Book Chapter

Establishing and Maintaining Effective Online Instructor Presence: Graduate Student Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper reports on the factors that establish and maintain effective instructor presence as articulated by 15 graduate students at an R1 university. This study relies on the theoretical premise that instructor presence is established through design and organization, facilitated discourse, and directed instruction, as described in the teaching presence component of the Community of Inquiry framework. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews, an open-ended survey, and a focus group were completed. The data collected was examined using inductive and deductive content analysis. Unexpected themes identified include creating course satisfaction and trust from day one and establishing a positive student mindset. Anticipated themes included effective instructor presence creates trust, engagement, investment, and less stress, and the instructor is a visible, connected, and engaged human. Implications and recommendations for future research are provided.

Keywords

Instructor Presence; Teaching Presence; Online Education; Online Learning; Online Learners; Graduate Students

Introduction

The benefits of effective online instructor presence are well-established in the academic literature. The current research literature reports that as the demand for engaging online learning environments [1] and high-quality interactive instruction continues to increase, an improved understanding of learner perspectives regarding online education [2] and instructor presence is of great importance.

The current research literature has explored the relationships between instructor presence and academic performance [3], satisfaction [4,5], online student engagement behaviors [6], and establishment of a community of inquiry [7,8]. Other scholars have examined instructor presence effectiveness through the lens of individual instructional strategies, including online forums [9], video [10], microlearning [11], and gamification [12], as well as investigating the connection between instructor presence and learners' perceived social and cognitive presence, as well as improved opportunities for collaborative learning [13].

However, while prior research has examined the influence of online learning on student opinions and attitudes [14], limited qualitative inquiry exists into graduate students' perceptions of instructor presence, practices, and associated challenges and issues [2]. By analyzing the significant factors required to establish and maintain an effective online instructor presence, as articulated by graduate students, we will gain vital insights into what instructional strategies work well, why, how those approaches are best delivered, and what instructional presence issues remain. Essentially, according to graduate learners, what makes online instructor presence effective and valuable?

Literature Review
Instructor Presence

Instructor presence can be defined as a way of designing, facilitating, and directing cognitive and social processes to achieve personal and educational value [15]. Online instructor presence determines students' performance [16], engagement behaviors [17], and learning satisfaction [18,19], the latter of which has been shown to influence students' intention to continue to use online learning [5].

As shown in the academic literature, instructor presence influences academic performance [3], learning efficacy [20], learner satisfaction [21], online student engagement behaviors [6], and the formation of a community of inquiry [8,22], which promotes students' perceived social and cognitive presence and creates collaborative learning [13].

Instructor presence, or teaching presence, as it was introduced in the three-part Community of Inquiry model [23] and is defined as "the design, facilitation, and direction of [student] cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes" [15]. Teaching presence is aimed at designing, facilitating, and directing social and cognitive presence to achieve expected learning outcomes [23,24].

Online Learning

According to Wang and Liu [8], requirements for online instructor presence are more stringent than that needed in a traditional, face-to-face classroom environment. Those requirements can include students' perceptions of the quality of communication in lectures, directions, and individual feedback [25,26].

It is important to note that multiple factors impact the experiences of online students [27,28], including many aspects of instructor presence. This includes planning and design before the course begins, how the instructor interacts with students, and

how the instructor responds to different circumstances [2]. Van Wart, Ni, and Media [2] determined that instructors who put more work into effective online teaching will see increased demand for those courses above the standard national trajectory recorded over the past decade.

Learner Opinions

According to Young [29], student opinions of instruction are reliable, valid, and useful in enhancing teaching practice. Such perspectives supply a critical, personal lens into student assumptions, beliefs, and experiences [30], which is vital when implementing new instructional approaches and introducing new technologies [2].

Theoretical Framework

Garrison et al. [23] proposed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework theory, comprised of three interdependent elements, social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence [31]. Each element works together to create a deep and meaningful learning experience [23].
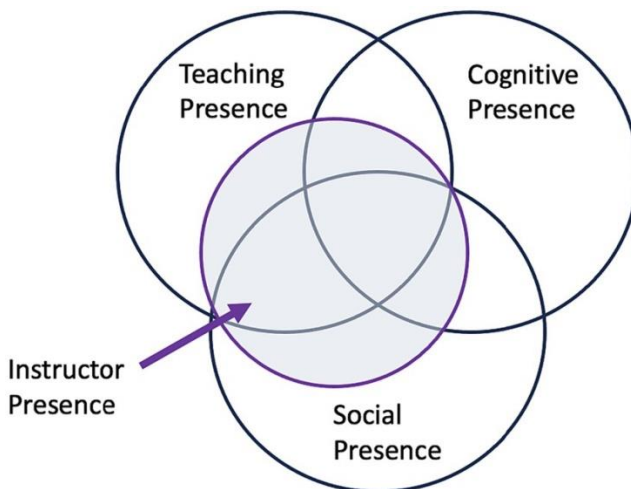
Figure 1: The Community of Inquiry Framework and Presences.

