# The Importance of Student-Instructor Connections in Graduate Level Online Courses

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**Abstract**

In an effort to determine how best to connect to their online graduate students, the authors analyzed student perspectives of connections with their instructors using a mixed-methods instrument. Participants for this study included 86 graduate students enrolled in an online master's program in the United States who provided perspectives on student-instructor connections via qualitative questions. Since student-instructor connections are key to retention in both physical and online classrooms, the ultimate goal of the researchers was to determine how students made connections with their instructors through the provided technology. Existing literature regarding student-instructor connections consistently notes the importance of ''instructor presence'' in an online environment. The results of this study confirm that instructor presence can exist in the online classroom. Participants offered the perspective that course homepages, discussion boards, and other aspects represented the extent to which the instructor was "present" in class. Ideas for improving instructor presence are offered. The authors suggest particular instructional methods to establish student-instructor connections that may be more effective than other methods.

**Introduction**

The vision of a typical college classroom in the United States portrays students filing into a brick and mortar building where an instructor awaits to begin his lecture. In order for learning to occur, this

representation assumes an instructor is physically present to deliver substantive course content and manage student learning (Jones, 2011). In the online classroom, the instructor and the students are not physically present in the same teaching and learning environment, often not at the same time. However, they are virtually in the same classroom where technology mediates the required communication for learning. It is easy to establish instructor presence in a physical classroom. In the online classroom, instructor presence is sometimes not easy to determine and even harder to distinguish, and thus relate to the improvement of student learning. Instructor presence can be advanced or hindered through the use of technology. The technology of online course delivery creates a unique burden to instructors to ensure their presence and subsequent interaction with students for the purpose of teaching and learning. Scholarship on the use of technology to support instructor presence may prove pedagogically useful in a variety of disciplines, settings, or levels.

Using the definition proffered by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001), *teaching presence* includes the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive processes for the purpose of realizing educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (p. 3). Based on this definition, teaching presence in an online classroom is not different from the face-to-face classroom. Both the online instructor and the instructor in a face-to-face classroom fulfill three basic roles: (a) designer of an educationally worthwhile educational experience, (b) a facilitator of learning activities, and (c) a subject matter expert (Jones, 2011). All three of these roles can be fulfilled using a variety of methods in the online classroom. Instructor presence involves both course design and implementation methods by the faculty member that allow students to interact with each other, the course material, and the instructor in a way that results in a meaningful learning experience.

In an attempt to evaluate instructor presence and its impact on student-instructor connections, Sitzman and Lener (2006) conducted a study that focused student survey questions on perceptions of instructor caring. The assumption is, and the subsequent research findings conclude, that instructors who are perceived as caring will be more successful in their teaching and in student learning. The online student respondents identified ten things faculty do as extremely important for their success in an online classroom: 1) write out and post clear instructions regarding schedules and due dates, 2) provide a detailed class calendar that includes due dates for postings, papers, and projects, 3) respond to postings and emails within 48-72 hours, 4) write out and post clear instructions regarding acceptable length/quality of required online communications, 5) demonstrate respect for the learning process by exhibiting excellence in creating/presenting content, 6) provide supportive/corrective guidance through email or telephone rather than in a public venue, 7) express belief that students will be successful in the online setting and verbalize enthusiasm for learning, 8) when responding to student work, refer to specifics, 9) provide scheduled phone availability so students know when the instructor will be available to speak to them, and 10) recount challenges experienced in the online setting and share remedies that have worked for self and others (p. 16). Sitzman and Lener (2006) added several other recommendations and suggestions for online students to be successful with both the content and their fellow students.

As the online classroom becomes more popular, the quality of the student experience as it relates to successful learning is a concern. Researchers (Ali, Hodson-Carlton, & Ryan, 2004; Armstrong, 2001; Knipe & Lee, 2000; Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, 2005) have confirmed the student-instructor relationship and particularly the connectivity between the two as significant to successful student learning. Effective teaching involves creating an atmosphere of belonging. For students, this encompasses a classroom environment where they feel valued, can take risks by sharing with the instructor and fellow students, and are encouraged as well as expected to contribute quality interactions.

