

Five Roles I Play in Online Teaching: Revisited

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Abstract: In 2005, I published an article entitled *Five Roles I Play in Online Courses* (Headley, 2005). Those roles were space planner, pace setter, host, connector, and mirror. After more than a dozen years, I have revisited those roles and reflected on what it means to be an effective teacher after a twenty-year span of online teaching. What continues to be crucial, in my view, is the role of relationships between the faculty member and students, and among students in the online environment. This paper explores the changes in our technological and educational context in the last 12 years, and whether there is a continuing need for these five roles for online teachers.

Introduction

In an age of predicted campus closures and the move toward greater efficiency in higher education, along with the rise of new course delivery models, such as MOOCs, university executives and boards seek solutions to keep their institutions viable and competitive going into the future (see, e.g., Hess, 2017). In some quarters, online education is seen as a low-cost alternative to delivering college courses. However, I disagree with the notion that online education should be viewed as a lower-cost alternative. My rationale for this disagreement centers on the belief that the value added to a student's learning in the online environment is that same value that is added in a face-to-face classroom; the care, experience, and commitments of the professor in guiding that student toward success. In short, relationships of care and trust make a difference. As Bernard and colleagues concluded as the result of a meta-analysis comparing distance education to classroom instruction, "Instructionally relevant contact with instructors and peers is not only desirable, it is probably necessary for creating learning environments that lead to desirable achievement gains and general satisfaction with DE [distance education]" (Bernard, et al., 2004, p. 412).

There are a number of models to examine students' online educational experiences. A particularly useful model in situating this paper is the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, developed (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000) to gain understanding of the online learning environment. The intent of their framework was to "identify elements that are critical prerequisites for a successful higher educational experience" (p. 87). Garrison et al. (2000) identified three elements of online learning to help frame research into online learning practice: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. These elements will be used to frame the roles and commitments I describe herein.

Review of the Roles

I teach in the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) and School Administrator Licensure programs offered by the College of Education at George Fox University (GFU). My students are teachers and administrators in elementary, secondary, and postsecondary schools. GFU, a Friend's institution based in Newberg and Portland, Oregon, has an enrollment of about 4,000 students. I have delivered Internet-based distance education courses here for over 20 years. We currently use Moodle, Google tools and Zoom as the primary applications for the delivery of our online courses.

The COI framework's three elements of social, cognitive, and teaching presence are reflected in roles I described in 2005. Social presence, as described by Garrison, et al. (2000) is the ability to be perceived by others in the online environment as a *real person*. Cognitive presence describes higher order thinking that contributes to acquisition of knowledge and development of understanding. Teaching presence, broadly defined, refers to the design and management of the learning environment and experience. The roles I described were; space planner, pace setter, host, connector, and mirror. The space planner role refers to the purposeful construction of a course to allow for opportunities for interaction with the people and content, both formally and informally. The pace setter role refers to the actions of the instructor in establishing the rhythms of engagement in the online course, including the breadth of material to be included in the course, and the typical cycles of content introduction and response to prompts and people. The host role requires the instructor to be welcoming of the students into the course, to be a subtle but steady encouraging presence and to be available to assist offline when needed. The connector role is one in which the instructor connects the course content to the student's professional context through application assignments, connects students to one another based on problems identified or personal interests. The mirror role is one in which the instructor serves to provide feedback to the student on understanding of content, timely feedback to individuals, and more general feedback reflecting general trends of understanding or misunderstanding.

Changes in Context

What has happened since 2005 in my situation, and more broadly in higher education? Regarding my context at George Fox University, the general climate and tools for online courses have improved. We moved from an LMS as the sole officially supported platform for online courses, with little synchronous interactions; to the use of an LMS (Moodle) plus Google tools, plus a reliable web-conferencing tool (Zoom). From a support standpoint, our university has institutionalized internet-based distance education. In our professional programs, in particular, incoming faculty members are expected to teach in the online environment. Our students, who move through professional programs in cohorts, are much more aware of the tools and general procedures for online education. As an institution, we have rejected the law of large numbers approach to distance education and operate on an approach that is small, tailored to the student audience, private, and housed within academic programs. In other institutions of higher

education, in many cases, the general trends for online education are a growing acceptance of its efficacy and quality (see, e.g. Allen & Seaman, 2015), continued interest in MOOCs (Chuang & Ho, 2017), and a push toward efficiency and consolidation in higher education (see, e.g. Hess, 2017).

