An Examination of Online Instructor Presence via Threaded Discussion Participation

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Abstract

Central to the effectiveness of online learning is the issue of instructor presence and the role of interactivity in establishing this presence. Though the literature clearly supports the need for instructors' active engagement in online courses, concrete standards and expectations for guiding this interaction are lacking. The purpose of the current study is to examine faculty perceptions regarding the extent to which instructor interactivity, operationalized as participation in online threaded discussions, should be evaluated and regulated in order to establish clear benchmarks and expectations for instructor presence in the online classroom. Feedback from online instructors revealed little agreement among experienced online instructors in the extent to which the quality and frequency of online instructor interaction should be monitored and/or evaluated. The implications of these findings suggest that institutions must establish clear standards for instructor interaction, as well as criteria for evaluation of instructor engagement, in order to guide faculty concerning best practices in online learning.

Keywords: Evaluation of Online Teaching, Best Practices in Online Instruction, Faculty Roles, Philosophy of Teaching, Asynchronous Learning Tools, Discussion Strategies

Introduction

As the number of online classes continues to grow, increasing numbers of faculty are engaging in this type of instruction. It is, therefore, essential to provide guidance to these professionals on the expectations and evaluative standards for online instructional activities. One of the unique aspects of online education is that an instructor's engagement with a course cannot be measured by the benchmarks typically used in face-to-face classes. As there is generally no established "class time" for an online course, evaluative strategies relevant to a classroom observation or peer review must be modified to be amenable to the unique context of asynchronous, virtual education. The purpose of this study is to examine faculty perceptions regarding the extent to which instructor interactivity, operationalized as participation in online threaded discussions, should be evaluated and regulated in order to establish clear benchmarks and expectations for instructor presence in the online classroom.

Instructor presence is a key element in the distinction between online and face-to-face education. Online instructors need to be "seen" in order to be perceived by their students as present in the course just as do face-to-face course instructors. Traditional instructors are able to utilize their physical presence as a signal of their active involvement with a class. This presence is easily established by physical proximity in face-to-face settings; once an instructor enters the classroom, their presence is not questioned regardless of the nature of the interactions, or the lack thereof. In contrast, online instructors must *actively participate* in the course to avoid the perception of being invisible or absent (Picciano, 2002). Three key issues have been identified in relation to the idea of instructor presence: teaching presence, instructor immediacy, and social presence.

Instructor Presence in the Online Classroom

Teaching presence involves frequent and effective interaction with the course instructor. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) define teaching presence as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" (p. 5). Based upon this conceptualization, a three-part model of teaching presence was created to highlight important components for establishing teaching presence: 1) instructional design, 2) facilitating discourse, and 3) direct instruction (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000).

Within this structure, *instructional design* emphasizes course organization and includes setting curriculum, establishing time parameters, and laying out netiquette criteria. *Facilitating discourse* centers on the identification of areas of agreement/disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging/acknowledging/reinforcing student contributions, setting the climate for learning, and drawing in participants and prompting discussion. Supplementing these components, *direct instruction* focuses on the presentation of content and questions, summarizing discussion, confirming understanding, diagnosing misperceptions, injecting knowledge, and responding to technical questions/concerns.

A test of the three-part model revealed that facilitation of discourse and instructional design are particularly important for establishing a clear teaching presence. A visibly active instructor and quality course design were found to be related to students' sense of "connectedness" and "learning" in the online environment. Thus, teacher presence (especially exemplified through course design and facilitation) has a powerful effect on student perceptions of support and inclusiveness as well as overall satisfaction with the course (Shea, Swan, Li, & Pickett, 2005).

Instructor immediacy refers to the behaviors that enhance closeness and nonverbal interaction with another (Meharabian, 1969 as cited in Hutchins, 2003). Gorham (1988) further classified instructor immediacy into two groups, verbal and nonverbal immediacy. Verbal immediacy actions include humor, frequent use of student names, encouragement of discussion, encouraging future

contact with students, and sharing personal examples; nonverbal immediacy involves smiling, eye contact, vocal expression, and gestures/body movements. In the physically isolated setting of distance education, verbal immediacy takes precedent and is a key factor in establishing online instructor presence.