Creating a successful connection between instructors and students becomes more complicated when working with graduate students. For instance, in their study of why more than half of enrolled graduate students do not complete degrees, Lovitts and Nelson (2000) highlighted the student experience, both organizationally and socially, as the primary reason for attrition. Elkins Nesheim, Guentzel, Gansemer-Topf, Ewing Ross, and Turrentine (2006) further identified some of the challenges that graduate students face such as an increased likelihood of having a job or a family as well as establishing "an essential but volatile" relationship with faculty (p. 15).

With graduate students bringing those needs into the online classroom, instructors need to be more cognizant of what practices these students desire to help build essential relationships that are both

supportive and educational.  Students enrolled in distance education courses naturally must have or develop characteristics of independent learning.  Yet a support system is still necessary for student success, and that support system largely falls to the instructor to provide or create (Nitsch, 2003).  Since the connection between the student and instructor is critical to this sense of support, the researchers explored how students made connections with instructors through the provided technology.

**Literature Review**

According to Ali, Hodson-Carlton, and Ryan (2004), students' relationship with online instructors was either no different than what they would encounter in a face-to-face course, or the relationship was better because the instructors were more accepting, personable, and professional.  Knipe and Lee (2002), however, found that online students may not feel as if they have the time and support from their instructors compared to students in a traditional course.  When students did not believe their instructors were fully engaged in course communication, the perception of academic quality diminished and students were more likely to disengage from the course material (Armstrong, 2011).  Graduate students may possess these thoughts as well, though their graduate school experience—the depth or professional nature of their study—may accentuate the need for student-instructor interactions (Fischer & Zigmond, 1998).  Moreover, graduate students desire and expect more than faculty who answer email quickly and offer comments on assignments (Holzweiss, Joyner, Fuller, Henderson & Young, 2014).  Graduate students are emerging members of a community of practice, which is founded upon the exchange of knowledge and a level of caring for each other that is not present in other groups (Ardichvili, Page, & Wentling, 2003).

Higher education currently operates from a scholarly model that applies effective distance education strategies from undergraduate studies carte blanche to graduate education (Braun, 2008).  Research that takes into account the fundamental aims of graduate education and the unique nature of online learning for this population is needed (Holzweis et al., 2014).  Online graduate students are an important source of information regarding effective ways instructors have connected with them.  This information added to other research data advances the scholarship related to online graduate learning, which may also benefit undergraduate and faculty professional development efforts.

Astin's (1993) I-E-O model demonstrates how the student-instructor connection can impact the successful completion of a distance education program.  The model considers what students bring to an academic environment through inputs (I), the challenges and opportunities provided by the academic environment (E), and the outcomes (O) desired from the interaction between the students and the academic environment over time.  Applying the I-E-O model to distance education, incoming students may have a variety of inputs such as level of experience with online courses.  Students new to the online environment may need additional support and instruction for accessing and utilizing course tools, while seasoned veterans of online courses may only require minimal direction before delving into course requirements or content.  If a student's input needs are addressed with appropriate environmental responses from the instructor, then the student has an increased likelihood to successfully achieve desired learning outcomes.

While the I-E-O model focuses on how an instructor can build upon what students bring to the classroom, there are still gaps in understanding what components create an effective classroom environment, especially when it is applied to the student-instructor relationship in an online setting.  In a study of the most successful learning institutions, Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2005) concluded that, regardless of delivery system, students learn best when they receive quality feedback in a timely manner and have faculty members who are willing to use technology to enhance the relationship.  Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) reiterated similar themes in an examination of twenty years of higher education research, emphasizing that a strong connection with faculty members both in and out of the classroom can promote retention and academic success.

