



The Problem of Teaching Presence in Transactional Theories of Distance Education

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Abstract

This article explores the challenges online teachers face in establishing a teaching persona. While many online teachers believe that they create and control their teaching presence, drawing on transactional distance theory and relational distance theory, this paper argues that such an assumption can result in increased distance between teacher and students. This increased distance makes it more difficult for online students to accurately sense who their teacher is. Problematically, this sense of who the teacher is can be a powerful element to help online students succeed within the course. To help students to perceive, more clearly, who the teacher of the course is, the article recommends frequent and varied communication between teacher and students, the utilization of multimodal communication methods to provide differing opportunities for students to make meaning, for teachers to share who they are with students, and to proactively encourage the formation of relationships between course participants through course design.

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“I was afraid to come in and talk to you,” one of my online students, Jill, said to me as we sat in my office after meeting for the first time. I was utterly speechless. She continued, “From the emails you wrote, I was worried about coming in to speak with you—I didn’t think you were very nice.” I recalled emailing back and forth with this student, in response to questions she had, but I never thought I came across as mean or scary. As we continued to talk about her project, I struggled to concentrate; my mind was stuck on “I was afraid to come in and talk to you.” I couldn’t get past the idea that one of my students was fearful of meeting me face-to-face (f2f). After our conference, I was horrified. I teach a 5/5 load at a community college, often working with nearly one hundred online students a semester. How many other students were out there, afraid to ask for help?

This experience led me to review much online teaching scholarship, to learn if others had experienced anything similar, and, hopefully, for advice on how to overcome these misinterpretations of who I was as the instructor. Numerous rhetoric and composition and distance education scholars have argued that participants in online classes can struggle with the virtual format of teaching and learning (Chris Anson, 1999; John F. Barber, 2000, p. 253; David E. Hailey, Jr. et al., 2001; CCCO OWI Committee, 2011; D. Randy Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Michael G. Moore,

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2013; David Sapp & James Simon, 2005, p. 479). This format is a struggle, they argued, because both teachers and students lack the regular, f2f interactions of a traditional course. Most online students complete their coursework alone, distanced from other classmates and the teacher, both geographically and temporally. Because both teachers and students experience this sense of isolation, it is a significant impediment to both online teaching and learning. This isolation can lead to increased feelings of frustration, confusion, and hopelessness when problems or questions arise, resulting in decreased motivation to do the work of the course, potentially leading to students dropping out of the class (Sapp & Simon, 2005, p. 472). Similarly, many online teachers also experience feelings of isolation when teaching in this domain, which prevents some faculty from returning to teach online (CCCC OWI Committee, 2011, p. 13).

Part of the challenge of online education, for teachers and students, is feeling comfortable in the online domain. Based on their educational experiences in f2f classrooms, students and teachers have a clear sense of the roles that both should play (Terry Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001, p. 5; Richard Beach, 1993, p. 108–109; Nancy W. Coppola, 2005; Wilhemina Savenye, Olina Zane, and Mary Niemczyk, 2001, p. 379); after all, these expectations “have been developed through decades of experience in traditional classrooms” (Cook & Grant-Davie, 2005, p. 2). However, when the domain of that class moves online, the participants are left to determine their new role either as online teachers or students, and then how to perform that role within the online space.

Further, they are left, often on their own, to understand who else is in the class and what those people are like. These f2f-based expectations about what a class should be often make the online experience less satisfying (Patricia Webb Boyd, 2008, p. 231). Because many students struggle with isolation while participating in an online course, and because online education is becoming more pervasive across higher education (not only entirely online courses, but also MOOCs, flipped classes, hybrids etc.), increased numbers of students, in particular, will experience these problems. Since first-year composition is a regularly required course at most universities, first-year writing faculty will increasingly teach in online formats and be expected to address the needs of online students.

In this paper, I discuss the importance of students’ perception of the teacher, which is often referred to as *teacher presence* in online classes, and how problems with the concept of *teaching presence* (often explained as something a teacher is responsible for creating) can negatively affect students, increasing the distance they perceive between themselves and the teacher. Using reader response theory, transactional distance theory, and relational distance theory, I argue that the term *teacher presence* is problematic because teachers neither create nor control how students construct their sense of the teacher. I argue that we need a richer conception of what teaching presence is and how it is created—a conception that accounts for the contributions of both teachers and students. Otherwise, teachers will continue to unknowingly create barriers between themselves and students within their online pedagogy and classes.

1. Changed pedagogy, unchanged results

Prior to my conversation with Jill, I had made significant changes to my online first-year composition course, implementing a rhetorical genre studies (RGS) approach to my writing pedagogy, and also basing the course around multimodal composition projects. I was excited by the prospects of what students would create for these projects and how RGS would impact their learning. Additionally, I created several short instructional videos of myself to help orient students to each module of the course, and to help instruct course concepts, attempting to assist students to more clearly envision who I was. My excitement, however, waned throughout the semester. With each passing assignment, some students didn’t meet the expectations that I had for their work, and I struggled with how to help them online—particularly after that meeting with Jill. While I incorporated some video media into the class, my composition pedagogy had changed, and the student projects had changed, but one major element of the online course had not changed: I still communicated with and tried to teach online students by writing to them, and this form of communication was not getting the results I wanted. I knew what I would do in a f2f class to reach students more directly and to encourage them through challenging times in the class, but online, I became more aware of how heavily I relied on email and other written texts to communicate with and teach my students. Worse, as I learned from Jill, students were forming a different sense of who I was as a teacher. What worried me most was that I had no idea who that perceived teacher really was. If I didn’t know myself, I could never know who my students thought I was.