The final component of instructor presence, social presence, is the "degree of salience of the other person in the (mediated) interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 65). Richardson and Swan (2003) found significant positive correlations between students' social presence scores and perceived learning as well as between students' social presence scores and perceptions of instructor presence. Thus, students scoring high in social presence felt they gained more from the class and had a more positive impression of their course instructor. Additionally, students believed they learned more from the class when they were satisfied with the perceived availability of their course instructor.

Instructor Presence and Student Learning

Regardless of the learning environment (traditional classroom or online), the classroom setting plays a role in the overall success of the learner. But establishing a positive climate in online classrooms may be more challenging due to the reliance of this setting on technologically mediated interaction rather than more personal human dynamics. Galbraith (2004) states that "…it is a real challenge for teachers to develop an appropriate setting for learners that allows for full engagement in learning and encourages persistence toward meaningful action…" (p.15). As such, online instructors have a responsibility for setting the tone and climate of the overall learning environment through their engagement in the course. The active participation of online instructors fosters increased student participation which, in turn, enhances and motivates student learning. The increased activity serves to create a positive attitude in the classroom, establishes *meaning* through dialog, and ensures content competence (Wlodkowski, 2004). An instructor's active participation in the online classroom helps establish a positive classroom environment which becomes a meaningful learning community.

Learning communities include all participants, student and instructor; the instructor however, sets the climate and ensures that "a community of learning is people-centered, and through dialog, discussion, and sharing, learners have the opportunity to connect with others…" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 193). Instructor presence affects student learning in the online environment by assisting in the creation of a community in which students can "co-construct knowledge and to share classroom authority" (Bruffee, 1999, as cited in Smith, 2005, p. 193). Online instructor participation is therefore is vital in the overall success of student learning and development of a learning community which fosters student growth and a positive classroom climate.

Enhancing Online Instructor Presence

Instructor presence can be enhanced through a series of roles online instructors take on as a component of good teaching practice. Emphasizing the roles of online instructors as "multidimensional," "active," and "evolving," online instructors embody various roles as a part of a "dynamic continuum" in which roles are progressively developed, malleable and shifting in response to the instructional demands of the classroom (Heuer & King, 2004). Heuer and King (2004) identified five specific roles that online instructors can utilize to foster a sense of instructor presence in their courses:

- Planner emphasizes course management including clarity of expectations and technology troubleshooting;
- Modeling is used as a guide to model expected behaviors and interactions;
- Coaching provides student encouragement, motivation, and support;
- Facilitator guides learning by taking on the dual roles of teacher and learner to allow others the opportunity to share and participate; and

- Communicator responds promptly to student concerns and creates a climate of open communication.

Savery (2005) conceptualized a variety of characteristics for successful online instructors with a model called VOCAL: visible, organized, compassionate, analytical, and leader-by-example. While several of these characteristics are relevant to the establishment of instructor presence, central to the issue is the importance of *visibility* and *leadership*. There are a number of strategies for increasing instructor visibility in the online classroom: inclusion of a personal website, email messages sent to students, synchronous chat, announcements on the homepage, updates to the course calendar, video/audio messages, and active participation in threaded discussions.

Instructors can demonstrate leadership in their course by modeling appropriate interactions, establishing clear requirements, and setting the tone for the course. Gallimore and Tharp (1990) suggest the instructor model desired behaviors, reward positive actions, and provide students' timely, detailed feedback on their coursework. Additional strategies for instructor leadership include course introductions (instructor shares a personal introduction so students feel they too can describe themselves to their classmates), follow-through with promises, and use of both public and private communication methods (discussions, email).