Continuing Need

I argue that there is a continuing need for instructors to be concerned about relationships and to consider the five roles I described previously. However, in the last 12 years there has been greater emphasis in higher education on efficiency and sustainability of institutions and academic programs. Therefore, online programs and courses are often viewed as a cost saving device for the university. Efficiency and cost-cutting have become factors in academic program delivery. The logical extension of this emphasis is the rise of MOOCs, which are designed for and delivered to large numbers and can be thought of, in some ways as the antithesis of my argument that strong relationships between faculty and students are important for student success.

As the growing emphasis on large numbers of students and the mechanization of online programs continues to shape institutional investments and strategies, some students will desire to participate in instructional models that allow for strong relationships not readily available in highly efficient delivery systems. The education models that invest heavily in course development and then deliver to large audiences do serve some function in today's market for higher education. MOOCs and similar technologies allow students to consume and process material and then document attainment of learning through mechanized assessment. Some students, for their own purposes of attaining new knowledge and acquiring credentialing, will pursue these course and programs. On the other hand, other students will seek out other kinds of educational experiences, those which feature stronger relationships between the instructor and the participant. I advocate for systems that serve manageable numbers of students, allowing for those ongoing relationships.

The model I advocate for requires teachers who seek out students and cultivate relationships with them, so as to understand their students' professional and personal context. This commitment leads to tailoring assignments for impact based on professional role and responsibility, while at the same time building opportunities for students to make connections with professional colleagues who are all grappling with making meaning of concepts, analyzing problems, and wrestling with dilemmas and ethical issues.

What I recognize about my students is this: they are busy professionals who are asked on a daily basis to lead and serve in difficult situations where the competition for values and resources is commonplace. These students have interest in growing professionally, both from a credentialing point of view, and in the sense of increasing their capacity to lead and serve. As their own professional environments become more standardized and efficient, they appreciate a high touch approach in their professional education.

From Roles to Commitments

In reflecting on the five roles I advocated for online teachers in 2005, I realize that I was articulating a model for describing effective teaching, and now recognize that the model implies strategies and tactics that take time and great commitment on the instructor's part. This time investment and the commitments needed are, in my view, greater than they are in an equivalent face-to-face course. My reflections lead me to propose moving beyond roles and adopting commitments as an online teacher. Currently, I believe the following commitments are necessary.

- A. I make a commitment to know my students. I do a better job as a teacher and I believe they work better with me when I do. Due to this commitment, I should allow time for relationship-building and reflection as activities in the course. In addition, this commitment implies that I will give prompt and respectful replies to inquiries and discussion.
- B. I commit to helping my students learn. This implies that I carry out best practice, as I understand it. My instruction is designed for application, recognizes students' prior knowledge and experience, provides choice, and encourages reflection and meaning-making. I must understand the context of my students' professional lives so that I can facilitate my students' attainment of the course goals. I realize the importance of my assessment of their work and commit to being prompt and thorough in that feedback.
- C. I am committed to create opportunities for interaction. I should model and encourage Interaction amongst the participants, and reward interaction in the formal assessment of my course. In addition, I invite interactions outside of the formal course space.
- D. I am committed to represent the student to the university, and the university to the student. That means that I may need to advocate for student needs or be gracious on deadlines. This also means I have a responsibility to uphold the requirements of the university as far as standards, expectations, and policies are concerned. I need to recognize that in the online environment, I may be the university to my students.

Changes in context, both within the university and more broadly have not altered the need for social, teaching, and cognitive elements to all be present in online courses. In fact, recent research continues to confirm the strength of the COI model in explaining student satisfaction and positive outcomes. (see, e.g. Wheaton, 2017). The commitments I make, and their implications for practice may seem typical and expected of all instructors, and yet, I know how difficult and time consuming they can be, especially in the online environment. Establishing relationships among learners is pleasing and rewarding, though can be quite challenging. Relationship-building in online courses in professional education is somewhat counter to the drive for efficiency, and requires both individual and group commitments. As the professor, I have to lead in making and keeping those commitments. And, it's worth it, for my own satisfaction, and for creating a worthwhile experience for my students.

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