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Instructor Visibility in Online Courses

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Abstract

Participants in an online course are visible when they take actions online that other participants in the course can see. In this paper we discuss the notion of instructor visibility and using visibility effectively. We base this discussion on our experience delivering a graduate degree in information systems by asynchronous learning network (ALN). Students in this program never attend a face-to-face class but interact extensively with instructors and fellow students.

Being Visible Online

We are using an Asynchronous Learning Network (ALN) to offer a graduate degree in information systems. Students in this program never need to come to campus since all course activities take place over the Internet. However, our courses are not self-paced, individual learning experiences. Our design is to use the ALN to emphasize interaction among the participants [Hislop, 1997a]. Our students are information systems professionals who work full time and attend school part time. Figure 1 shows a profile of student characteristics (n = 66).

As can be seen from the profile, our students bring a great deal of relevant experience to the degree program. In addition, many of them have a prior I/T degree of some sort. On the other hand, most of them have been away from school for quite a while.

Instructor visibility is a key element in creating the type of online degree we are delivering to these students. In traditional classes students expect to see the instructor during class and during some defined set of office hours. It is part of the synchronous nature of communication in traditional classes that students do not expect much access to the instructor outside of those times. For an asynchronous class, the expectations are considerably different. Students do not expect the instructor to be online all the time, but they do expect the instructor to participate quite frequently.

Average age	37
Average years of full-time work experience	14
Prior information technology degree (%)	
Yes	46
No	54
Average years since last degree	11

Figure 1. Student Characteristics

This change in student expectation matches the shift in course activity when you adopt an asynchronous model. By the very nature of the asynchronous approach student activity spreads out much more than the bursts of interaction characteristic of traditional, synchronous classes. Instructors have to adjust their working style to match that shift to a continuous flow of activity.

Frequency of Instructor Participation

The instructor's role in an online course starts with a student need for regular reassurance that, indeed, the instructor is there and listening. Of course, in the role of guide the instructor's participation must extend far beyond just demonstrating presence. The online equivalent of "I see." will work as a response occasionally, but for the most part the instructor must be contributing substantively to the online conversation.

There are no fixed rules on level of instructor participation except for being regular, frequent, and generally substantive. Roxanne Hiltz [Hiltz94] alludes to the "perpetual professor" to describe the participation of ALN instructors. Our experience has been that most ALN instructors seem to participate about four or five times each week on average. We have had successful courses with an instructor participating as few as three days each week, and other courses in which instructors participated almost daily. The variation seems to be due to instructor style, nature of the material, and perhaps class size.

We should note too that participation in this sense means that you are posting items that the whole class can see. In an online environment you are only visible by what you post. Checking the status of a class without posting anything is fine, but you need to be mindful that from a student's perspective you are only there when you post something.

This visibility of instructor postings is also a consideration if you are sending email to individual students. There are times when this is a desirable approach (discussed further below), but you need to remember that the rest of the class does not see these postings.

Post course evaluations from several course sections [Hislop, 1997b] provide some insight into student impression about instructor visibility (n=44):

- All of the students felt that the instructor was accessible (100%).
- 40% of the students felt that they communicated more with the instructor than they would have in a traditional class. Another 28% felt that the level of communication was about the same.

Schedule of Instructor Participation

Instructors as well as students benefit from the flexibility of asynchronous learning. While there is a requirement to participate frequently, the burden of doing that is offset somewhat by having some flexibility in picking the time to participate. Still, the need to participate regularly does limit the instructor's flexibility. It is difficult for an instructor to skip more than a day or two days at most without creating an impression of being "missing in action."

Instructors also need to schedule their participation in response to the pattern of student activity. Left to their own devices, students tend to participate mostly on weekends and toward the end of each activity window of the course [Andriole, 1995]. Getting students to change this pattern is one of the challenges of teaching online, and typically requires explicit instructor action and monitoring. Even with attempts to change this pattern, some of these effects are likely to remain visible in student activity. In order to be in the thick of the action, instructors need to align their activity with the student pattern. Many instructors find it helpful to work with the class sometime during the weekend. When this is not possible, it is prudent to at least participate just before and just after the weekend.

While these considerations limit the flexibility an instructor has in scheduling participation, it does not eliminate it. Over the course of a week, an instructor can easily pick several days on which she or he does not participate. In addition, instructors are generally quite free to pick the time of day at which they deal with their online class. Moreover, the choice of days of the week and time of day can vary as desired from week to week.

Participation Rhythm Across a Term

Regular and frequent participation every week of the term is the basic pattern for instructor participation. This requirement is no different than the expectation of weekly scheduled class meetings in a traditional class except that the activity spreads out across the week instead of being on particular days. However, just as in a traditional class, there are times when the instructor's participation has more impact. The same considerations determine when these times occur in an online course as in a traditional course, but as with many analogous aspects of online courses, the instructor should think through the implications of the online environment. The paragraphs below discuss times where instructor impact is high in any online course.

First week – Since there is no scheduled first class meeting, the instructor needs to be active during the first week to help get the class started. Students taking their first online class tend to be both eager and anxious about getting started. Their natural impulse seems to be to wait for the instructor to do something before they start. Students who have taken several classes seem to become somewhat blasé. They fall out of the habit of regular participation during term breaks, and may need some push to get started again. In short, the instructor's early participation needs to signal the start of the term.

Last week -- Since there is no scheduled last class meeting, there is a danger that online classes will simply sputter to a halt rather than having a clearly defined ending. The instructor's participation in the last week is key to creating a good sense of closure for the course.

Transition points – The considerations for starting and ending the class in the first and last week of the term also apply in smaller scale to the transition points within the course. A routine part of the instructor's participation should be to help move the class smoothly into and out of each phase of class activity.

After Tests and Assignments – All students like prompt feedback on their work. If anything, being online seems to make students value prompt feedback even more.

Being Invisible

While instructors need to be very visible throughout the course, there are some situations where instructor visibility is not the only consideration. For some course activities invisibility may be a better choice.

Private feedback – Students' work can be more public in the online environment. In our program students see each other's assignments and review each other's work regularly. Students may also see comments by the instructor about another student's work. We believe that the opportunity for this sort of interaction is one of the strengths online courses can offer.

At the same time, we want the online experience to be positive. For instance, constructive criticism centered on course content can be a very positive experience. But there are times when instructors must deal with more difficult issues such as poor performance or inappropriate behavior. In situations like these, a public airing of the issue will not enhance anyone's course experience. Instructors should switch to some form of private communication, such as email or phone to deliver these messages.

Discussion dominance – Instructor participation in discussion requires a particularly careful touch. Students remember who assigns their grades, and that always sets the tone in discussions. Instructors need to be careful to guide but not dominate discussions. It is difficult, but important, for instructors to balance between letting students take the discussion in new directions but not letting things get too far off track.

Similarly, discussions can be much more interesting when participants present opposing points of view. However, instructors need to pick their battles carefully – not because they can only win a few of them, but because they will hardly lose any of them. Few students will oppose an instructor's view for more than an exchange or two before heartily endorsing the instructor's position. This is no different than in a traditional class, but the impact is greater since online classes tend to depend more on active participation by students.

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