2. Teacher presence within distance education scholarship

Because of my experience with Jill, I investigated scholarship focused on helping online teachers develop their teacher presence, because what I was doing was not working as I had envisioned it would. Scholars in the field of distance education have argued that there are three types of “presence” in online courses: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence.¹ Social presence refers to students’ ability to represent themselves as real people within a virtual environment, and to establish relationships with other participants in the online course (Garrison et al., 2000); cognitive presence refers to the students’ ability to develop meaning, resulting in knowledge gained from the course (Garrison et al., 2000); teaching presence has been defined in terms of a teacher’s efforts to create social and cognitive presence. For example, Anderson et al. (2001) argued that teaching presence is the result of “[T]he design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes” (p. 5). This definition emphasized the teacher’s work through course design and instructional methods and assumed that if a teacher does this work, teaching presence will occur (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89–90).

After discovering this definition and reviewing scholarship based on this framework, my reaction was that it seemed too easy—too simple. I found myself saying, “I do this,” or “I’ve tried that” repeatedly, as I reviewed article after article. I began to realize that establishing a teacher’s presence is not easy to do, or at least not as easy as some authors would make it seem. However, while the scholarly definitions of a teacher’s presence seemed too simple, I couldn’t just ignore the aspect of presence because students’ sense of their teacher is critically important to their success in online classes. Peter Leong (2011) theorized that a student’s sense of the teacher impacts learning, as “social presence strongly influences cognitive absorption, and cognitive absorption in turn influences satisfaction” (p. 22). More importantly, multiple studies have argued for a correlation between a student’s sense of an online teacher, student satisfaction, and the student’s perceived learning (Akyol, Garrison, and Ozden, 2009; Jennifer Richardson & Karen Swan, 2003; Peter Shea, Andrea Pickett, and William E. Pelz, 2003; Karen Swan & Li Fang Shih, 2005). In fact, Tina M. Stavredes and Tiffany M. Herder (2013) noted “[i]t is clear from the literature that the development of presence in the online environment is essential for learning to occur [...] and teaching presence is a critical factor in learner satisfaction and deep learning” (p. 160). The presence of a teacher can impact each individual student. The challenge is to better understand how this knowing of the teacher actually happens, and how we can move beyond notions that a teacher, alone, is capable of creating a presence in an online course.

There are many instances in online writing instruction (OWI) scholarship in which advice is given to the teacher on how to improve one’s online teaching practices². This advice, relating to course design, facilitation, and processes, offers the hope that if a teacher does these specific things, teaching will be improved, and through that improved teaching, a teacher can enhance teaching presence (Barber, 2000, p.253; Lee-Ann Kastman Breuch, 2015, p. 377–79; Brickman, 2003, p.362; Anjanette Darrington, 2008; Hailey Jr., Grant-Davie, & Hult, 2001; Connie S. Mick & Geoffrey C. Middlebrook, 2015, p. 144; Timothy J. Ragan & Patricia R. White, 2001, p. 404). Such a focus stems from the belief that a teacher is in control of teaching presence. Anderson et al. (2001) explained that “the variable that is most directly under the control of teachers [is] the task of creating and sustaining ‘teacher presence’ in a text-based computer conferencing context” (p. 3). In fact, in online teaching scholarship, the focus is often on the teacher, and the teacher’s reflection on her practices and her assessment of its effectiveness. Boyd (2008), in a study of online students’ perceptions of their courses, explained that much scholarship in this area focused on the teachers and their perceptions of their online courses: “although they might include a student account along the way, the main focus of the articles [studied] remains on teachers’ evaluations of the success of the courses” (p. 225). This focus on the teacher’s preparation for teaching online, on actions teachers should take when teaching, and on teachers’ evaluations of the course means that the students remain secondary, even though they will construct a teacher’s presence. Of course, such teaching advice comes with the best intentions, aimed at helping teachers to create an engaging online course through

¹ This work is based upon the community of inquiry framework established by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer in “Critical Inquiry in a Text-Based Environment: Computer Conferencing in Higher Education”

² Scott Warnock’s book *Teaching Writing Online: Why and How?* is a prime example of a guide to beginning to teach online and to improve one’s online writing pedagogy.

which students will learn the course concepts, but again, the implication remains that by following such advice, a teacher will be more present in the class, regardless of who the students of the course are or what they do.

3. Transactions and a teacher's presence

Within any class, in any domain, information is shared and meaning is created between students and a teacher through the give and take of information—a transaction. As John Rouse (1991) suggested, students and teacher share “a transactional relation, in which each contributes to the developing experience and from which each learns something” (p.198). One aspect of online learning that differentiates it from f2f, however, is how transactions between students and teacher occur, which modes of communication are emphasized, and through which media those modes are delivered to students. In online and f2f courses, a teacher may provide similar content. For example, he might offer a quick introduction of who he is at the beginning of class, but the delivery and uptake of that content will differ. In a f2f course, the teacher will talk directly to the students and students may respond directly to other students as well. Collectively, the give and take of information results in informational transactions, through which knowledge is developed. Michael G. Moore (2013) explained, “The term ‘transactional distance’ was first used in Boyd and Apps’ 1980 *Handbook of Adult Education*. Originating with John Dewey, the concept of transaction ‘connotes interplay among the environment, the individuals and the patterns of behaviors in a situation’ (Boyd and Apps, 1980, p. 5)” (p. 68). While the same biographical info can be shared with online students, this communication is neither immediate nor direct, and the differences in environment alter the patterns of communication between teacher and students. These transactions more closely resemble the relationship between an author and readers than the relationship between a teacher and students in a f2f classroom.