Instructor Interaction as a Component of Instructor Presence

As highlighted by previous research, one of the key means by which an instructor establishes presence in the online classroom is via their ongoing interactions. Online interactivity has been defined in a number of ways: two-way communication, dynamic interactions, or simply as engagement in learning (Northrup, 2002; Smith & Winking -Diaz, 2004). While there are a variety of forms of interaction found in most online courses (i.e., learner-instructor, learner-learner, learner-course content, etc.), most relevant to the discussion of instructor presence is the interaction between the instructor and the students that occurs *within* the online course (Chou, 2003; Moore, 1989; Smith & Winking-Diaz, 2004; Su, Bonk, Liu & Lee, 2005).

The literature has clearly established the importance of ongoing interaction as a vital component contributing to the quality of instruction in asynchronous, online courses (Muirhead, 2001 as cited in Smith & Winking-Diaz, 2004). As such, many online courses utilize asynchronous discussion boards to facilitate interactivity and promote active engagement with course material. To take advantage of the instructional benefits available through discussion boards, the instructor must fulfill a number of roles: questioning, listening, and responding. The importance of an instructor's active, timely involvement in discussion boards is a critical component of the online learning experience (Northrup, 2002) as students gauge the importance and relevance of the discussion board by the instructor's level of participation (Schulte, 2004).

In an examination of the impact of instructor presence, Blignaut and Trollip (2003) found that instructors are not responsive enough; as such, they recommended that online instructors would benefit from increasing their overall participation in discussions. Based on these findings, Blignaut and Trollip proposed a taxonomy of faculty participation in online discussions. The model categorizes online instructor discussion postings into six groups: three focusing on course content (corrective, informative, and Socratic) and three which pertain to other aspects of instruction (administration, affective, and other). While the implementation of the various categories of postings will be determined by the relevant instructional goals and learning activity, the prevailing message is that active participation in online discussion threads (regardless of purpose or intent) increases instructor presence in the course which can have a positive impact on both student learning and student satisfaction.

Conclusions and Purpose

Central to the effectiveness of online learning is the issue of instructor presence and the role of interactivity in establishing this presence. Though the literature clearly supports the need for an

instructor's active engagement in online courses, concrete standards and expectations for guiding this interaction are lacking. Despite the development of rubrics for evaluating the levels of interactivity as a function of course design and function (see Roblyer & Wiencke, 2004), little information exists to provide a guiding consensus on how much instructor interaction is required to take advantage of the pedagogical benefits of online threaded discussions. As such, an ongoing challenge is the establishment of online instructional interactivity standards and best practices as well as the relevant evaluative processes to monitor these expectations.

As highlighted by Northrup (2002), a delicate balance of interactivity must be struck: too much interaction causes students to feel overburdened, whereas too little interaction may make students feel isolated. Similarly, an examination of student perceptions of interactivity in online courses are diverse and may be based on personality traits and learning styles; while some students request a need for more interactions among each other and with their instructor, others perceive themselves as individual learners (Su, Bonk, Magjuka, Liu, & Lee, 2005). Online instructors believe interaction (among students and between students and the instructor) is an important element in quality instruction. Unfortunately, many instructors do not feel they have the skills or expertise to increase interactivity in their courses (2005).

The purpose of this study is to examine faculty perceptions regarding the extent to which instructor interactivity, operationalized as participation in online threaded discussions, should be evaluated and regulated in order to establish clear benchmarks and expectations for instructor presence in the online classroom. It is important to note that an examination of faculty's investment in threaded discussions is only one aspect of instructor presence in an online course; there are undoubtedly many other ways of establishing instructional presence (i.e., announcements, online lectures, grading, feedback, etc.). But, the popularity of threaded discussions as the primary tool of asynchronous interaction within most online course management systems mandates closer exploration of the use of this important pedagogical feature.

Method

Participants

Participants included 96 online faculty members from a large distance learning program based in the Midwest. All participants were experienced online instructors and indicated a minimum of one year of online teaching experience, with an average of 3.5 years of online experience. Seventeen percent of participants were full-time faculty while the remaining participants were adjunct instructors. Faculty represented a range of disciplines: social sciences (26%), natural sciences (13%), education (4%), liberal arts (4%), business (41%) and technology (12%). All instructors reported teaching a minimum of one undergraduate course online; 11% indicated teaching responsibilities at the graduate level as well. For the purposes of this survey, participants were asked to report their attitudes and views concerning *undergraduate* online education only. All online classes being taught by participants were offered in an accelerated, 8-week format. No information was collected on age, gender or ethnicity of participants.

