Title: The Influence of Instructor Propinquity

Abstract: This roundtable discussion will explore the influence of instructor proximity to students during experiential learning activities in the higher education classroom. The goal is to understanding how educators can guide students in experiential activities, knowing that our very presence affects student learning and behavior. The effects may prevent distractions, limit contributions from students who lack confidence, or may promote question asking, participation, or risk-taking. By first discussing these effects in face-to-face classroom activities, the participants can then explore how the online medium mitigates or exacerbates the influence of instructor presence (physical propinquity or eye contact) on student behavior and learning.

Keywords: instructor proximity, influence, experiential learning activities

Introduction

This session is intended for instructors seeking a more nuanced approach to their handling of experiential learning. We propose focusing our MOBTS roundtable on how an instructor's very presence near students promotes and prevents behaviors that can either deepen the learning or detract from it.

The primary question will be: "What can you do to guide your students in experiential activities when you realize that your very presence affects their learning process?" The discussion will revolve around instructor impact within experiential learning activities. To maintain a more focused discussion, this session is not about faculty presence in higher ed classrooms in general (e.g., instructor presence during an exam) or about traditional "classroom management" issues such as controlling horseplay, preventing inappropriate behavior, or juggling multiple learning styles. We are proposing that the discussion look at the perceived and/or interpersonal influence that results from the nearness of the instructor. To aid in this focus, roundtable participants will consider how archetype roles of instructors, such as expert, coach, or authority figure may be salient such that their very *presence* near students during experiential learning may influence students' focus, risk-taking, dependency, or other performative aspects as they interact with peers.

Given the widespread experience of teaching online in 2020, the discussion will also explore how the challenges of instructor presence in face-to-face experiential activities are eliminated or exacerbated in online classes. Again, the roundtable discussion will use the term *instructor presence* to focus specifically on how an instructor affects student behavior and learning by joining a virtual breakout room or even due to video usage by all participants. We note that "instructor presence" is a term used widely in the SoTL literature regarding effective online education where it is often used in reference to designing course elements to mimic the sense of connection that instructors have with students in face-to-face classrooms.

In that arena, presence is discussed as accessibility or reachability of the professor, and as a means of creating a personal touch and interactions in a course that might be partially or fully asynchronous. While that is important, it also is not the focus of this roundtable session.

In the end, MOBTS participants will leave the roundtable discussion with a broad awareness of how student behavior and learning in experiential activities or simulations may be affected by instructor presence. They will have collectively shared their insights regarding methods to ameliorate or prevent negative effects of instructor presence such as 'hovering invisibly', and ways to heighten or promote positive effects, including design strategies for learning activities.

Theoretical Foundation/Teaching Implications

We have noted that students' participation during experiential activities is influenced when the instructor is nearby. Specifically, the appropriateness, quantity, timing, quality, authenticity, and riskiness of student actions and verbal contributions may be affected by the instructor's physical presence. By presence we mean both proximity (co-location) and the use of one's gaze to signal an instructor's attentiveness to the student(s) or to aspects of the experiential activity itself (Leigh & Naweed, 2019; Stull, Fiorella, & Mayer, 2020).

While both presence and gaze can be manipulated in a face-to-face setting, such as turning toward or away from certain behaviors or students (even while continuing to listen to them), the online platforms make these simple actions difficult or awkward.

Exploring the ways in which our presence affects student learning during learning activities will allow us to more deliberately design and use experiential learning activities. To provide some structure to the discussion and our thinking about these situations, Table 1 proposes that the salience of an instructor's various roles may play a part in preventing or promoting certain behaviors. Instructors have agency and power as the classroom authority and expert, as well flexibility to adopt more communal teaching methodologies (Pennings,

Brekelmans, Sadler, Claessens, van der Want, & van Tartwijk, 2018). That is, when an instructor is physically (virtually) present, student focus on the instructor's authority, expertise, or coaching may prevent or promote behaviors that affect engagement and learning during an experiential activity.