Because of this relationship between readers and a writer, and the heavily text-reliant nature of online teaching and learning, reader response theory compounds the notion of a teacher's presence and can help inform how an online teacher should consider the students within the online course, considering how they might take up that writing. This complication of a teacher's presence is absent within distance education scholarship. Because education happens through transactions, and multiple people are needed for a transaction to occur, students and teacher cannot be separated. A teacher cannot consider her work in isolation, for everything she works to do within an online course, including her teaching presence, will be dependent upon how each student takes up that work and interprets it.

According to Alan Gross (2005) and Walter Ong (1975), presence can happen, and it can be created; however, presence won't happen only through the actions of just one person—in this case, the teacher. Presence is the result of a transaction between two (or more) people. Certainly, the teaching materials and pedagogy a teacher uses plays a role; however, once those materials are published, the teacher cannot always anticipate exactly how students might interact with those materials. The teacher has no control of whether a student reads those texts, how a student's imagination or emotion affects that reading, nor could the teacher anticipate how students' previous educational experiences with teachers and courses might influence their reading of those texts and the subsequent meaning devised after the act of reading, but it is these qualities and experiences of the student that will affect their sense of who the teacher is.

When advice associated with a teacher's presence emphasizes the actions of the teacher, the assumption is that students play a minimal role in the development of that presence. Teachers, then, proceed with course development by focusing on their own actions (and anticipated outcomes), resulting in a teacher-centered approach to course development, and subsequently, to online teaching. A teacher-centered approach almost always ensures that a teacher and student will struggle to communicate clearly, resulting in strained transactions between the teacher and the students. When the teachers predominantly emphasize how they prefer to communicate, they assume students' communication preferences align with their own (Patricia Dunn, 2001, p. 47). Unfortunately, the ways teachers and students interact with texts rarely align. This is especially true when considering that people think in different ways and prefer varied ways of making meaning (Dunn, 2001). Louise Rosenblatt (2005) argued that every reader comes to a text with a unique background based upon that person's individual experiences, which no other reader will share, resulting in meaning specific to that reader (p. 26). There is no possibility that all readers will read a text in the same way, share values or experiences, or interpret their role as a reader in the same way; therefore, the resulting reading of that text will be individualized and specific to that one reader (Stanley Fish, 1980). In an online course, where teaching is often accomplished through text, the varied abilities that students have to make meaning through reading should be taken into account. Different readings of texts by different students will result in diverse meanings made. By emphasizing the work of a teacher, and by implying that this work “creates a teaching presence,” scholars imply that “a teacher's

presence” in an online class is something a teacher controls rather than something a student is equally involved in creating.

I found that Rosenblatt’s work suggests a model for online education as a series of literate transactions that enabled me to interrogate the simplified approach to a teacher’s presence that existed within the distance education scholarship I had initially sought to help improve my own teaching presence, as I mistakenly assumed I could do. Through reader response theory, I could better understand the flaws in how “teaching presence” was theorized, but reader response couldn’t help me to determine what an alternative approach to a teacher’s presence would be. In online courses, the participants are both writers and readers, or producers and receivers of information, sharing experiences as they work together in the production and consumption of information. Reader response theories were not geared towards the complexities of distance education and could not provide help in explaining how students develop their perception of the teacher.

To better understand how distance impacts both the relationships and transactions between teacher and students, I sought out scholarship that emphasized these elements of personal interactions instead of scholarship that focused on teaching presence.³ The concept of a transaction is key to understanding how students form a sense of who the teacher of their online course is, and within online education, where the student also performs the role of the writer, these transactions are also how teachers develop a sense of who their individual students are. In my attempt to find a connection between informational transactions and relationships, and how distance between people affects both, I came to transactional distance theory and relational distance theory.

Michael G. Moore (1993) defined transactional distance theory as “a concept describing the universe of teacher-learner relationships that exists when learners and instructors are separated by space and/or by time” (p. 22). Transactional distance theory considers the distance between participants in these transactions, the relationships formed between participants, the frequency of their communication, and even the formality/structure of such interactions and how such aspects of a distance education course may promote or discourage learner autonomy. Moore (1993) identified three aspects of learning that establish a high or low level of transactional distance: dialogue, structure, and learner autonomy (p. 23). Here, dialogue refers to the instructional communication between teacher and students; structure refers to the course design, or the way the course is delivered through a specific communication media and how that design may/may not allow for dialogue; learner autonomy refers to the potential for students to take ownership of their own learning (Moore, 1993).

F2f, learner autonomy can increase due to the opportunities for immediate dialogue between participants, an increased number of participants sharing an immediate experience, an increased ability to alter a class session spontaneously, and greater comfort for many students, due to their familiarity with their role in a f2f setting. Conversely, no matter the format of the class, transactional distance can be high because of a formal, rigid structure, infrequent communication or interaction, or even the personalities of participants, which are all likely to decrease learner autonomy. In online classes, the medium of the class increases the transactional distance in ways that a f2f class cannot experience, due to the close proximity of all f2f class participants. Moore (1993) explained, “It is the separation of learners and teachers that profoundly affects both teaching and learning” (p. 22). Online, the physical distance between participants is immediately greater, the means of communication are typically slower and more formal (email vs. conversation), and the teaching is often done through previously developed materials (sometimes set to self-release on a specific date); as a result, pedagogical methods cannot spontaneously be changed, and personalities and tone are harder to discern (Barber, 2000; Ragan & White, 2001). The format of an online class has to be more structured in order to move students through the class in a way conducive to learning. Combine that structuredness with the text-heavy nature of many online courses, and the transactional distance between students and teacher increases, making the process of developing relationships increasingly difficult.