Materials and Procedures

An email message (asking a series of questions concerning instructor views on online learning, faculty evaluation and course standards) was sent to all faculty (N=368) currently teaching an undergraduate online course. The resultant 96 respondents indicates a 26% response rate which qualifies as an acceptable response rate for email surveys (Sheehan, 2001). Relevant to the purpose of this study, the following questions were selected for inclusion in the analysis:

- Should the university require faculty to actively participate in online course threaded discussions? Explain.

- How frequently should online instructors be required to actively participate in the online classroom?
- Should faculty be evaluated on the quality of their posts in course-specific threaded discussions? Explain.

Individuals electing to respond to the online survey questions were instructed to reply to the email. Responses were not anonymous as per the nature of email interactions. Upon receipt of email responses, personal identifiers were removed and data was compiled into a coded file. A content analysis was conducted to identify common themes in the data. Following traditional exploratory content analysis guidelines (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003), responses were coded and categorized based on emerging trends.

Results

An examination of faculty perceptions concerning the requirement of faculty to actively participate in the assigned threaded discussions in the online classroom found that 77% of respondents support mandatory instructor participation, while 23% were opposed to university regulations on their facilitation of threaded discussions. Of those 23% of instructors who were opposed to requirements on instructor participation, 62% believe that instructors *should* participate in the threaded discussions but that this interaction should occur at the choice and discretion of the instructor rather than in response to a regulation on teaching. A content analysis of the open-ended responses revealed three themes in relation to mandatory faculty participation: concerns about university regulation, instructor freedom, and instructional quality.

Results of faculty's perceptions of the ideal frequency of required discussion postings revealed little agreement among these professionals. As indicated in Figure 1, great variety existed in the instructor's replies. These responses ranged from 23% of instructors who believed there should be no requirements for instructor participation to 10% who felt that instructors should be required to participate in the discussions 2 or more times per day. Mediating this discrepancy, 23% believed that discussion interaction should be required daily while 25% indicated that faculty should only be required to participate 3 days per week. It should be noted that these frequencies were based on a traditional 7-day, weekly schedule for an 8-week accelerated course.

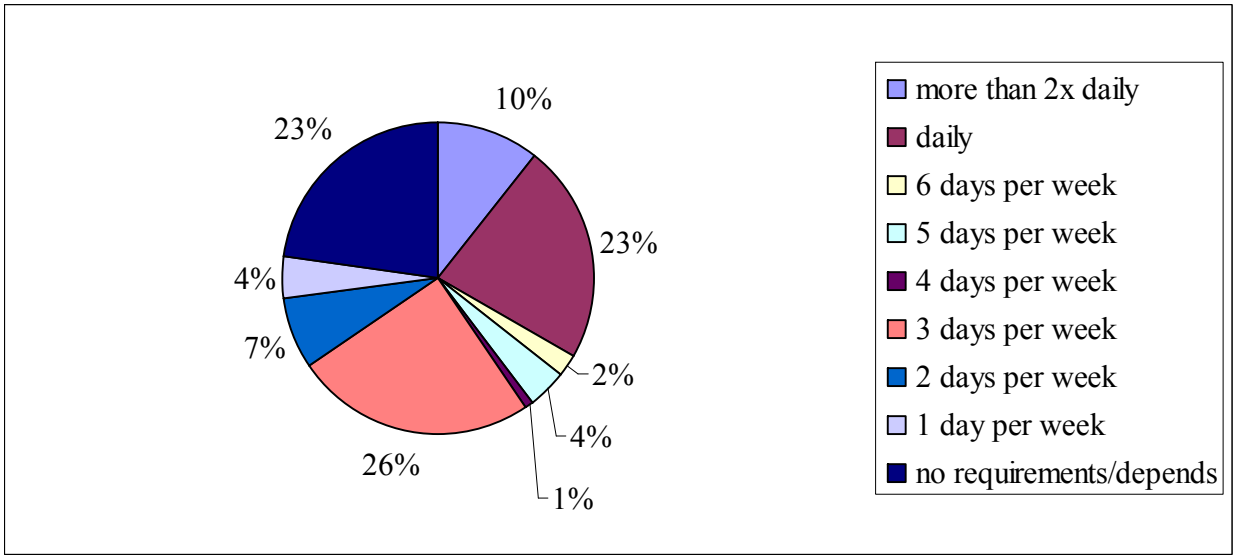

Figure 1. Frequency of reported instructor participation requirements for threaded discussions