Social presence represents learners' capability to interact socially and emotionally with others in a community of inquiry [49]. Cognitive presence is characterized by the degree to which learners use communication, critical discourse, and reflection to create meaning [23]. The teaching presence component directs and guides both the cognitive and social processes [23] and is essential for the establishment and maintenance of a successful community of inquiry [22,50].

Research Question

In this study, we aim to answer the following question: What do students articulate as significant factors in establishing and maintaining an effective online instructor presence? Concerning the guiding question, it is important to clarify that this study focuses on the teaching presence component of the CoI framework theory. The instructor presence element encompasses three dimensions: design and organization, facilitation, and direct instruction [16,32].

Methods
Approach

The study was carried out using a qualitative approach, as it captures the patterns and processes of human experiences, views, opinions, and behaviors [33] versus the use of statistical inquiry and exploration [34]. At the heart of qualitative research is the search for and identification of themes and patterns that can be challenging to enumerate [33].

This project began with discussions between the authors about the role of instructor presence in online asynchronous courses. Author#1 began this study with a desire to know how graduate school learners define effective instructor presence and how these learners describe and perceive effective instructor presence through their own experiences.

As there are multiple ways to approach how graduate-level learners identify and articulate evidence of effective instructor presence strategies, she conferred with Author #2 to design a

project that could answer this question using qualitative methods. While these discussions continued, the researchers revised the main research question several times until the most suitable study question was identified.

Participants

The study participants (Table 1) were graduate students (n=15) enrolled in a 100% online instructional technology program at an R1 university in the southeastern United States. All students were enrolled in at least one online IT course during the Fall 2022 semester and had completed at least one IT course before the Fall 2022 semester. Among the students, 20% (n = 3) were men and 80% (n = 12) were women. The duration of the study was approximately nine weeks.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Participants.

Number of Participants	15 graduate students
Gender	3 male, 12 female
Age Distribution	20% = 25-34 33% = 35-44 27% = 45-54 20% = 55+
Student Status	Part-time

Participant Recruitment and Selection

Author #1 obtained IRB approval to conduct the research before participant recruitment began. To recruit participants, Author #1 emailed all graduate students enrolled in the instructional technology master's degree program at an R1 university and invited them to participate if they met the criteria (i.e., a student in good standing at the R1 university, completion of one course in the instructional technology master's degree program, and currently enrolled in one course in the instructional technology master's degree program during the semester in which the study was being conducted).

If a learner responded to the initial email indicating they fit the criteria of the study and were interested in participating, Author #1 replied by email and delivered more information on study participation and the consent document. Before signing their consent forms, participants were given the chance to ask questions about the study and their participation. Over nine weeks, 15 graduate students took part in the study.

While all 15 students participated in the semi-structured interviews, time limitations and schedule conflicts resulted in some students participating in the subsequent survey and focus group more than others. Ten students participated in the open-ended survey and four students participated in the focus group.

Data Collection Tools

To examine the factors that participants identify as significant in establishing and maintaining an effective online instructor presence, we conducted semi-structured interviews, an open-ended survey, and a focus group (Table 2). During each data collection segment of the study, participants were asked to articulate their insights, observations, and experiences related to effective instructor presence methods, strategies, and behaviors in online courses at the R1 university.

Table 2: Data Sources.

Semi-Structured Interviews	n=15	13 questions
Open Ended Survey	n=10	11 questions
Focus Group	n=4	5 questions

Semi-Structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were used in this study to gather rich and in-depth data [51] on effective instructor presence. Before conducting the semi-structured interviews on Zoom, the authors created predetermined, open-ended questions (Appendix A) which were asked of every participant. As the data collection method was semi-structured, during the interview, the authors adapted to the participants' responses. The authors were able to ask probing questions and got to know the individual participants on a more personal level, which is valuable for the current study and future research [35]. As outlined in the consent form, the interviews were video and audio recorded. The length of each interview was approximately 30-45 minutes.

Ten of the interview's 13 semi-structured questions were based on the 13-item teaching presence instrument utilized by Arbaugh et al. [36] and Zhang [17]. Table 3 shows the breakdown of interview questions according to the Community of Inquiry's three teaching presence dimensions. The additional three semi-structured interview questions (one, two, and 13), related to defining and articulating effective teaching presence, make up the fourth dimension, Shaping Instructor Presence.

Table 3: Teaching Presence Dimensions and Interview Questions.

Course Design and Organization	Facilitating Discourse	Direct Instruction	Shaping Instructor Presence
Q 3, 4, 5	Q 6, 7, 8	Q 9, 10, 11, 12	Q 1, 2, 13

Survey

The survey (Appendix B) was used as a data collection tool after the 15 semi-structured interviews were completed and analyzed. By conducting the survey post-analysis, the authors gained insights into the participants' views and opinions and were better prepared to plan and conduct the survey [35]. The survey's open-ended questions were administered through Qualtrics to ensure the data's anonymity and security.

The open-ended survey questions, while based loosely on the 13-item instructor presence instrument [17,36], also focused on

effective instructor presence behaviors and the related effects on learners. Survey question 1 asked participants to identify specific behaviors and actions that make online instructor presence effective. Question 3 asked participants to list examples of effective instructor presence. Questions 4, 5, and 6 related to the impact of effective instructor presence on participants' behavior and feelings.