Additional theoretical perspectives also inform the current study as well as the student-instructor relationship.  Robley, Farnsworth, Flynn and Horne (2004) noted that online students develop a number of skills such as communication and critical thinking when the Constructivist Theory of instruction was employed in online courses. Constructivist Theory is founded on the notion that humans build knowledge and meaning through interactions with each other and their environment by bringing "unique knowledge, skills, attitudes, and beliefs to the learning experience" (Swan, 2005, p. 18).  From this theoretical

perspective, individual constructivism occurs when a student creates knowledge from his or her direct experiences, while social constructivism sees the creation of knowledge through collaboration with others (Almala, 2006). In the classroom, individual and social constructivism might take the form of activities such as problem-based learning, case study analysis, discussion forums, group projects, research papers, and current event assignments (Almala, 2006; Dixson, 2010; Holzweiss et al., 2014; Rovai, 2004). These activities help individuals make connections between what they know and what they learn in the classroom (Ingram, 2005).

Within the online environment, graduate students reported a sense of community when they received positive feedback on their work, participated in online discussions that challenged their thinking, and connected with classmates through course activities (Lee, Carter-Wells, Glaeser, Ivers, & Street, 2006). Lee et al. (2006) also identified several instructor behaviors that impacted the students' feelings of community such as being actively engaged in the course activities, providing quick responses for questions and other needs, and exhibiting a sense of caring. Additional activities such as instructors participating in class discussions, using a student's name in communications, referring to course members with personal pronouns, and providing timely feedback on assignments can also have a positive impact on the student-instructor connection (Dixson, 2010; Hughes, 2007; Kehrwald, 2008; Rieck & Crouch, 2007; Roby, Ashe, Singh, & Clark, 2012).

The current study builds upon previous research by contributing the perspectives of online graduate students regarding what helps them connect with their instructors. Student voices can inform the pedagogy of distance education by highlighting environmental variables unique to the online graduate experience that influences relationships between students and instructors. Identifying these variables can, in turn, help instructors understand how to successfully implement effective online teaching and learning pedagogies through student-instructor connections. Results from this study will also inform instructors' understanding of *instructor presence*, a concept critical to effective online instruction.

**Method**

To better understand graduate student perspectives for instructor connections, the authors created a survey instrument based on Dixson's (2010) work. The instrument contained several open-ended questions for graduate students to share their personal experiences and opinions. Qualitative data is essential for understanding the meaning students assign to their experiences (Merriam, 2009). This article focuses on student responses to one of the open-ended questions on the survey which asked the student respondents to describe what helped them connect with their instructors.

The study population originated from a public institution located in the southern United States and classified as doctoral granting. The institution enrolls approximately 19,000 students overall, with more than three thousand classified as graduate students. Twenty-one graduate degree programs at the institution are fully online. The specific program for this research was a fully online Master of Arts program in Higher Education Administration. Table 1 illustrates the demographic characteristics of the program enrollment. Many of the characteristics align with typical graduate student populations in that they tend to be older, returning to school while working full-time, and primarily female and Caucasian (Aud et al., 2013).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

| Demographics | Participants (n=86) |
|---|---|
| Average Age | 36 |
| Age Range | 19 to 61 |
| Race/Ethnicity | 53% Caucasian |
| | 24% African American |
| | 15% Hispanic/Latino |
| | 6% Asian American |
| | 1% Native American |

|  | 1% Multi-Racial |
|---|---|
| Gender | 69% Female |
|  | 31% Male |
| Employment | 93% Employed Full-Time |
|  | 7% Not Employed |

Invitations to participate in the online survey were sent to all program students halfway through the fall semester, with two reminder emails sent at two-week intervals. Students were provided five weeks to respond. In addition, anonymity was guaranteed in order to obtain students' candid opinions. It is for this reason that no non-response bias for gender, race, or age could be obtained. Sixty students completed the survey for a 70% response rate.

For those who participated in the survey, a little over 40% indicated that they had completed four or more online courses at the time of the survey. Another 30% completed two courses and 22% were enrolled in their first online courses. The remaining participants completed either three courses (5%) or one course but had not continued their course work (2%).