Even when a teacher attempts to include multimedia in online teaching, the result can be a course with high transactional distance. While the implementation of short videos into an online course might seem useful at decreasing the distance between teacher and student (as I thought in my attempts at using this media in my online courses), the reality is that pre-recorded videos can actually increase the distance between teacher and student. Moore (2013) explained that “In the typical recorded video podcast instructional program, the teaching is highly structured and

³ Recall that teaching presence is one of three forms of presence that are believed to exist within an online course, as established through the Community of Inquire framework created by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000).

there is minimal teacher-learner dialogue” (p.71). The inclusion of pre-recorded videos is a highly structured element to include, and there is no opportunity for dialogue, in the moment. Certainly, dialogue could occur in response to the video, but that conversation then happens at a distance, perhaps days after the video had been recorded and posted, increasing distance between teacher and student. Whereas the benefits of a video seem obvious because they incorporate communication methods other than writing, there are risks, too—risks that can decrease the potential for communication to happen between teacher and students.

The elements of relationships between teachers/learners and the varied ways space and time affect those relationships align transactional distance theory closely with relational distance theory. Although the concept of *relational distance* has roots within leadership studies, this theory has the potential to clarify how relationships between students and teachers are created and sustained, even when the distance inherent in an online course challenges the very existence of such relationships. Similarly to education, businesses are experimenting with distanced forms of working, encouraging some employees to telecommute, to work from alternate locations, and to connect with a business’ main location through technological means. Laura Erskine (2012) stated, through “the work of Antonakis and Atwater (2002) and Napier and Ferris (1993), relational distance is defined here as multidimensional and interactive distance between individuals” (p. 97). Distance does not just mean physical separation; relational distance involves varied formats of distance: structural, status, and psychological (Erskine, 2012, p. 97). Structural distance refers to physical distance along with methods and frequency of communication; psychological distance is based upon the relationship quality of participants; status distance is comprised of demographic and social status (Erskine, 2012, p. 97). Each dimension of distance affects the types and frequency of interactions between participants, decreasing the potential for teacher/students to establish a relationship.

The online domain is less forgiving than the f2f when a teacher’s actions work to increase the transactional distance between the teacher and students; there is less immediacy online, resulting in time passing between the action and a reaction from students. If a teacher crafts a poorly written email, it could be days before she gets a response from a student and realizes the confusion caused by her own writing; if a text is poorly formatted, any number of students might review the text and choose not to email the instructor with a follow-up question, a question that could cause the teacher to review the text to improve the formatting to make the text more accessible; even assumptions made about who the students of the course really are and what their preferences for learning are can increase the transactional distance between teacher and students, resulting in a decreased likelihood of a relationship between them.

Because leadership, like teaching, “is inherently relationship-based” (Erskine, 2012, p. 96), relational distance theory is appropriate for understanding more clearly how students construct their vision of their online teacher. No single dimension of distance, whether structural, psychological, or status alone, affects the satisfaction and success of students in an online class, but collectively, these aspects of distance all impact students’ ability to form relationships with the teacher, especially in an online course. The degree to which students and teachers form relationships, in both f2f and online courses, can positively impact students’ success. If online teachers do not consider the impact of distance on their pedagogy, they may inadvertently develop a course that privileges the exclusive few students who share a teacher’s own experiences and come from a similar background. Specifically, a student who has never taken an online course may come to the course with different expectations than would a student who has previously taken online courses. The student with no online learning experience may bring expectations more appropriate for a f2f class, and struggle to transition into the role of an online student. These differing expectations of what a specific online course should be like can interfere with a teacher and student developing a relationship within the course. When expectations mismatch reality, all course participants may struggle to connect with others in the class.

4. Problems of relying on writing in online courses

Jill’s fear of meeting with me stemmed from her reading of my emails, course materials, and announcements. She formed her impression of me from our written communication, which I never envisioned would possibly be the basis for a student developing a negative impression of me. After reflecting upon my teaching after our f2f conversation, I realized that I was over-relying on writing to communicate with students. Like many other online instructors, both my pedagogy and communication methods were deeply rooted in the written. Even though I incorporated multimodal composition projects into my class, my communication with students continued to privilege one mode (linguistic) and one media (alphanumeric writing). Within OWI, the primary way many instructors teach and communicate with students is through writing and text-driven media, learning management systems, PowerPoint and Word lectures, and discussion

boards (CCCC OWI Committee, 2011, p. 21; Hewett, 2015, p. 3,9, 170–71). William Condon (2000) argued, “The only way a writer [either students or the teacher] can make his or her presence known in a virtual classroom is by writing there” (p. 50). Problematically, for me, and perhaps for others, this reliance on the written was based on assumptions I had about the nature of communication through writing—that students would take away the exact meaning from the texts that I had in mind when I wrote them. This was particularly true when I thought of how my personality would come across to my online students. The writing in an online class often provides the only opportunities for students to develop a perception of who the teacher is (Craig Stroupe, 2003). Over-relying on any one way of communicating, however, will alienate and disadvantage students who are challenged by that form of communication (Dunn, 2001).