Survey questions 7 and 8 relate to questions 1–4, respectively, of the 13-item teaching presence instrument, which represents the Course Design and Organization dimension [15]. Survey question 2 relates to items 7 and 9 of the 13-item instrument representing the Facilitating Discourse dimension (2001). Survey question 9 was aligned with item 13 of the 13-item instrument, which is part of the Direct Instruction dimension (2001).

Focus Group

The focus group (Appendix C) lasted one hour and was conducted with four participants. Four to seven participants are standard for focus group data collection to gain additional insights into the participants' viewpoints and perceptions [37] related to effective instructor presence strategies and methods in courses. The length of the focus group was approximately one hour.

The focus group was used as a data collection tool after the 10 surveys were completed and analyzed to better structure the participant questions. By conducting the focus group after analyzing the survey replies, the authors were better able to create targeted focus group questions to clarify and gain more detailed responses.

Data Analysis

Transcripts from the semi-structured interviews were analyzed using inductive and deductive content analysis. Transcripts from the focus group and the text document from the open-ended survey were analyzed using inductive content analysis. In the deductive analysis, the teaching presence component of the CoI

framework and its three dimensions, social, behavioral, emotional, and cognitive were adopted: Course Design and Organization, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction.

Author #1 transcribed the interview and focus group audio files verbatim using Rev.com. Participants' responses to the open-ended survey were exported from Qualtrics into a text document. Following an inductive approach to coding, Author #1 and Author # 2 reviewed the transcripts and text document for accuracy and read the transcripts and text document to become familiar with the data.

The transcripts and the text document were analyzed using inductive and deductive content analysis. Inductive coding was used to identify codes, categories, and themes from the data [38,39]. In the deductive analysis, the three teaching presence dimensions from the CoI framework, Course Design and Organization, Facilitating Discourse, and Direct Instruction were adopted.

The data were coded manually and with NVivo, a qualitative data analysis software tool. Throughout data analysis, Author #1 and Author #2 independently coded the transcripts and text document and met weekly to discuss codes and apply cross-case analysis. Cross-case analysis allows authors to locate and discuss similarities and differences articulated by the participants [39] regarding their perceptions of effective online instructor presence. To determine the final codes used in the data analysis, the authors met to examine, discuss, and resolve any discrepancies to reach a 100% consensus [40]. After coding, the data was examined for patterns and subsequent themes to answer the study's research question.

Table 3 shows inductively generated themes for the three instructor presence dimensions, in addition to a fourth and fifth category, Shaping Instructor Presence and Disconnected Instructor Presence. The table's purpose is to show the themes and codes related to each teaching presence dimension. These themes are connected in the Results section, where these themes are reinforced by participant explanations and quotations.

Results

Based on the analysis of 15 interviews, ten surveys, and one focus group, the findings are broken down by data collection method to answer the research question: What do students articulate as significant factors in establishing and maintaining an effective online instructor presence? Based on past literature, some themes were anticipated in response to the research question. Other themes were unexpected.

Findings From the Semi-Structured Interview

Several themes emerged in relation to the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A). The resulting themes, as seen in Table 4, are: (1) The instructor connects early and often, (2) The instructor is visible, connected, and engaged, (3) The instructor builds trust and sets the stage for learning, and (4) Disconnected instructor presence results in students feeling overwhelmed and anxious.

Several participants described the significance of not just learning content but learning new skills applicable to learners' jobs and lives (n=8) and the need to have assignments that push them out of their comfort zone (n=4). Additionally, it was pointed out that scaffolding is crucial for deep comprehension with new information building on earlier information everything builds off the week prior (n=7). One participant commented:

I can look at the modules and I can look at sort of the goal of each section. And I feel pretty confident that I could. Based on how is organized tell you, okay, this is what they want me to get out of this course.

Table 4: Semi-Structured Interview categories, themes, and codes.

Category	Themes	Codes
Course Design and Organization	*Setting the stage for learning*	Structure and organization Assignments that help me learn Consistency Meaningful content with depth and variety Discussion boards Navigation Objectives
Facilitating Discourse	*Connect early and often*	Continuous communication Ease of accessibility Guidance Listening to students Peer interaction Prompt replies See and hear instructor
Direct Instruction	*Provide expert, real-world instruction*	Feedback Trust Guidance as an expert Optional synchronous online meetings
Shaping Effective Instructor Presence	*Instructor is a visible, connected, and engaged human*	Values student success Set the stage for learning with personality and style Instructor is present and engaged Relationship and connection See and hear instructor
Disconnected Instructor Presence	*Disconnected instructor presence results in overwhelm and anxiety*	Delayed or no feedback Ineffective and disconnected Little instruction or few expectations Learner stress, overwhelm, and anxiety

Several of the participants (n =13) voiced that content depth and variety are extremely helpful as a learner. Many participants

voiced that more than a textbook was needed to understand and digest the course material, describing that the use of video, podcasts, articles, visuals, and short summaries provide different perspectives on a particular topic. One participant explained:

I could like go for a walk right, and listen rather than just like sitting more. I can read the notes for this or I can listen to it and I absorb things better if I read them than if I just hear them.