Participant responses to the study question were analyzed using a traditional content analysis process (Merriam, 2009). All comments were unitized into individual ideas and put onto notecards. A team of faculty members from the academic program sorted through each notecard and began constructing thematic categories to address the main topics shared by participants. As a final step, the team developed meta-themes, or broad categorizations of themes, to best explain participant perspectives regarding the student-instructor connection. To ensure reliability and validity, the authors used multiple investigators and existing research to triangulate the data as well as maintain an audit trail to track category decisions and procedures employed at each stage of analysis.

**Results**

Participants were asked to "Describe any experience (formal or informal) that helped you feel connected to your instructor(s)." Four primary themes emerged from the responses including: (a) connections through interactions outside of the classroom, (b) connections through classroom technology and assignments, (c) connections through instructor feedback, and (d) overall connections with instructors.

*Connecting through Interactions Outside of the Classroom*

Participants shared 88 comments addressing how interactions outside of the classroom can impact the connections they have with instructors. The majority of the comments focused on e-mail communication, with an expressed desire for messages that were effective, timely, and personal. One participant shared, "Having responses along with graded assignments is fine, but I have felt most connected through email…about my specific progress in class and in the program."

Interestingly, 11 participants specifically mentioned the importance of timely e-mail messages and they were all relatively new to distance education, having completed no more than two online courses at the time of the survey. Receiving timely communication seemed to be important to their feelings of connection to instructors. One participant explained, "The fact that my instructors email on a weekly basis…makes it feel as if they are trying to stay connected to the students." Two additional participants commented on instructors who had a slow response to e-mail messages. Both expressed dissatisfaction with this approach and indicated that it did not provide a good perception of how engaged the instructor was in the course.

Outside of e-mail, participants expressed appreciation for communication involving video, phone, chat technology, and face-to-face meetings. One participant described the use of Skype®, a video conferencing software, as a method that "helped connect me with the professors to develop these personal relationships." Another participant commented that an instructor who held online chat office hours helped build the student-instructor connection.

In addition to the type of technology used, participants placed importance on the availability of communication outside of the classroom as well as the understanding expressed by instructors for their personal situations. Fourteen comments highlighted the positive connection participants felt with instructors who had regular or easy accessibility outside of class such as hosting weekly online office hours or being willing to meet with students by request. Another 11 comments expressed how connected participants felt with instructors who demonstrated a level of caring about personal situations or opinions. One participant explained, "I have had a professor email me…to make sure that I was doing ok and would be able to complete the course." Another participant shared, "One informal experience that helped me connect to my instructor was a discussion about a grade and the instructor was…sensitive to the point I was trying to raise."

*Connecting through Classroom Technology and Assignments*

This theme, encompassing 78 comments, highlighted many of the technologies and assignments students encountered as part of their online courses. For instance, 24 comments highlighted the importance of online discussions to help participants feel connected with their instructors. While discussion forums were emphasized as a way to connect, it did not mean that instructors had to be actively engaged in the ongoing conversation. As one participant explained, even receiving feedback on discussion posts helped to build a connection because it was clear the instructor was engaged behind the scenes. It is important to mention, however, that two participants indicated that not having instructors involved in the actual discussion forums was disappointing. This sentiment may serve to damage connections between students and instructors. It may be worthwhile for instructors to explain whether or not s/he will participate in discussion forums with students along with the rationale for that choice. Informing students about teaching philosophy can be a good method of setting expectations and combating perception issues that may negatively impact the instructor-student connection.

Technology that incorporates audio and/or video, such as podcasts and synchronous meeting software, was identified in 22 comments as a good way to build connections with instructors. One participant shared that "the learning topic is so important and being provided the [podcast] system to hear their thoughts…is a great way to also learn from them." Another explained, "I really like the live class sessions…It makes me feel like I am really in class versus being online."

One surprising positive classroom technology mentioned by eight participants was the course homepage. One participant explained that the "course homepage keeps us informed with…reminders for current or upcoming assignments." These participants seemed to appreciate just having basic and ongoing access to course communication, demonstrating that connections can be created in the smallest details of course management.

One final technological tool mentioned as important for connections with instructors was the use of online journals. This direct line of communication between the student and the instructor helped two participants develop a better understanding of their faculty.