For online teachers, communication through writing immediately increases transactional distance. As Ong (1975) explained, “writing is itself an indirection. Direct communication by script is impossible” (p. 19). This lack of direct, immediate transaction increases the distance separating the teacher from students, and students are left to make sense of the written documents in isolation. Each reader, as Ong (1975) discussed, “retires into his own microcosm” when asked to read a text (p. 11). Worse, the written nature of my online communication minimizes the ways through which students might construct meaning, as the online domain limits the ability of teacher and student to non-verbally and spontaneously communicate; this lack of direct and immediate communication increases the distance felt by students, resulting in intensified feelings of isolation (Brickman, 2003, p. 362; Darrington, 2008; Hailey et al., 2001, p. 392; Patricia Webb Peterson, 2001, p. 367; Ragan & White, 2001). However, a teacher’s reliance on one form of communicating increases the importance of teachers using that form effectively (Beth Hewett, 2015, p. 170–171; Ragan & White, 2001, p. 400–401). If a written text fails to communicate as the teacher intended, the transactional distance between teacher and student increases, and the student will feel more isolated and less trusting of the instructor. Even when online teachers are efficient writers, there is no guarantee that the writing will do the work they envisioned it doing. Online teachers cannot control how online students read a text.

No matter how carefully the online teacher develops the texts of the class, those texts are open to interpretation and always susceptible to misinterpretation. Sapp and Simon (2005) remarked, “few [teachers] have the sophisticated communication skills necessary to connect with students interpersonally, to build trust and rapport in unfamiliar virtual environments” (p. 478). An over-reliance on writing then enhances distrust and disconnect. My lack of consideration of how varied my students’ responses to my own writings would be decreased the likelihood that I could connect with them, the exact audience I aimed to communicate with. Online, there are traces of the teacher, such as a writing style or a perceived tone, that offer momentary clues of the instructor, but even with these, the student’s ability to form a sense of the teacher is limited. Ragan and White (2001) stated, “Reading from a monitor is more difficult than reading on paper. Obviously, that makes the reader work harder to comprehend what is being said, and that presents an additional barrier to absorbing information” and creating meaning (p. 405) (see also Marilyn Cooper, 2005, p. 33; Carmen Luke, 2000, p. 84). A particularly difficult aspect of communicating online is the use of tone; depending on how a reader interprets the written text, he will apply a tone to the writing that might be accurate or not, showing how students each develop their own fiction of who their teacher is (Brickman, 2003, p. 362; Hailey et al., 2001, p. 392; Ragan & White, 2001, p. 404). A student can misread anything a teacher writes because, as Rosenblatt (1978) stated, “The ‘meaning’ [of a text] does not reside ready-made in the text or in the reader, but happens during the transaction between reader and text” (p. 4). When students begin to interact with the written materials, the meaning inherent in those texts changes according to the perspective of each individual student. Within each student-text interaction, transactions occur between the student and the teacher, as Stroupe (2003) explained:

In this electronic medium, which draws more completely on the ethos of writing and writing instruction than mere discussion, a significant alternative discourse can be created whereby students play an active role in creating, or composing [. . .] the experience of the class, its sources of authority and presence, and its online community. (p. 258)

Accordingly, the reader is absolutely necessary in developing meaning within the online course; how a student constructs meaning is not simply up to just the teacher.

Just as a teacher’s writing skills impact the communication between student and teacher, affecting the development of both meaning and a teacher’s presence, a student’s reading ability will have an equal effect on the outcome of that communication (Hewett, 2015, p. 8). By developing writing that is intended to communicate to the entire class, an instructor assumes that all students are able to approach written texts in the same way and that their reading practices and abilities are at a similar level. In fact, this is far from true. In *The State of the Art of OWI Report* (2011), authors

argued that “students must access much of their interactions, instruction, orientation, supplemental assistance, and so on in text-based manners” (CCCC OWI Committee, p. 13). This is not news; however, this committee (2011) noted, “we think that many students are not necessarily good readers of instructional texts” (p. 13). Even if the teacher is a phenomenal writer, students will not necessarily read those texts well. The ability of a student to read the written instructional texts, developed by the teacher, to teach, to communicate, and assumed to help the students to know the teacher, is an uncontrollable variable which will affect what meaning a student makes from the teacher’s texts. There’s equal risk here, too, for the teacher to be an ineffective communicator. Students might generally be poor readers of instructional texts, but if the instructional texts are poorly written, especially for the online domain, the result will be disastrous.

There is also the real possibility that students may choose to entirely disregard the written materials of an online course. Students may choose not to read because they lack interest in the class, because they may have had bad experiences with past online classes and believe the reading not to be worth their effort, or because they may not have developed good strategies for reading text online. Online teachers can contribute to this problem by not considering how reading in different contexts may affect the meaning made. Jennifer Roswell (2012) clarified how reading patterns shift when reading a digital text: “Upon entering a digital text, a reader’s gaze often moves to the top left corner and moves to the right side and down,” which she refers to as reading in an “F-pattern” (p. 77). When a teacher’s online materials are formatted as traditional print documents, using print-based conventions, students may be reading a traditionally formatted text using digital reading habits, and as a result, they will likely miss content, not through an unwillingness to read, but through a mismatch between digital reading practices and inappropriately formatted text. Anne Mangen (2014), comparing reading comprehension results from readers of physical texts to digital texts, found that readers of digital texts comprehend far less than those reading from a physical text (cited in Alison Flood, 2014). It is easy to blame students by saying they chose to not read the materials, but the reality is that students might read the text and still miss out on portions that the teacher believed to be critically important. For a teacher, the assumption is that a student will read the text, but the uncertainty of whether the text was read, or even viewed, increases the distance and decreases the trust between the teacher and the students.