Connect Early and Often. In their descriptions of Facilitating Discourse, several of the participants (n=11) indicated that continuous communication is necessary for students to be successful in online courses. Many participants (n=7) described that weekly videos from the faculty helped them connect to the course material and the instructor, along with course announcements and group or individual emails. One participant commented:

I think those weekly videos are a good place to address misconceptions from the past week or like, yeah, I noticed several of you made the same error in this assignment. Here's a different way of thinking about it

Visibility of the instructor or being able to see and hear the instructor and view the instructor's style and personality was viewed by many participants (n=12) as a crucial part of a successful, satisfying online learning experience. Visibility also included an instructor who interacts, pays attention to the students' needs, and is present in the course. One participant described:

Being able see the faces of the professors makes things really easier to go through. It makes you feel more confident and actually makes it easier to communicate with your professors. the instructor does a weekly recording of themselves, kind of going over the material. So you still get to see their face, you still get to interact with them.

Most participants (n=12) indicated that encouragement and support of peer interaction is needed to create an online community. One participant explained:

Then, you react and see all the other students and their stuff. Then, you've kind of built a relationship with the students in the course. Some may have 14, some may have 20 students, but you built a relationship with all of them.

Additionally, participants (n=10) emphasized that ease of communication with and accessibility to the instructor as important factors. Participants (n=10) also described that they enjoyed autonomy in online courses but desired the ability to reach out to the instructor and receive a prompt reply. Most participants (n=10) expected an instructor's reply within 24 hours. Participants also felt less stress in an online course if they believed they could reach out to an instructor with no repercussions. One participant shared:

I think is just the responsiveness of an instructor. if someone is able to respond to me within 24 hours, I'm pretty much like, oh wow, that's awesome.

Provide expert, real-world instruction. All participants (n=15) mentioned that quick, constructive, and detailed feedback created trust and was necessary for deep learning. Participants (n=8) preferred feedback that conveyed positivity, and encouragement, and provided specific information on improving the quality of a submission. Several participants (n=5) emphasized that they felt less anxiety and more trust if the instructor conveyed constructive feedback in a way that was not negative and shared that mistakes are part of the learning process and it provides an opportunity for growth, not punishment. One participant commented:

I know he will tell me if something is good or not good. So I trust that he will provide me with good information. And he always does.

One participant responded:

So, the having the opportunity to do a rough draft, get feedback and turn it in is invaluable to me. It. It gives you the opportunity to show what you already know, but it's a safe place to mess up. And I really do find that I learn more from mistakes than from what I did right.

Participants (n=12) also enjoyed the option of well-spaced, synchronous online meetings that provided valuable information and instruction. Participants expressed that synchronous meetings allowed them to share ideas and work and interact with peers. It was important that these optional meetings were organized, constructive, provided value, and didn't waste participants' time. One participant responded:

I love that Zoom optional presence with the caveat of it needs to be meaningful and effective and not just doing it to say that we're doing it.

One participant described this:

I personally love optional Zoom meetings. I understand maybe not meeting one every single week, but just even every couple of weeks to do a little check-in.

It was also expressed by participants (n=11) that they desired an expert instructor, both in the synchronous and asynchronous environments, who was an established professional with the ability to effectively teach online. Participants expected that instructors be an expert in the subject being taught.

Instructor is a visible, connected, and engaged human. Nearly every participant (n = 12) agreed that effective online instructor presence means that the instructor is accessible, available, and responsive to students. Equally important to participants was that the instructor is a real person who gives students the opportunity to know them, and who is also engaged and approachable from day one and throughout the entire course. One participant responded:

I keep wanting to say the word prioritization, making the online course feel like it's just as important as if we were face-to-face. They are almost as engaged in the course material as the students. It is just as focused as if it were in person.

Most of the participants (n=9) underscored that an effective online instructor presence means that the instructor values student success. One participant responded:

I do feel like that instructor is present and cares about whether or not we're actually understanding and getting the information. It's not just lip service, it's thoughtful responses.

Several of the participants (n=9) placed emphasis on the importance of being able to establish a relationship with the instructor and not feeling just another student in the course. Part of that relationship building, according to many participants (n=8), meant the ability to see and hear the instructor. One participant explained:

When a professor establishes an online presence throughout the course, you get to really know their style. You got to see their face and interact with them a lot more, which built more of a relationship. It felt more like being in a classroom setting.

Disconnected instructor presence can result in overwhelm and anxiety. Several participants (n=7) talked about the learner stress, overwhelm, and anxiety that can be generated when viewing the way the instructor presents the structure, flow, and workload required in a course. Relatedly, if the online course navigation is confusing, the content is outdated, or the instructor is uncomfortable with technology, it triggers feelings of learner stress and unease. Several participants (n=4) expressed that feelings of being overloaded caused them to drop a course. One responded:

There was one class that I withdrew from because I felt overwhelmed. The first thing I did as a student, I would go through and look at every module, and if I felt like, oh my

goodness, this is going to be overwhelming, or I don't feel like I can do this.

