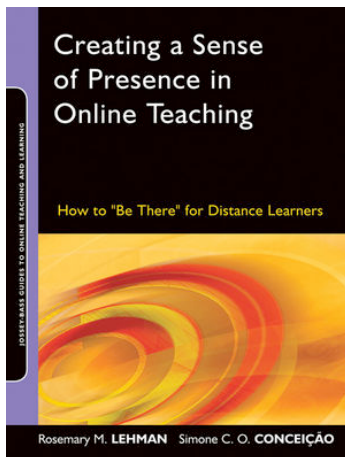


CREATING A SENSE OF PRESENCE IN ONLINE TEACHING: "How to Be" There for Distance Learners

Written by Rosemary M. LEHMAN and Simone C. O. CONCEIÇÃO
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INTRODUCTION



Online learning has now been widely recognized and found itself a place beside the mainstream education. As a result of this, the special characteristics of online learning and teaching have been targeted in literature in order to improve the practice. *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to Be There for Distance Learners* by Rosemary M. Lehman and Simone C. O. Conceição which was published in 2010 in San Francisco, CA by Jossey-Bass, John Wiley & Sons, Inc. is one of these efforts. The online edition of the book has a total of 143+xiv pages. The ISBN of the book for different versions is 978-0-470-56490-5 for print, 978-0-470-87309-0 and 978-0-470-87311-3 for the digital versions.

Rosemary M. Lehman and Simone C. O. Conceição have expertise in distance education, adult learning, instructional design and faculty training. The writers have partnered in a project they call *eInterface* where they help educators to combine the digital world with the real world (<http://www.einterface.me/eInterface.me/Home.html>). As a part of their partnership, Lehman and Conceição have co-authored three books. *Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to Be There for Distance Learners* (2010) is the first of this series in which they try to help online teachers to give effective online instruction.

REVIEW OF THE BOOK

In their preface, the writers emphasize the need for careful instructional planning in education in the online environments to achieve a "sense of being" that is a sense of presence. They portend that the book provides a framework to create online courses that develop a sense of presence through activities, illustrations and cases. The writers argue that the book will be of guidance for instructors, instructional designers and practitioners who plan to teach online.

All the chapters in the book start with two cases. The first case is of a 35 year old working online student and the second case is of a veteran instructor who is going to give an online course for the first time. Both scenarios involve personas who are anxious about the concept of presence in their first online course experiences, from a learner's and instructor's perspective. Throughout the chapters, the characters develop a sense of presence following the framework presented by the authors.

In Chapter 1, "The Role of Presence in the Online Environment" , Lehman and Conceição make a literature review and elaborate on the concept of "social presence" from social, psychological and emotional perspectives to explain the concept of sense of presence. They also explore the reasons for the significance of the sense of presence in online learning. The significance of social presence is still recognized in open and distance learning and is still among the top ranking theoretical backgrounds in open and distance learning studies, which implies that although the technologies that are used in online learning change rapidly, the pedagogical needs remain the same. Therefore, the pedagogical framework of the book is still relevant in online learning, and the chapter may be a starting guide for the beginners of online teaching.

Chapter 2 "Ways in Which Presence Can Be Experienced" starts with the myths about the interactions in online learning. The chapter then focuses on ways through which the feeling of presence can be created for learners. These are "the types of experience", namely, subjective, objective, social and environmental experience; "modes of presence", namely realism, immersion, involvement, and suspension of disbelief; and "learner dimensions", namely the interior world, the interface with the real world and the concrete world they share with the others. Though the chapter does not provide detailed information about these concepts, it gives concrete examples to each one, which may provide a roadmap to the ones who want to research deeper into the topic. Moreover, these concepts form the basis of "The Being there for the Online Learner Model" that the authors introduce in the rest of the book.

In Chapter 3 "Designing Your Online Course with a Sense of Presence", Lehman and Conceição introduce an instructional design framework to create an intentional sense of being there with the learners.

