

Reimagining and Fostering Presence in Online Courses

Topics: Professional learning

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Abstract

Teaching and learning during the Covid-19 pandemic was greatly disrupted. Efforts by lecturers to continue to support their students during this time focused on the need to incorporate (and learn how to use) various technologies for learning and teaching. Many lecturers and students complained that this period resulted in reduced humanised interactions. A focus on adapting classroom pedagogies for remote learning, together with the many challenges' students faced during this time, meant that the "presence" of the lecturer was not felt by many students. Students also struggled to feel that they were part of an online learning community. The aim of this conceptual paper is to discuss considerations for fostering presence and community in online courses within a South African higher education context. As a learning designer, I had to support the professional learning of academics during Covid-19. This paper is influenced by my experiences over the past two years. The Community of Inquiry framework (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001) is used as a basis to highlight the need for teacher, cognitive and social presence. The importance of adopting a pedagogy of care (Noddings, 2012) to enable the development of a learning community is also considered. Building upon the work of Pacansky-Brock (2021), fostering presence requires making first impressions count, getting to know your students, humanising interactions, and creating opportunities for interactions. Fostering a caring community presence can help to counter feelings of isolation for students and help them to succeed in their studies. It is recognised that there is a need for continued online components as part of university learning and teaching going forward, which requires shifts in pedagogies and lecturers to be able to teach in blended or online learning environments. Adopting a caring community perspective may assist lecturers to be more resilient, responsive, and relevant in a shifting higher education context.

Questions for engagement at the conference are: 1) How do we, as academics, humanise our interactions in blended learning spaces in a South African context? 2) How do we, as academics, foster a sense of community in blended learning spaces in a South African context?

Keywords: learning community, online presence, pedagogy of care