Nearly half the participants (n=7) described the frustration caused when the instructor offered few or no instructions and few or no expectations of the students in the online course. Additionally, a few participants (n=3) mentioned feeling tense and confused when an instructor changed due dates and did not notify the students. One participant explained:

I think in this class I'm in, it's been taking like three weeks for me to get feedback on my assignments.

Delayed communication and delayed assignment feedback, especially when the feedback lacks depth or substance caused participants (n=7) additional stress and overwhelm. One participant responded:

If I send you an email and you don't respond for a week, there's challenges with that as a virtual student.

Several participants (n=8) expressed concern and frustration with ineffective instructor presence, specifically when an instructor is disconnected, does not participate, or communicate, and is not engaged with the course or the students. One participant shared:

You're just standing back there as God of some sort that just watches it all happen.

Additional frustration was expressed by participants (n=4) who perceived assignments to be punitive, worth zero credit, or were related to using technology for technology's sake and not pushing learning or skill-building forward. One participant responded:

It was basically writing a paper every single week, which I got to say was not my favorite. And it reflected that. When I did my course evaluation, I also said that's not effective because it's just punitive at that point.

Another participant replied:

This specific class, we have quizzes at the end, but personally, I don't like the quizzes because he doesn't give us a value on them. He gives us a zero. And to me a zero is like just completely devastating because I take my studies very seriously.

Findings From the Survey

Several themes emerged in relation to the open-ended survey asking participants (n=10) to articulate significant factors in establishing and maintaining an effective online instructor presence. The survey questions, based loosely on the 13-item teaching presence instrument [17,36], also focused on effective instructor presence behaviors and the related effects on learners. The resulting themes, as seen in Table 5, were: (1) Clear, logical course structure, (2) Engaged, committed, knowledgeable instructor, and (3) Effective instructor presence creates trust, engagement, investment, and less stress.

Table 5: Survey categories, themes, and codes.

Category	Themes	Codes
Course Organization	*Clear, logical course structure*	Clearly defined, structured modules Consistent, weekly comm (sync or async) Logical course content flow Scaffolding used Clear expectations and instructions Variety of relevant, up-to-date material
Instructor Style	*Engaged, committed, knowledgeable instructor*	Available and accessible for students Show a mastery of technology Personal style and

		communication
Result from Effective Instructor Presence	*Effective instructor presence creates trust, engagement, investment, and less stress*	Engage and focus more More invested Engenders trust Less stress and greater comfort Impact on satisfaction Learn more, greater interest in topic

Clear, logical course structure. Most of the survey participants (n=8) desired clear expectations and instructions from the instructor from day one and throughout the course. Similarly, participants (n=8) identified that a logical flow of course content reflected effective online instructor presence and mentioned that the organization of the course should be easy to understand. All survey participants (n = 10) agreed that effective online instructor presence means that the instructor has prepared the course with clearly defined, structured modules that are scaffolded and built from a base of previous understanding. One participant commented:

As clearly as possible. As structured as possible. Built-in flexibility when appropriate. For me, start with the big picture and zoom down into the specifics. I know not everyone sees the world that way, but it helps me.

Many of the participants (n=8) agreed that it is crucial to have relevant, up-to-date content in a course. Participants also expressed that they want to know why a task or assignment is important, not just do it because it is required. A need for consistent, weekly communication from the instructor was also discussed by all participants in their responses (n=10). That communication can take many forms, including posting a video introduction, holding a synchronous welcome meeting, in addition to optional Zoom sessions, and sharing text, video, or audio updates and encouragement. One participant shared:

A rousing speech! I'm with you. I'll help you. You can do this! Here are tips to succeed.

Engaged, committed, knowledgeable instructor. All survey participants (n=10) shared that effective online instructor presence was reflected by being available and accessible for students throughout the entire course. This included the instructor responding quickly and fully to emails and communication from students, without making students feel intimidated. It also means providing students a timeframe during which they can expect their grades and grading promptly with the addition of rich, critical feedback for improvement. One participant explained:

Comment on the positives. Critique the negatives with an eye toward improvement. I do enjoy a gold star, whether through video or written comments, but I appreciate hearing the instructor's perspective.

Most of the participants (n=8) reported that an instructor's personal style and communication are reflective of effective online instructor presence, particularly in terms of the instructor's personality and compassion. Participants commented that when instructors share their personal style it establishes credibility and introduces them as a real person.

Effective instructor presence creates trust, engagement, investment, and less stress. Nearly all the participants (n=9) shared that effective online instructor presence helped them engage, invest in the course material, put forth more effort, and focus on learning and skill development. Additionally, participants explained that effective online instructor presence causes them to feel less stressed about assignments. Participants (n=9) expressed that effective online instructor presence engenders trust in the instructor and facilitates greater comfort and interest in the course topic. Additionally, participants (n=7) shared that effective online instructor presence impacts student learning and satisfaction. One participant explained:

I feel that I do better in courses where there is an effective teaching presence. Generally, it means the difference of me

checking boxes and engaging with material. It increases my investment and I grasp more information.