*Connecting through Instructor Feedback*

Through 62 comments, participants demonstrated that receiving feedback influenced the connections they felt with instructors. From the participants' perspective, feedback from the instructor allowed them to understand how grading would occur and also where improvement could be made. As one participant explained, "One particular professor…assisted when I was not clear on certain assignments that required advanced skills and knowledge for presenting the work."

While participants expressed appreciation for all feedback, they also desired timely, quality, and positive feedback to help them feel connected to their instructors. One participant shared, "The instructor that I do feel connected with gives us feedback every week on our assignments." Another described quality feedback as "receiving feedback on assignments that include comments not just a grade."

Six comments from participants also highlighted the negative impact that the lack of feedback can have on the student-instructor connection. As one participant shared, "Lack of explanation on the reduction of points makes it difficult to know what was done incorrectly and how to improve." When instructors did not take the time to offer guidance on learning, participants felt disconnected and on their own.

*Overall Connections with Instructors*

The final theme, which addressed the overall sense of connection with instructors, originated from 34 comments. Eighteen of those comments focused on the ability of an instructor to create an interactive course. One participant enjoyed how engaged one instructor was throughout a course while another explained, "Having the professor be interactive in our online courses has really helped in my course work (since we don't have the face-to-face component with online courses)." A third participant shared, "I can honestly say that all instructors that I have had made me feel connected to them with clarity of expectations."

Another 14 comments indicated that some participants did not feel any connections to their instructors. As one participant noted, "I've had basically zero interaction with my profs because they are not involved in their courses other than to assign readings and give homework/projects." It is worthwhile to point out, however, that all but one of the participants who indicated they felt no connection with their instructors were relatively new to distance education and had completed two or less online courses. It may be that those new to distance education may form expectations based on previous face-to-face classrooms that are not met in their first online courses. Sharing information regarding what kind of online environments they may encounter during their academic program could help shape expectations about instructor and student responsibilities, thereby allowing better connections to build.

It should also be noted that not all participants desired a connection with their instructors. As one participant explained, "This is a graduate program, faculty should not have to hold my hand to make me feel as though I can ask for help." Offering flexible course policies may be beneficial in supporting students who are more motivated for self-guided learning.

### Conclusions & Recommendations

Choosing to assess student-instructor connections by asking questions of students in an online master's program resulted in confirmation of the axiom that students learn better when they and the instructor are active participants. While the present study confirms this notion with a population of online graduate students, this concept may hold true for online undergraduate students. Building an effective online learning environment in any educational setting requires faculty to consider the basic elements of teaching presence and develop activities and teaching techniques that match.

While qualitative data is not usually generalized to other contexts (Merriam, 2009), the results of this study largely confirmed the findings of existing literature regarding best practices in a graduate distance education environment. The results of this study also provide opportunities to apply the findings to similar online graduate programs as well as other undergraduate programs. For this study, there were some findings that highlight unique areas of consideration for graduate students. For instance, graduate students new to the online environment may need instructors to offer a high degree of interactivity and communication to help them make the simultaneous transition to both distance education and graduate level academic expectations.

Graduate students may also need more than just interaction from their instructors. Feedback was a primary theme from this study's participants, yet it went beyond pointing out what was missed on an assignment and what to do better the next time. Rather, their comments highlighted a need for mentoring to help improve advanced skills and where to find information to accomplish these tasks. The continued engagement participants highlighted was more indicative of a deeper relationship needed with the instructor such as in a mentoring capacity. Instructors may find it beneficial to personalize and tailor timely feedback to students, structure assignments to allow for early, frequent, and "low stakes" feedback (i.e. drafts), or other strategies to deepen feedback beyond traditional course communications.

Graduate faculty may be presented with opportunities to offer graduate students program advising, career guidance, or personal advising as a result of this student need. These opportunities go beyond the traditional graduate student-instructor interaction and are often reserved for faculty or staff in advising roles. Moreover, online students, who by nature of the instructional medium do not have regular face-to-face interactions with their instructors, may not seek out those natural opportunities to obtain non-course advice. However, the current study illuminates a set of student expectations that such out-of-course interactions are indeed valued and influence how students engage faculty. Online programs may find it beneficial to invite graduate students to seek such out-of-class guidance from all faculty and advisers in the program or provide special opportunities to do so. In addition, connecting course content to career

aspects may also prove beneficial in deepening the student-instructor connection in graduate school.