When a student misreads a text in a f2f class, the opportunity to ask questions or to see other students ask questions can help decrease the relational distance between teacher and student, but online, that distance increases. Even if a student emails a teacher for help, as my student Jill did with me, the lack of immediacy between teacher and student negatively affects the relationship of teacher and student. A teacher and student are stunted from communicating synchronously, thus decreasing the likelihood of a dialogue between participants of the online course (Moore, 1993, p. 24–25).

5. Normalized view of students

While attempting to strengthen my online teaching presence, through advice from distance education scholarship, I noted first how focused much of the advice was on the actions of the teacher. Shortly after that, my attention shifted to how minimized the role of students was. While students are often mentioned within this scholarship, it is typically in general, generic ways. This view is similar to how readers are often framed in literary criticism, where “the reader is often mentioned, but not given the center of the stage” (Rosenblatt, 1978, p. 4). Rosenblatt (1978) then argued that in such criticism:

the reader is usually cast as a passive recipient, whether for good or ill, of the impact of the work. He is still, in a sense, invisible, even when he is treated as a member of something referred to under such collective rubrics as “the audience” or “the reading public.” (p. 4)

This homogenizing of student work in ways similar to literary criticism makes generalizations about the readers of a text. Beach (1993) noted:

Many theorists, including traditional literary critics, refer vaguely to a hypothetical, impersonal being known as “the reader.” (In most cases, of course, “the reader” is an imagined extension of these theorists’ own reading experience). In this rhetorical move, the writer or critic proposes an interpretation and then presumes that “the reader” will make the same interpretation. (p. 5)

This generalization of readers and of students is problematic. Just as there is no such thing as a generic reader, there can be no such thing as a generic online student. Marjorie Davis (2005) stated, “The audience [in an online course] will almost certainly be much larger and more diverse than students sitting in a physical classroom” (p. 17). Within much online teaching scholarship, references are made to students of within an online course, but there is little distinction about the nuances, or preferences and expectations, of individual students, their interest levels, academic experiences, or their technological proficiency.

While it’s impossible to discern the potential of each individual student who might take an online course, generalizing students presumes that each student will possess the same knowledge of the role of an online student and the same technological, communication, and reading skills—essentially assuming that all students will react to the various elements of an online course in similar ways. As explained before, however, when each student takes up a text, a unique meaning will be made of that text, creating a tension between a teacher who perceives students as “the same” and a class of students who are all quite different from each other. Because no two students will interpret the texts developed by the teacher in the same way, conceptualizing students as a homogenous group who develops similar meanings from a text creates false expectations for the teacher—expectations real students fail to live up to, creating barriers for those students who react differently to the course materials, making it even more challenging to create meaning from them. This misalignment of the reality of a class of individual online students situated within a course designed for a perceived homogenous group will only serve to increase transactional distance between teacher and students, further alienating each from the other.

Further dangers exist when a teacher approaches online course design and teaching with the mindset that her class will be made up of a generic group of homogenous students. This assumption is particularly dangerous when considering how students within any class, online or not, might learn best. By generalizing the students in an online class, assuming they all learn best through reading, an over-reliance on text will negatively affect those students in class who might prefer to access the course materials in different ways (Dunn, 2001, p. 47). In describing how readers react to and analyze a text, Rosenblatt (1978) noted, “each reader was active. He was not a blank tape registering a ready-made message. He was actively involved in building up a poem for himself out of his responses to the text. He had to draw on his past experiences with the verbal symbols” (p. 10). Stephen Spender (1949) explained, “Only a few things, which illustrate.. [a person’s] own interests and ideas, are real to them; other things, which are in fact equally real, appear to them as abstractions” (p. 253). When a student’s interests and experiences align with the course content, the student will have an easier time constructing the presence of the teacher; the teacher will become more real, but if those interests are too dissimilar, it is another level of transactional distance between students and teacher.

Each student’s unique expectations and experiences will directly impact how the student develops a sense of both the instructor and the work required of the course. In “The Role of Immersive Media in Online Education,” Stephen C. Bronack (2011) stated, “students’ perceptions of the presence of [...] the instructor in an online class [...] is significantly related to students’ positive attitudes toward the course” (p. 114). Assuming that each student possesses the same attitude and motivations toward the course further disenfranchises students who do not share positive attitudes towards the course, and for a required course like first year composition, not all students are enthusiastic about enrolling. Additionally, few students in a composition course will possess the same understanding of their writing process or the ability to write as well as other students within the class. This involves comfort with technology as well, as all students will have different levels of experience with online learning and associated technologies. Any student who, in any way, differs from the anticipated norm will be at a disadvantage in attempting to discern the instructor’s envisioned meanings within the course materials, becoming frustrated, potentially further isolating herself and withdrawing from the course.

By conceptualizing students as a generic group, the teacher often fails to realize the value of developing multiple ways in which students can access the content of an online course. A teacher’s communication preferences and methods can both enhance and limit the potential of students to create meaning from the texts a teacher develops. However, approaching communication through just one medium, emphasizing a single mode (the linguistic), may create barriers for students who may struggle with that medium or mode. As Dunn (2001) argued, “Word-based teaching is the dominant one in school cultures. Further, it may be that graphic, spatial, aural, kinesthetic, or other ways of knowing are especially under-used in writing classes” (p. 47). In an online class, other ways of knowing may increase motivation and provide some students with a greater chance at accessing and developing meaning from the course texts.