Findings From the Focus Group

From examining the focus group responses, several themes were determined after analyzing the data. to gain additional insights into the participants' viewpoints and perceptions [37] related to effective online instructor presence strategies and methods in courses. The resulting themes, included in Table 6, were: (1) Creating trust and satisfaction from day one, (2) Trust means communication, reliability, and rich feedback, and (3) Instructor delays and disorganization cause frustration.

Table 6: Focus Group categories, themes, and codes.

Category	Themes	Codes
Course context, purpose, and pacing	*Creating trust and satisfaction from day one*	Course cadence and pacing Explain the course purpose and why it is important Discussion boards versus peer reviews
Student Mindset	*Establishing a positive student mindset*	Updates and communication needed Autonomy needed for students with busy lives Student balance Clarity on how the professor operates
Frustration (Instructor-Driven)	*Delays and disorganization cause frustration*	Additional guidance needed from instructor Delays and disorganization cause frustration Not being able to reach professors Sub-par professor responses; more attn to detail Tech for tech sake isn't helpful Instructor understand competing priorities Too many assignment

		choices don't work well

Creating Course Satisfaction from Day One. All participants (n=10) indicated that effective online instructor presence strategies include creating a comfortable course cadence and pacing. Participants shared that chunked content helped avoid cognitive overload and uniformity with assignment due dates helped reduce stress levels. Additionally, participants stressed the importance of consistent course structure and organization, including inside the individual modules and module sections. One participant explained:

I know that for every class it's split into the different like modules and sections, but if there's consistency in the way that each of those look, it makes it a lot easier to be able to go in and say, okay, I need to start here. Look at this, look at this. And just that consistency definitely helps me to be able to be successful.

Participants (n=10) stressed the need to understand why the course was important and the reason why the context, activities, and skills are necessary. Other participants (n=5) explained that receiving context and information from the instructor before the course began helped ground them in the course and assisted students in more quickly assimilating to the course requirements and content. One student shared this about day one of a course:

Just giving the syllabus and the course schedule I feel like isn't enough. I feel like there needs to be like a video or a Zoom or something where there can be a little bit more like conversation about the course.

Participants (n=10) had a lot to say about discussion boards and peer reviews. Most participants (n=9) shared that they disliked discussion boards, found them stressful, and questioned the value and purpose of this activity. Several participants (n=5) debated whether the purpose of discussion boards was to interact with peers or whether it was to determine if students understood the material, citing that the activity shouldn't be included because it's always been included as part of a course. The participants (n=9) also expressed that the ability to communicate with the

instructor easily and quickly, if needed, resulted in satisfaction and the perception of effective online instructor presence.

Establishing a Positive Student Mindset. Most participants (n=8) agreed that autonomy and the ability to work at their own pace in an online course is needed for graduate students with busy lives. Additionally, many participants (n=9) described that it takes time and gaining trust in the instructor before it feels comfortable to engage and communicate inside the course and about the material. One participant responded:

I'm not ready to just launch into the, the bulk of the content of the course until I feel like I'm really clear on how this instructor works.

Participants (n=5) were also successful in establishing a positive student mindset when they could have productive conversations with the instructor. It was also helpful for participants to have access to instructors at times that were convenient for busy, working adults.

Instructor delays and disorganization cause frustration. All participants (n=10) expressed concern regarding the inability to contact or receive guidance and answers from instructors, particularly after hours when the student is required to work a 9-5 day. One student explained:

I don't feel like I can ever get that communication and that foundation, it, it's almost like I don't trust that professor to take care of me, so to speak.

Another student commented:

I work during the traditional school day, so if a professor is only going to reply to things or whatnot during the workday, it can be very hard to have an open back-and-forth of communication and get all of the questions I need answered while I'm trying to also wrangle 37 students at the same time. So being able to communicate with my professors during the evening is the best thing for me and not being able to do that is a roadblock.

Other participants (n=4) described frustration over receiving incomplete or vague instructor responses and shared their annoyance when instructors don't pay attention to detail or respond to emails or questions thoroughly. One participant responded:

Then there are some [instructors] who like answer the first thing and, and that you're left with two other questions that were never addressed. And so that's when I start to get stressed out. Well, I need these other two questions answered, but they already didn't answer them.

Many participants (n=8) articulated confusion and frustration over course expectations not conveyed by the instructor in a timely manner or missing information in the syllabus or instructions. Additionally, the participants expressed that it is overwhelming to have work to complete in week one of the course without advance notice or information in the course on day one.

To pile all on the very first day if the student is like juggling a number of classes, just really front loads and can be kind of caused this flurry of stress right at the very beginning. It is really defeating to feel like I'm already behind the ball.

Other participants (n=3) described concerns surrounding decision fatigue when an instructor offers too many choices or options when completing an assignment or when the assignment appeared to be using technology for technology's sake.

I've had a course before where the professor had this really cool technology tool that he wanted us to use, but nobody could figure out how to use it. And there were so many emails and Zoom calls of us trying to use it that the actual purpose of the assignment kind of got lost behind this technology tool.

Trustworthiness

As the research question required a thorough examination of participants' perceptions and experiences, the authors confirmed the trustworthiness of qualitative data analysis, which require the results to be credible, transferable, conformable, and dependable (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Trustworthiness is a degree of confidence in data, in the preciseness and consistency of data analysis, and in the disclosure of methods of analysis used to guarantee the quality of research.