Students who focus on the instructor's role as an authority figure with power granted through the administration of grade may seek to **avoid punishment.** They do this by cutting short or limiting off-task conversations (social chatting or discussing another course) or certain individual behaviors (texting) or group actions (focusing on an upcoming exam rather than a negotiation case) when the instructor is nearby. Or, it may spur quiet students to contribute as the instructor nears as a means of **confirmation** of having met the minimum participation requirements to earn points during that class session. Having the authority figure present may also be a **distraction** and trigger a student to 'step outside' the activity to seize the opportunity to ask about another course component, such as an upcoming assignment.

Students who focus on the instructor's role as an expert, may be discouraged to participate for fear of a **negative judgment** of ill-formed ideas, wrong answers, or poor suggestions on what to do next in the activity. Conversely, they may be encouraged by the chance to gain approval or **validation** from someone with expertise that their own contributions are useful, smart, or insightful. Students may also get off-topic to ask a question that is related to but outside of the activity (e.g., asking for advice on negotiating their own rent when the class is paired off to role-play a negotiation). This **affirmation** or recognition of the instructor's expertise in the topic.

Lastly, the proximity of a coach may embolden **experimentation** as students have the confidence (Brok, Brekelmans, & Wubbels, 2004) to take risks and engage in unfamiliar classroom behaviors, or **exploration** of a situation or topic by expressing curiosity in front of

peers. It's also possible that viewing the instructor as a coach (the guide by the side) may **fail to elicit peak performance** from those students lacking intrinsic motivation (Walker, 2009).

Session Description

This 60-minute roundtable discussion would have the following tentative format. It is tentative to be responsive to group size as well as the energy of the group to focus on some areas more than others. The proposed agenda is:

8 minutes	Welcome and quick/fun participant introductions
7 minutes	Agenda and brief overview of topic using Table 1 to provide a breadth of examples and possible causes for student behavior to be affected by instructor presence.
30 minutes	Participants will discuss the following question: ***"What can you do to guide your students in experiential activities when you realize that your very presence affects their learning process?"*** We will encourage the initial focus to be on face-to-face experiential learning and then to move to a discussion of this question in online courses. While this might not be possible given the salience of online learning to most participants, doing so could create comparisons of instructor impact on student learning in these two media. NOTE: If more than 10 participants are in the session, they will be asked to vote on whether to have breakouts or one large discussion group. If breakouts are preferred, everyone will be given a link to a shared GoogleDoc where notes can be recorded to represent the points made in each room. That link can be accessed by all participants.
10 minutes	… if breakouts: Return to main room, share biggest issues or insights.

… if no breakouts: Ask any participants to share insights from the

discussion about minimizing negative impacts of instructor presence.

5 minutes   … If breakouts: Ask participants to share any insights about

minimizing negative impacts of instructor presence.

… If no breakouts: Ask participants if there's something we as an

educational community of practice can do to further pursue this topic.

Table 1: Examples of how an instructor's presence may affect students in experiential

activities (with hypothetical student thought processes in quotations):

	Instructor as Authority	Instructor as Expert	Instructor as Coach
Instructor presence may **prevent**:	**Off-task or inappropriate behavior** (avoid punishment) *"I'll get in trouble for being off-task so when you are nearby, I will do what I'm supposed to."*	**Tentative or partially-supported ideas/actions** (avoid judgment) *"I am unsure of my ideas and don't want to sound stupid or unprepared, so I won't speak up."*	**Engaged or heightened participation** (absence of punishment) *"Since you coach but don't punish, I don't have to push myself or strive for attention."*
Instructor presence may **promote**:	**Participation – quantity/requirement** (confirmation) *"I want you to see that I am earning points for participation today."* **Off-topic questions** (distraction) *"I want to take this opportunity to ask you something (unrelated to the activity) so I don't forget or in case there's no chance to ask later."*	**Participation – quality performance** (validation) *"I have a lot of answers or good ideas to share, and bask in your praise."* **Off-topic questions** (affirmation) *"I want to take this opportunity while you are here to ask a question that taps your expertise, even though it's unrelated to this activity."*	**Participation – risk taking** (experimentation) *"You are encouraging and supporting us to try something new, so…."* **On-topic questions** (exploration) *"You are encouraging and supporting us, so I want to make a point about something related to this activity."*

References

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