6. Relationships, experiences, and transactions

Teacher presence is not a simple construct; it is not something that a teacher alone can create. No matter how much effort a teacher puts into trying to craft a persona in an online class, the reality is that the teacher will always be a fiction.⁴ For each student, the teacher will be different, created by that student based upon her own past experiences, readings of the course materials, and communications with the teacher.

An online teacher's presence is the students' sense of that teacher. Because these students never meet this teacher f2f, they must construct this sense from the materials of the course and their own experiences within the course. While course materials and course design allow the online class to function, it's the human element that allows for the formation of a connection between students and teacher. Online, this connection is formed through the reader/writer relationship, for presence begins to happen when two or more people interact, sharing an experience and forming a relationship based upon those shared transactions. As Ong (1975) stated, "Establishing presence is done by intimacy, shared experiences, and familiar ground" (p. 14). In an online class, experiences can be shared or not, can be intimate or distant, and can be built upon familiar ground or unfamiliar. However, when a student feels distant and alone, situated in an unfamiliar environment, the vision that the student creates of the teacher will be one of an uncaring and not helpful individual—whether it is true or not.

Reader response, transactional distance, and relational distance theories all intersect at the point where transactions occur between the participants in an online course. While a teacher creates the online course and associated materials, it is the people within the class that interact with each other and share experiences, forming relationships from these interactions. Cathy Cavanaugh (2013) noted, "Interaction is at the heart of online learning. Frequency of interactions in an online course among learners, the course interface, and the instructor has been associated with significantly higher course achievement (Rockman et al., 2007; Beldarrain, 2008)" (p. 178). Through these shared interactions, each person gains more clues as to what the other is like, forming a more complete sense of that person. It is important then to establish an online course where transactions are plentiful, varied, and occur regularly, thereby lessening the perceived distance between course participants.

7. Reducing the distance

At the time of my interaction with Jill, I had nearly a decade's experience of teaching writing online, but prior to that single conversation, nothing had shaken my online pedagogy (not to be confused with my composition pedagogy) nearly as much. Reflecting on my experience of attempting to establish and clarify my teaching presence within my online classes, I cannot help but consider how misled I was about the concept of a teacher's presence. My primary means of teaching involved a variety of written, print-based texts (some were interactive, taking place on a discussion board while others were static, meant for consumption by students), videos demonstrating elements of print-based texts (such as handouts and assignment directions), and talking head style videos. My communication methods were not much more varied. I communicated weekly with a general written course announcement to all students, responded to individual emails, and periodically used an instant messenger when initiated by students. While I did not consider myself a poor communicator, I made too many assumptions about my students and failed to recognize how integral they are to establishing who I am as the teacher of our online course.

While my activities as the teacher may have helped some students, a more varied approach to course design, pedagogy, and communication methods with students has yielded improved results. While only students can envision the teacher, some strategic communicative decisions by the teacher can enhance students' ability to create a richer sense of who the teacher of the course is. The following strategies can increase the opportunities for students to form a connection with the teacher and to decrease the transactional distance between them.

7.1. The role of frequent communication

Whereas a f2f class meets regularly, online students do not have guaranteed, regular interaction with their teacher. To offset the isolating effects of an online class, teachers can strive to communicate more regularly and more informally

⁴ Just as Ong (1975) reminded us that a writer's audience is always a fiction.

with students, thus lessening the transactional distance between student and teacher (Moore, 1993, p. 24–25). While general communication with all students is a good first step, personalizing the communication with individual students, particularly through informal interactions, can decrease relational and transactional distance. A teacher might consider contacting students through email, instant messenger, or even video chat, demonstrating to students that the teacher is personally interested and invested in each student and providing students with a chance to have an individualized dialogue with the teacher. The more frequent those interactions, the more opportunities students will have to share personal experiences with the teacher, which will strengthen the bond between them.

7.2. Increase possibilities for students to make meaning

The formation of a more complex perception of their teacher can help students to develop a connection with her (Erskine, 2012, p. 108; Peter Shea, Karen Swan, Chun Sau Li, and Andrea Pickett, 2005, p. 60). While more frequent communication can help students to sense the level of interest a teacher has in the online course, varying the modes and media of the teaching materials within a course can provide additional ways for students to access not only the content of the course, but also alternate ways for students to create meaning (Gunther Kress, 2009). As I explained earlier, online teaching often emphasizes the linguistic mode through written text. Providing only one option for learning the course content puts students who prefer different modes (or media) at a disadvantage. If a teacher wants to use a written text as a lecture, an alternate format of explaining the same concept should also be provided (video is often the go-to, but an audio-based text would work well, too—as could an image-based text). If the teacher does not offer multiple means of engagement through multiple media, emphasizing different communication modalities, the teacher will likely struggle to reach students in an authentic way. An online teacher can help students to better construct meaning by providing multiple formats of texts for them to interpret.

Providing alternate communication methods can help some students to construct a clearer sense of the teacher. Whether it is communicating with students through short video announcements (done in conjunction with a written announcement) to the entire class at specific time intervals (like a weekly review announcement) or through individualized audio feedback to student work within the class (through an annotated PDF), multiple ways to develop meaning makes it more likely that the student's perception will be richer and more complex, offering multiple opportunities to form a connection with the teacher. Judith Szerdahelyi (2008) and other online teachers have worked within new genres of teaching materials to enhance the text-based materials that are regularly used throughout online classes, such as the video syllabus, to communicate with students using varied modalities and media, moving beyond written text to provide additional opportunities for students to create meaning in ways they otherwise could not, which can be particularly useful when trying to figure out who the teacher of the course is.