To determine credibility, three different research instruments, interviews, a survey, and a focus group were used for data triangulation. For reliability the authors used code–recode method and coded the same data twice, taking a one-week break between coding. The authors compared the two coding results for similarities or differences. Concerning transferability, precise criteria were used for purposive sampling to gather the most informative data. To avoid researcher bias, the authors documented processes and made conclusions using the language from the participants' transcripts and text document narrative. The authors also used member checking to verify finding and interpretations of the focus group data.

Discussion

This qualitative study investigated effective online teaching presence through the lens of graduate students enrolled in a graduate-level instructional technology program. The findings, which provide new insights into the concept of effective online instructor presence, are discussed below.

Overall Perceptions of Effective Online Teaching Presence

The research participants agreed on the importance of effective online instructor presence, as confirmed by Martin et al., (2019) and Turk et al., [41]. The study confirmed that instructor presence is a critical factor in online students' learning, which is in line with previous research, as indicated by Akyol & Garrison [20], Turk et al. [41], and Wang et al. [31].

Trust in the Instructor

An unexpected theme realized during data analysis in the current study was the concept of trust as it relates to effective online instructor presence. Specifically, the study participants articulated that when trust in an online instructor is developed and maintained, it leads to a more effective and satisfying learning experience.

The concept of trust, as directly related to instructor presence or teaching presence, has received very limited attention in the academic literature. Sheridan and Kelly [42] mention trust as an indicator of belonging and community building, Akyol and Garrison [20] cite social presence and its role in facilitating safety and trust in communities of learning, and Shea and Pickett [22] discuss trust in the process of developing a learning environment and development of trust as a component of effective learning communities. Trust in the instructor, as a theme in the current study, as described by participants, was created when the instructor shared an authentic style and personality, when students felt satisfaction with the course design, organization, facilitation, and instruction, and when the instructor was perceived to be a knowledgeable, encouraging content expert.

Establishing a Positive Student Mindset

Participants also shared a concept that has not been extensively examined in the literature related to an effective online instructor presence: the ability to establish a positive student mindset. Participants in this study articulated a hesitancy to launch into or fully engage and commit to working in a course until they are very clear on how an instructor operates in the online course environment. Specifically, when participants felt less stress and greater comfort in a course, it is easier to establish a positive student mindset.

The study participants shared several ways that an instructor could assist students with establishing a positive mindset or approach: when autonomy was extended to students, including the ability to work at a student's own pace, especially for graduate students with busy lives. Additionally, participants articulated that the ability to establish a positive student mindset was possible when students felt the instructor valued student success and when students felt a relationship and connection with the instructor was authentic.

Many of the participants agreed that it was also helpful when the instructor was perceived to be encouraging and expressed that mistakes were expected and part of the learning process.

Additionally, several participants described that it can take time to establish a positive student mindset, especially if instructors do not share facets of their personal style and personality. Once a positive mindset can be established, the more quickly students feel comfortable engaging and communicating inside the course and about the material.

Satisfaction

Participants in the study clearly articulated that positive, constructive instructor communication and interactions with the instructor, are tied to their satisfaction, which is also supported by the academic literature [5,18,20,36]. Additionally, as found in this study, and in existing research, learners with higher satisfaction are more apt to have tenacity, perseverance, and be more invested in learning [5]. Participants in the study also reported that satisfaction with online instructor presence helped them engage and focus more on the course.

Course Design and Organization

As articulated by participants in the current study, many factors, including different aspects of instructor presence, impact the online student experience, as detailed in the current academic literature [28]. Participants in this study mentioned many factors that happen before the course begins, expressly related to course

design and organization, which confirms recent research by Van Wart et al. [43]. Specifically noted by study participants were factors including clearly defined objectives, well-structured modules, logical course flow, scaffolding, easy navigation, and clear expectations and instructions. In short, as stated by Van Wort et al. [43], a poorly designed course is not received well by online students. In addition, participants in the study also desired consistency in modules, assignments that help students learn, meaningful content with depth and substance, and a variety of relevant, up-to-date material delivered in audio, video, text, and images. As discussed by participants, an instructor should have a mastery of technology and technology tools, as described by Singh et al., [44].

Facilitating Discourse

Participants in the current study confirmed what has been shared in the academic literature, that regular and high-quality interaction in online distance education courses [45]. The study participants cited that effective online instructor presence, through the lens of facilitating discourse, entails consistent, weekly comm, either synchronously or asynchronously. As stated in the academic literature, this includes how the instructor interacts with learners throughout the course and the response from the instructor when faced with a variety of situations and circumstances [43]. The participants articulated that especially during pinch points in the semester (e.g., the start of the course, assignment due dates, end of the course) it is crucial to have ease of instructor accessibility, prompt replies and guidance, and an instructor who listens to students. Also appreciated by the study participants was an instructor who encouraged and supported peer interaction. As cited by Wang and Liu [8], the participants articulated a need for clear, focused, and encouraging instructor communication.