An examination of whether or not faculty should be evaluated on the quality of their interactions within an online course threaded discussion revealed considerable variability in instructors' perceptions with 41% supporting, 24% opposed and 35% unwilling to take a position either for or against this practice. An analysis of the open-ended responses found two common trends: importance of instructional quality and concerns about the subjectivity of this type of evaluation.

Discussion

Requirement of Participation

A clear majority of respondents believe that online instructors' participation in the online course discussion threads is essential. Interestingly, while the majority of respondents supported university mandates to prompt this interaction; even those opposed to regulated participation seemed to support the necessity of an instructor's active participation in the online course.

Rather, the argument was not that instructors shouldn't participate, but that this participation shouldn't have to be regulated by the institution. This sentiment was summarized by one instructor, who stated,

> Instructor interaction is obviously a key factor in an effective online learning experience. As such, my opposition to regulation is based *not* on a theoretical disagreement with the need for instructor participation; rather, it is a philosophical argument about the role of the university in policing and mandating instructional expectations of those they have endorsed and hired as experts to teach the course.

A closer examination of the open-ended responses provides additional insight into faculty concerns about institutional standards for an instructor's participation in online discussion threads. Three distinct trends surfaced in the content analysis of the instructors' rationale used to support these positions: university regulation, instructor freedom, and instructional quality.

The dominant faculty concern with regards to mandating an online instructor's participation in discussion threads is that this type of scrutiny is an inappropriate level of supervision and regulation. The driving argument is that an instructor's interaction in course discussion threads should not be reduced to a simplistic mandate or universal standard that is imposed upon instructors. Rather, faculty who were opposed to the university establishing standards of participation believe that university regulations should more broadly address instructional effectiveness, but not evaluate the activities an instructor engages in to meet this higher goal.

This concern is particularly problematic as universities attempt to set benchmarks to guide effective online education. The challenge in establishing instructional best practices solely focusing on student learning outcomes is that faculty are not solely responsible for what students learn; and, thus, cannot be evaluated solely on the learning demonstrated by their students. Faculty evaluation systems are derived from a complex equation balancing instructional best practices with available resources, institutional climate, accreditation expectations and a host of other contributing factors. Central to this issue, faculty evaluation systems are designed to help the university ensure the effectiveness of their faculty. Leaving the option of participation in online discussion threads to the discretion of the instructor exposes institutions to a variety of problems in maintaining and monitoring the academic quality of online courses. As a consequence, it becomes particularly challenging to ensure continuity of academic and intellectual standards across various sections of a given course, to handle student complaints about absent instructors, and to address differing standards between face-to-face and online courses.

A related concern of faculty was that mandating instructor interaction in discussion threads may be seen as infringement upon their freedom to utilize whatever instructional strategies they find most effective. Fifty-six percent of the nearly one quarter of instructors who opposed regulations also endorsed that faculty interaction should be guided by the instructors' freedom in selecting the most effective pedagogical techniques to meet the educational goals of a given threaded discussion as opposed to a generalized mandate concerning participation. Reflective of this position, one instructor stated,

> The nature and purpose of any given threaded discussion is going to dictate the instructor's role within the conversation. For example, if the learning objectives relevant to a targeted threaded discussion are to examine opinions and experiences, then it may not be appropriate for the instructor to play an active role in the discussion. Forcing instructors to participate in discussions, regardless

> of the instructional value of this interaction, undermines the nature of effective teaching as well as minimizes the value of peer-to-peer learning.