7.3. Share yourself with your students

A teacher's humanity is invisible in an online course, but through the purposeful use of multiple modes of communication, there is less to imagine, resulting in a more realistic sense of who that teacher is. Multimedia texts that emphasize modes beyond the linguistic can narrow transactional and relational distance. While communicating personal information with students through a written introduction is a good start, as in hobbies or other aspects of one's personal life, other clues a student might gather from such a bio could be heightened if that information was shared through the video medium. For example, when a teacher talks directly to the students in a "talking-head" style video, the student can see and hear the teacher, and can observe the teacher's appearance and gestures. Instantly, tone is more recognizable and less likely to be misunderstood. While there is the potential that a video will minimize dialogue between students and teacher, the clues that students can take away from a video outweigh those risks. When creating such videos or audio recordings, mistakes made during recording can provide clues for students that otherwise would be absent in another format of a text, letting students see how the teacher reacts to her own mistakes (as is often the case in a f2f class). I recognize that some instructors may prefer to not make mistakes in front of students, or would prefer to remain anonymous to students. However, there is a great benefit to slip-ups. They show students a level of humanity that is not possible in a highly edited video or written text.

Additionally, the environment that a video is shot in can help students to fill in the gaps of the teacher's presence in their own mind with details of what the teacher is like. For example, Jason Snart (2013) created a video welcome announcement of himself situated within his office, that lets students to note elements of his personality through their

interpretation of his surroundings. These seemingly insignificant aspects of a text could offer some insight into a teacher's personality, providing students with clues to who the teacher is that otherwise would not be perceptible.

7.4. *Decreased relational distance can decrease transactional distance*

Students' level of interest and attitude towards the course material will affect their reading of the course texts along with their interest and motivation for participating in the course. Teachers should provide students with opportunities to develop a personal investment in the course through developing relationships with others in the class, which can be enough to increase a student's interest level in the course itself. In my own online first-year composition classes, students regularly tell me how they dislike writing and writing classes, but by personally responding to each student, providing opportunities for them to dialogue individually with me, we form a relationship in which they recognize my investment in the course, and more importantly, my investment in them and their success.

This relationship between teacher and student and between students themselves can provide an additional reason for a student to stick with the online course. As [Erskine \(2012\)](#) explained, relational distance "will surely impact factors such as commitment, satisfaction, and performance" (p. 108). Decreasing that separation, specifically through multiple and frequent methods of communicating and interacting with students can help to enhance a teacher's presence, which assists students to form a relationship with the teacher through common, shared experiences. While student investment in the topic of the course will not always be likely, a teacher's awareness of relational distance may help the teacher to increase options for how a student may engage with the online course.

The key for a student to feel confident and connect to the teacher is that a relationship is developed which fosters trust and rapport. As trust and rapport grow, students become less isolated, and are able to more readily reach out to the instructor if need be. Within the past semester, one student of mine who struggled with writing, but also had major technological problems early in the semester, had considered dropping the course. He communicated these issues with me, and through conversations about his initial challenges, he became more comfortable contacting me throughout the semester as other problems arose. In an email sent to me at the end of the course, he noted "Thank you for dealing with me struggling through all this!" This is one instance in which comfort in communicating with me helped him to stick with the class and to overcome challenges that otherwise would have resulted in his dropping out (which he admitted to me he had done multiple times before in other online writing classes).

8. Conclusion

Online, students and teacher both struggle to conceptualize each other. For teachers, as it is for students, it is a challenge to envision who each other is and what they are like. While teaching a class of unidentified individuals can be a challenge, the repercussions can be more severe for students if they cannot establish a vision of the teacher's persona. In reality, it can be this persona and an ensuing connection with that teacher that could be the difference between a student completing the course or dropping it. However, unless multiple modes and media are used to provide students with possibilities of creating the teacher's presence, some students will be at a disadvantage to connect with the teacher. Providing students with purposefully varied interactions can help students to develop a more realistic perception of who the teacher is, creating a stronger sense of a teacher's presence, and solidifying a strong bond between student and teacher, all of which can help the student succeed. This relationship is incredibly powerful; as [Debra Purdy \(2015\)](#) noted, there is no significant learning without a significant relationship. However, teachers have to keep in mind that for each online student, the teacher's presence will be slightly different, just as no two readings of any text will result in the same meaning ([Beach, 1993](#), p. 31; [Fish, 1980](#), p. 78). Each student has varying experiences and interest levels, and by considering each student as an individual, with unique needs, a teacher may more effectively provide opportunities for all students to access the content of the class.

Just as all readers may not have a specific interest in any given text, not all students will have an interest in one specific class, but if the teacher can create a way for students to access the class, to connect the goals of the class with their own interests, then more students have a better opportunity at connecting with the teacher. This connection, between teacher and student, is important because, as [William Finlay, Christy Desmet, and Loraine Evans \(2004\)](#) explained: "student participation is influenced by the same factors that we believe shape student learning: instructor interaction with students, availability for help and innovativeness in the classroom, student autonomy in the classroom, and knowledge of what they need to do to succeed" (p. 167). These elements of the class context are developed

through interactions with the teacher, which can be aided or impeded by the student's perception of who that teacher is. For online teachers, the relationship with students through shared experiences can do more to enhance a student's perception of a teacher than could any action on the part of just the teacher. To help students establish a sense of the teacher, creating a course that communicates in ways other than just written text provides the opportunities necessary for all students—not just students who are excellent readers of written text.

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