With three sample online courses, the authors provide an overview of how to be prepared as an online instructor and how to ignite the same feeling in the learners. Throughout the chapter, the authors endeavor to provide the determinants of presence which can be considered as the guidelines to be followed while designing a course with a sense of presence in different types of online learning from self-paced learning to collaborative group work. The determinants they emphasize are type and focus of content, format of the learning experience, interactive strategies, the role of the instructor, types of technology and kinds of support provided. Based on these premises, the authors explain their "Being There for the Online Learner Model" by analyzing three different online courses and addressing the previously mentioned constructs that need to be taken into consideration while creating presence. The model that Lehman and Conceição provide is designed primarily for Learning Management Systems (LMS) as they were the popular technology of the first decade of the 20th century. However, with modification, the model can also be applied to the trendy online learning settings like MOOCs, social sites, wikis and many other online learning practices. The reason for the adaptability of the framework to multiple settings is its focus on the pedagogical instructional model rather than the technology it employs.

Chapter 4 "Activities That Create a Sense of Presence in Your Online Course" provides activities to create a sense of presence based on the determinants that are explained in chapter 3. These activities cover the whole online teaching process and sets examples for activities that can be designed and used before the course begins, during the online course and end of the course. The purpose of each activity is explained so that the activities can be used appropriately and in a timely manner. Almost all of the activities that are explained in the chapter are also followed by examples and templates ready to use. The activities that re explained in the chapter are not limited to ones that can only be used within the close boundaries of an LMS. There are also activities that can be used on social networking sites such as twitter and other virtual environments like Second Life and Blogging.

In the final part of the chapter, Lehman and Conceição provide a series of questions to help online teachers check whether the strategies they employ work or not. They also provide guidance about how to interpret the information teachers gather so that they can improve their practice.

In this sense, the chapter functions not only as a very practical reference tool for the ones who are new to teach online but also as a roadmap for reflective online teaching.

The last chapter of the book, Chapter 5 "Are You Here or There? Making Sense of Presence" presents three example cases in which the framework that Lehman and Conceição propose is put into practice.

Each case is followed by an evaluation of the case according to the determinants of presence that are explained in Chapter 3 to clarify how presence is experienced through the strategies employed in each one. The chapter ends with a specific emphasis on how creating social presence in online learning requires careful instructional planning and design. This final chapter can be regarded as the showcase of the whole "Being There for the Online Learner Model". Lehman and Conceição end their book with a large appendix including resources with an annotated bibliography on training and online course design to provide a more comprehensive reading list. In the appendix, the authors also give a very comprehensive sample syllabus which includes a template for introducing the course description, requirements, instructional materials and resources, an explanation of learner roles and responsibilities, activities, evaluation and grading and a course outline. Especially the syllabus they provide is a very helpful template which can be readily used by online teachers.

CONCLUSION

Creating a Sense of Presence in Online Teaching: How to Be There for Distance Learners by Rosemary M. Lehman and Simone C. O. Conceição is a book that is a basic reference for teachers who plan to teach online. The book is organized in such a way that the readers are first introduced to the theoretical background of the "Being There for the Online Learner Model" in the first two chapters. The following chapters demonstrate how the model can be put into practice with real life examples. Though the book does not provide a wide review of the literature about the concept of social presence, it places emphasis on practice and provides several examples to steps that can be taken to enhance the feeling of social presence in online learning environments. In this sense, it can be a good read for the ones who plan to teach online for the first time, and provide guidance about the topics that should be followed prior to the online teaching experience.

Moreover, it can serve as a basic guideline for instructional design of online courses as well. Most of the practices that are explained in the book are explained within LMS in mind because LMS was perhaps the most popular platform to teach online when the book was written. However, all these activities can be transferred to other distance learning environments, too.

Considering the expansion of the opportunities that the Internet renders, the activities can even be more practically applied in the developing realm of online learning. Social presence is a concept that should be considered in all forms of education; therefore, whatever platform is used and whatever learning pedagogy is adopted, the feeling of presence should be created to make learners personalize their learning experience. Many resources in literature elaborate on the theoretical perspectives on social presence. What makes Lehman and Conceição's book noteworthy is its emphasis on practice, enabling the readers to have a feel of how social presence can be created in online learning.

ABOUT AUTHORS

Rosemary M. LEHMAN is a partner in eInterface with twenty years of experience at Instructional Communications Systems, University of Wisconsin-Extension where she was a distance education specialist and led the Learning Design and Outreach Team. She is the coauthor of *147 Practical Tips for Synchronous and Blended Technology Teaching and Learning*.

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