Vella (1994) states, "The dialogue of learning is between two adult subjects: teacher and student" (p. 13). This dialogue does not change in online classrooms. If anything, dialogue, operationalized as active participation in the virtual classroom, becomes more important. The challenge, it seems, is determining and defining "active participation" in an online course. While an instructor's active participation in online courses is essential for maintaining ongoing communication and providing a quality learning environment (Beck & Greive, 2005), it may be that discussion threads are not always the appropriate forum for instructional engagement. Best practices would not dispute that each discipline warrants its own level of interaction based on the content and level of a given course; but this variability challenges the establishment of benchmarks for online instructor interaction. Thus, while instructor presence is clearly necessary in the online classroom, there is less consensus of the necessity of instructors' presence specifically in the online discussion threads.

Of the instructors that supported university requirements on faculty participation in course threaded discussions, 88% indicated that concrete standards were essential in assuring consistency in the quality of instruction across the entire online program. Included within the instructional quality category were supportive statements targeting the: 1) role of faculty as guides within the course interaction; 2) need for students to have expert feedback within the threaded discussions; 3) power of faculty to stimulate learning through non-scripted interactions; 4) spontaneous nature of learning that occurs when faculty challenge students' beliefs; and 5) need for documentation of instructional activities within the online classroom.

As stated by one instructor, "When you teach in the classroom, you talk; when you teach online, you participate in threaded discussions. If an instructor is not participating in the threaded discussions, the course becomes a correspondence event rather than an online learning experience." The importance of instructor interaction was reflected by another instructor who stated, "At this point in higher education, online teaching is still novel to many instructors. As such, it is only reasonable that universities provide specific guidance and insight on the expectations for faculty involvement in a course."

The instructor who noted that "online teaching is still novel to many instructors" provides a valid statement concerning the realities of the online environment for most higher education faculty. Although online learning has been active since the early 90s, it is still relatively unfamiliar to most faculty and is undergoing constant transformation as new technologies evolve and more research is conducted on how the online environment affects learning and teaching. The pace of change in technology requires that structure be in place to ensure that instructors are meeting the learning outcomes and students are retained in the class. Providing concrete standards about the expectations for instructor participation in an online course is a first step in moving faculty toward the implementation of better teaching strategies to ensure quality online instruction.

Frequency of Required Participation

Faculty report little consensus concerning the minimum frequency of an instructor's required postings in the online discussion threads. Instructors' responses range from the belief that there should be no instructor participation requirements to supporting twice-a-day mandatory instructor participation.

While the target question asked faculty for *minimum requirements* for threaded discussion participation, many faculty noted that their responses were based on minimum expectations for employment as opposed to maximal instructional effectiveness. As such, some who indicated that the minimum requirements should be for faculty interaction 3 days-per-week also noted that they believed faculty should still be participating and interacting more frequently. As discussed previously, most faculty stated that frequent interaction was an essential aspect of online course

instruction, and that they were simply hesitant to have this aspect of their instruction mandated by a simplified count of the minimal posting requirements or the required number of days of online course participation.

Faculty feedback reveals that instructors do not agree on how to define "active participation." Yet, the importance of an instructor's engagement in an online course cannot be overlooked. Vella (1994) suggests that learning is an "active process" which implies engagement of the instructor and student. Research on student barriers to online learning suggest that "social interaction is strongly related to online learning, enjoyment, effectiveness of learning online, and likelihood of taking another online class" (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005, p.45). Students will not be retained if the online class is conducted merely as a correspondence course; learners want what they would normally have in the face-to-face classroom: interaction between students and instructors. As such, to promote optimal student learning and retention, it is critical to establish guiding principles that drive best practices in online instructor interaction.

Beck and Greive (2005) provide online instructors suggestions on how to be successful in online teaching. They stress the need to be an effective communicator via chat, e-mail, discussion participation, feedback on assignments, sharing examples, and instant messaging. While instructor-student communication is important across all these modes of interaction, threaded discussions serve as the primary means of whole-class or group interaction in the online classroom. The use of threaded discussions provides online instructors a means of engaging groups of students, fostering peer-to-peer interaction and developing a cohesive learning community. The result of this engagement is an enhanced active learning process.