Student-instructor connections, as evidenced through the design, facilitation, and subject matter expertise of good teaching presence, can and does exist in the online classroom. Instructor presence can be achieved in online graduate courses by utilizing various methods of communication outside the classroom including regularly scheduled email, video chats and online office hours.  Using the technology to facilitate assignments also provides an opportunity for more connectedness.  Instructors who use audio and/or video for lectures and supplemental instruction provide another avenue for students to connect. The use of podcasts helps create a more personalized communication with the instructor while also allowing the listener to accomplish other tasks (Bolliger, Supanakorn, & Boggs, 2010). Another use of the technology supporting online student connectivity is synchronous communication. Usually taking the form of chat exchanges (Johnson, 2006), it can help create a sense of engagement with the instructor and other course members (Kuyath, 2008).

While there is no distinction between the importance of online and face-to-face instructor comment on student work, student respondents to this survey research reaffirmed the necessity of timely and quality feedback to help them feel more connected to their instructors in a distant environment.  Merely returning a graded assignment was not sufficient as students criticized instructors who did not take the time to offer guidance on learning deficiencies or accomplishments.  Those students who reported having this type of experience with an online faculty member sensed more than a disconnection from that faculty member. The students also felt responsible for determining what learning was expected.  This is especially important in a graduate program as these students are hoping to advance in their careers and become leaders in the field.  Being more explicit about what learning should occur and how to accomplish that learning is part of the professional development that graduate students expect from a program.

Several recommendations for practitioners, researchers and online graduate faculty are suggested from the results of this study.  Considerations of interactions outside the online classroom include the influence of other forms of communication such as video, phone, and face-to-face meetings.  Accessibility of instructors through specific online office hours and meetings scheduled upon student request appears to impact student-instructor connections.  The affect of the types and uses of classroom technology and course assignments are another area of study.  For example, does the instructor participate in class discussions or provide direction for student online discussions?  Does the course home page include basic information concerning the etiquette of the online learning environment, access to online student and academic resources, and expectations of the type and amount of interaction from the student and by the instructor?  It should also be noted that new students possibly would have unrealistic expectations of their online course experience.  The instructor may find sharing expectations about student responsibilities and how the instructor will interact with students a necessary precursor to a successful online graduate student learning experience.  Online graduate instructors must also consider the possibility that a small number of students may not want a connection to instructors. Analyzing student perceptions of student-instructor connectivity can assist future course design, result in more quality courses, and improve student learning, retention and completion rates.

While many of these findings have relevance for online graduate programs and online graduate faculty, student-instructor connections are critical to all learning environments.  Many of the recommendations on presence, timely feedback, and concepts of student engagement also apply to online undergraduate or professional development learning environments.  Participants in this study offered insights on their connection with graduate faculty.  Instructors in any program may find these recommendations useful to improve student-instructor connections.

The survey results presented here from students in an online graduate program confirm they could see, hear, and feel the presence of the instructor in these online courses.  The results also confirm the importance of interaction and guidance from the instructor for improved learning as reported by the online graduate students (Holzweiss et al., 2014).  Little feedback from the instructor and/or untimely interaction between students and their online instructors results in a disconnection contributing to a negative online learning experience.  Overall, students reported perceptions of more successful learning in online courses with high levels of student-instructor connections specifically including those instructors who use frequent and various methods of providing students' notice and clarification of key course components and encouraging student-instructor interaction as well as student involvement with the course material.

If instructor presence is defined as course structure and fostering development of a learning community, then students determined that the instructor was present in their courses resulting in a perception of student-instructor connectedness. Future research focusing on connecting online students and instructors should be expanded to include the specific impact of the multiple communication techniques and the various pedagogical practices cited in this study.

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