

Effective Learning Environments in Higher Education Online Settings

Establishing Social Presence



Karen Moroz | Trish Harvey | Jennifer Carlson

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A volume in
Contemporary Perspectives on Learning Environments
Erin A. Mikulec and Hayriye Kayi-Aydar, *Series Editors*
Paul Chamness Iida (*in memoriam*)

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Defining Online Learning Environments

Educators are passionate about their content; their goal, always, is to share that passion with students and to provide education that allows students to engage with information in a manner that honors the rich content of their chosen field. To that end, pedagogy (the method and practice of teaching young learners) and andragogy (the method and practice of teaching adult learners) have long been areas of research that receive much attention as educators work to determine how to deliver content in ways that allow students to mentally construct knowledge through engagement. Historically, the majority of effective pedagogy and andragogy research has focused on face-to-face (F2F) learning environments; with the increase of online programming, however, it is essential that the same type of commitment to creating communities of engaged learners exist for online platforms with instructors working to determine how to best share content in a manner that fully engages learners, inviting them to construct knowledge and to participate fully.

Indeed, educators and educational stakeholders must work to meet the needs of all students regardless of delivery modality because as stated by

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Dimeo (2017), “In Fall 2015, 2.9 million students took all courses online and 3.1 million took at least one class online” (para. 6). These numbers help illustrate that while overall college enrollment keeps decreasing, of those students who matriculate, the rate of online enrollment continues to increase steadily (Seaman et al., 2018). It is critical, then, that online learning no longer be looked at as a “back up” when traditional teaching environments are not available or as a necessary evil to attract students, but instead that they are designed and delivered in ways that spur new learning, engagement with fellow learners, and professional growth.

In this book we, the authors, each with years of teaching in higher education, share research and methods designed to accomplish those goals. The book guides faculty, instructional designers, and administrators in developing high-quality online instruction, focusing on tools, strategies, standards, and goals. This book, *Effective Learning Environments in Higher Education Online Settings: Establishing Social Presence*, is based on the premise that online learning environments need to be more completely defined, improved, and enhanced if they are to meet students’ needs. There is no denying that online learning is unique. We are keenly aware that online learning is not for everyone or for every situation and that the motivation and effectiveness of all involved is largely impacted by the nature by which one comes to an online classroom including whether one enrolls in the course by choice or by necessity and the surrounding life circumstances (i.e., part of a robust undergraduate college experience). As the uniqueness and potential of strong online instruction is unpacked, our experience of improving as online instructors and the research that allows all interested in intentionally creating effective and affective online learning environments rich in social presence to thrive becomes evident.

Chapter 1 provides an explanation of this book’s importance as it responds to the question, “What is an effective online learning environment?” and discusses the history of online courses and the increased availability and need for online learning as heightened by the COVID-19 pandemic while addressing the “Why?” in the need for understanding contemporary approaches for exemplary online teaching with the establishment of social presence. It is important to note that while the terms online and distant were used consistently and usually interchangeably throughout the COVID-19 crisis, in most situations for both students and teachers what was actually occurring was *emergency remote teaching* (ERT). ERT is defined by Hodges et al. (2020) as “a temporary shift of instructional delivery . . . [involving] the use of fully remote teaching solutions for instruction . . . [where] The primary objective . . . is not to recreate a robust educational ecosystem but rather to provide temporary access to instruction and instructional support

in a manner that is quick to set up and is reliably available during an emergency or crisis” (p. 10). Indeed, while Spring 2020 faculty worked to deliver content and to remain connected, the facets of effective online teaching including intentional research-based course development and explicit use of practices that have been proven to create social presence in online environments were, due to time constraints, experience, and the intense stress individuals were experiencing not consistently employed. Therefore, virtual, distance, elearning, online, hybrid, and blended learning were at the forefront of discussions but many of those discussions were based on people’s newly found perception and experience of online teaching and learning, one that was distorted by the stressors and emergency nature of the online delivery.

Situating Institutional Understanding of Online Teaching

The impact of COVID-19 on online learning will be unknown for many years. The move to remote emergency learning by K–12 and higher education institutions was a dramatic shift in course delivery for many classrooms. It was a dramatic shift in delivery for many instructors. In some instances, the experiences in 2020 will help educators, students, families, and administrators realize the potential that online learning has to be student-centered and efficient. While these benefits definitely exist, unfortunately the experiences of many educators, students, families and administrators during 2020 could have lasting negative ramifications for online learning. The lack of training, quality assurances, and preparedness to teach online resulted in disorganization, data privacy issues, lack of equity, accessibility issues, and limited ways for students to engage in course content. The hesitancy by some instructors to embrace technology pre-COVID-19 resulted in sparsely developed digital toolboxes and a lack of confidence. As stated previously, even calling the 2020 experience “online learning” is not an accurate description of what took place. RET best describes the situation for classrooms that were not prepared to make the shift to online learning.

While this pandemic-initiated RET presented real academic challenges that must continue to be explored and discussed, the unique situation it presented to the educational system also provided educators with an opportunity to look at the courses currently being taught online and to more fully understand what online learning is and is not. Table 1.1 illustrates the overarching principles of online learning as compared to blended and F2F instruction and a systematic literature review for definitions of online learning, yielded Vandana and Thurman’s (2019) conclusion that the term