Direct Instruction

As expected, and as shown in the current literature, participants articulated the need for quick, customized, constructive, and detailed feedback [8,36]. Participants preferred constructive

feedback that provided specific information on improving the quality of a submission. Several participants shared that they preferred feedback that provided an opportunity for growth. Many of the study participants also enjoyed optional synchronous online meetings that contained substantive information and stressed the importance of receiving instruction from an expert on the topic being studied in the course.

Frustration/Disconnected Instructor Presence

As has been cited in the academic literature, a lack of instructor presence negatively impacts students' success. An instructor who provides little or no interaction with students also influences online course dissatisfaction [46], which can lead to retention issues [47]. Additional factors cited in the literature representing a disconnected instructor presence include a lack of academic community and no support available from instructors [28,48]. These components foster students' decreased motivation and feelings of isolation [28,48].

As cited in the current study, participants expressed frustration and disappointment in many of the following areas: delayed feedback or missing feedback, insubstantial instruction, few expectations shared by the instructor, sub-par professor responses, little attention to detail, delays & disorganization, inability to reach professors, and using technology only for technology's sake. As a result of a disconnected or absent instructor presence, learners cited feelings of stress, overwhelm, lack of motivation, and anxiety. Based on feelings of overwhelm, several participants dropped out of online courses.

As shared in recent research by Van Wort, et al., [43], if online learners experience sloppy instructional design, functional incompetence, substandard instruction, and poor communication, they are likely to leave a course.

Conclusion

This study was undertaken to examine the factors that establish and maintain effective instructor presence as articulated by

graduate students at an R1 university. In this qualitative study, semi-structured interviews, an open-ended survey, and a focus group were completed. Among the unexpected themes identified are creating course satisfaction and trust from day one and establishing a positive student mindset. Anticipated themes included effective instructor presence creates trust, engagement, investment, and less stress, and the instructor is a visible, connected, and engaged human. Implications and recommendations for future research are provided.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study. First, the sample comprised only college students who are not representative of all online learners in the United States. Additionally, for our research sample, we selected only graduate students from a single program who were currently taking online courses at an R1 university. Thus, the study results are limited to a master's level online learning environment. Thus, to broaden the sample representativeness, future researchers should include a variety of online learners, including community college and undergraduate students. In addition, online learning refers to synchronous or asynchronous courses. Future research could compare results from asynchronous to synchronous online courses.

Implications for Future Studies

The data gathered were obtained from graduate students in an instructional technology program. Future studies could include undergraduates, non-instructional technology students, or instructors who do not teach instructional technology. The authors also suggest that future researchers consider using mixed methods approaches to study learners' opinions and insights into effective online teaching presence. It also would be well worth exploring students' perceptions of the differences in instructor presence between instructors and facilitators. The results of this study also have implications for course design.

Based on the review and analysis of data in this study, Author #1 is pursuing further lines of inquiry that include (1) how graduate

students define effective online teaching presence and (2) how graduate students articulate what instructors can do to establish and maintain effective online teaching presence, and (3) the need for students to develop and maintain trust in an online instructor and its impact on effective presence.

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Appendix A

Instructor Presence Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. What does it mean to you when an instructor has established an "online presence?"
2. What behaviors have your instructor demonstrated to establish instructor presence?
3. In what ways and how were you and your peers introduced to the course by the instructor?
4. Describe if and how the course content aligns with course objectives.
5. Discuss how the course activities are helpful for learning.
6. Describe how the instructor communicates with students.
7. Describe how the instructor encourages discussion in online discussion boards.
8. Describe how the instructor encourages discussion in group meetings, like Zoom.
9. Describe how students confirm understanding if concepts are confusing.
10. Describe how specific course concepts are taught by the instructor.
11. Describe how the instructor helps students master new skills and concepts.
12. How is feedback shared with students?
13. Define effective instructor presence in your own words.

Appendix B

Instructor Presence Survey Questions

1. What specific behaviors/actions make an online instructor's presence effective?
2. What type of communication style makes an online instructor's presence effective?
3. What examples of effective online instructor presence can you list?
4. What is your reaction when an effective instructor presence exists in an online course?
5. How does effective instructor presence impact you in an online course?
6. What do you do differently when effective instructor presence exists in an online course?
7. What, specifically, can an instructor do at the start of an online course to establish presence?
8. How can instructors better organize online courses for effective learning?
9. How can instructors provide better feedback in online courses?
10. In what ways can instructors better present online course material?
11. What are the three most important steps an instructor should take to create an effective presence in an online course?

Appendix C

Instructor Presence Focus Group Questions

1. Thinking about the concept of trust in any online course, describe how or ways in which this can be established through instructor presence.

    > *To trust means to rely on another person because you feel safe with them and have confidence that they will not hurt you. Trust is the foundation of relationships because it allows you to be vulnerable and open up to the person without having to protect yourself.*

2. Thinking about the first day of an online course, how can you be introduced to that course in a very effective way? What would that look like?

3. Thinking about this online program or past online courses you've taken, what have you experienced or what gets in the way of learning?

4. Thinking about course design and organization, describe the ideal way you'd like to see an online course laid out for ease of use and navigation.

5. Thinking about community in an online course, in what ways can or should an instructor build community among peers both inside and outside a course?