to get assistance with technical problems?
- Are there any special concerns the student would like to share?
- Are there any issues that may make learning this semester difficult?

ESTABLISHING PRESENCE

In the traditional classroom, with face-to-face instruction, students can get answers and explanations immediately. They can also engage in dialogue with the instructor before and after class or privately during office hours. This physical presence, and the ability to absorb nonverbal communication gestures, body language, tones, and volume establishes social presence in a way that is missing in the online classroom. The online instructor has the responsibility to develop a sense of community from day one and to attempt to foster engagement in students.

Participation online does not happen spontaneously and may be seen by students as just tasks to be completed. The barriers of time, distance, technological glitches, employment, and family problems make creating student engagement difficult, with the risk of loss of interest, discouragement, and eventual attrition. The personal contact, and early intervention for problems identified from the telephone call, can be the inspiration necessary to spark participation, interest, and engagement.

Conrad (2002) found that students were less interested in a formal individual instructor welcome than they were in having class information, policies, and expectations provided early in the class. Using the telephone call provides an early opportunity to clarify expectations and demystify areas of confusion.

The Call Tracker, which allows for the documentation of students' concerns, can be used throughout the term as a way to see if issues have been resolved and to track follow-up actions. Notations on the form may be shared with students. For example, in a course on instructional technology, where students frequently express concern about their computer literacy and ability to use instructional tools, these same students, as the course progresses, easily create blogs and embed mind maps and videos into PowerPoint presentations. By seeing a record of their initial concerns, the students and the instructor together have a record of the student's growth.

The tool and pertinent information are also shared with faculty department chairs and other personnel to ensure that issues raised by students are resolved. This easy-to-institute early intervention for the online instructor has the added possible benefit of promoting retention.

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REFERENCES


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