Evaluation of Participation

Consistent with the lack of faculty agreement concerning the regulation instructors' involvement in online discussion threads, faculty also disagreed on the extent to which the quality of their discussion thread postings should be analyzed as a component of their teaching. Central to faculty concerns was the belief that instructional effectiveness should drive all benchmarks concerning when and how an instructor participates in the online classroom. In addition, faculty expressed apprehension about being evaluated on something as subjective as the "quality" of their interactions.

Regardless of their reported position on evaluating the quality of an instructor's participation in the threaded discussion, 81% of the open-ended responses highlighted the necessity to go beyond a simple number count of faculty posts to ensure that instructional interaction was relevant, meaningful and pedagogically valuable. This perspective was effectively captured by one instructor who stated,

> Anyone can post *X* number of times, but this doesn't ensure that students are learning anything. Twenty irrelevant interactions are not nearly as effective for promoting student learning as one or two insightful, relevant comments or questions that stimulate critical thinking and active exploration of course material.

While faculty generally endorsed the need for an evaluation of quality, 52% of open-ended responses also highlighted concerns about the subjective nature of evaluating the quality of faculty interactions. Specifically, instructors were concerned about the ability to operationally define "quality interactions" as well as the ability of evaluators to determine quality standards across a variable range of disciplines, courses, instructional styles and educational goals. As one instructor challenged,

> Undoubtedly, quality is of the utmost importance. But, quality is a vague term that generates more questions than answers. Who determines quality? Does every interaction have to be of a specific quality? Can quality vary from one discussion to another? Are quality posts different from introductory to advanced classes? Is

quality of instructor interaction related to the purpose of the assignment? What constitutes high quality interactions compared to low quality interactions?

The questions posed by the faculty are reflective of the issues that must be considered when creating guidelines and standards for online education. As research converges to shape best practices in online instruction, one must be mindful of the role instructors will play in facilitating quality online learning experiences. While, faculty understand the need for evaluation, there is a concern that the online classroom may lack "established guidelines or procedures for online teaching" (Spector, 2005, p.17).

It follows that institutions must apply best practices in online instruction to create clear protocol to guide and evaluate online instruction (including expectations for instructor participation in the online classroom). The implementation of an online instructor evaluation process that utilizes principles of effective online teaching (Chickering & Ehrmann, 1996) is central for success in the virtual classroom. As such, an effective online faculty evaluation system can serve to simultaneously guide faculty in effective online instructional practices, evaluate instructional effectiveness and maximize student learning (for an example of an evaluation system based on these principles, see Mandernach, Donnelli, Dailey & Schulte, 2005).

Implications and Future Directions

Discussing the role of technology in institutions, Duderstadt (1999) states "The real question is not whether higher education will be transformed but rather how and by whom" (p. 1). Technology has become a standard and expectation by today's learners; technology is changing the face of education and, consequently, the role of administrators, instructors, and students. "It could well be that faculty members of the twenty-first century college or university will find it necessary to set aside their roles as teachers and instead become designers of learning experiences, process, and environments." (Duderstadt, 1999, p.7). If this is indeed the case, it is vital that benchmarks are established to guide instructors through this role transformation. Developing clear standards for online instructor presence and participation may be the first step in moving instructors towards a new model for their role as virtual educators.

Faculty perceptions regarding the regulation and evaluation of instructors' participation in online course threaded discussions suggested that specific benchmarks regarding time and frequency of instructor posting in the online classroom may not be as important as setting professional expectations and communicating concrete strategies for instructors' visibility in the online classroom. Also, it is important to note, that an instructor's philosophy regarding course facilitation and the learning outcomes of the course will mediate all best practice standards regarding instructor time and presence in the online classroom. Thus, the focus of faculty education and best practices in this area must be tailored to balance the need for instructional presence with the unique demands of each institution.

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Manuscript received 22 Aug 2006; revision received 20 Nov 2006.