Giving Virtual Office Hours a Makeover: Improving Instructor Presence

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Welcome to your online classroom! (Now figure it out!)

As online learning has grown in prevalence over the past decade (Allen et al., 2016; Brown & Green, 2019; 2018), new challenges have emerged for both students and instructors alike in navigating this learning environment. Instructors who have previously found success in face-to-face learning environments may not automatically see those skills translate into successful online teaching (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Lewis, 2018). Many instructors have found the transition from face-to-face teaching to online teaching to be an adventure of discovery (McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017).

The present study is a case study that tells a story: the story of how I became dissatisfied with an aspect of my own online teaching practice, and sought to improve it. Many online instructors—even experienced instructors—continue to learn how to conduct their craft by discovery and by learning through the examples of other instructors (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018). I will refer to learning by discovery as “the school of hard knocks,” that is, learning by trying things, sometimes failing, and revising for the next time around. This might sound similar to design-based research (Brown, 1992; McKenney & Reeves, 2012) but the telling of this story will play out as a qualitative case study (Creswell, 2013) as we consider how online instructors approach discovering how to engage students in learning in the online classroom.

A brief review of relevant literature

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) model developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) has become a dominant model for explaining interactions in online courses that lead to meaningful educational experiences (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2018; Swan & Richardson, 2017). The CoI model describes how cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence interact in dynamic ways to foster the development of community through interpersonal relationships in “the pursuit of meaningful inquiry” (Swan & Richardson, 2017, p. 64). While much investigation of online learning has been conducted using this model for a theoretical lens, new research endeavors building on this model are beginning to investigate instructor presence as a construct (Martin, Wang, & Sadaf, 2018; Oyarzun, Conklin, & Baretto, 2016; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Instructor presence has been described as being composed of three elements: teaching presence, instructor immediacy, and instructor social presence (Oyarzun et al., 2016). Teaching presence is the way the instructor design and organizes the course, plans materials and learning activities, and facilitates and encourages learning (Garrison et al., 2000). Instructor immediacy is a way of describing the communication factors that instructors use to decrease perceptions of psychological distance between the instructor and the students, which can increase student motivation, participation, and achievement (Oyarzun et al., 2016). Instructor social presence is the ways the instructor demonstrates they are a real person (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). It is worth noting that several of these elements are aspects of the CoI framework, but the way they interact for instructors may take on a different flavor than they do for students. These three elements of instructor presence come together in the way the instructor facilitates the online course, demonstrating their real care and concern for students and their learning.
There many methods for instructors to demonstrate their presence in asynchronous online courses. Some common approaches include the use of video-based personal introductions, course orientation videos, timely response to student questions, sending announcements to the class, being active participants in discussion forums along with students, and providing timely, personalized feedback on student assignments (Martin et al., 2018). Many of these strategies require some planning ahead to incorporate into the design of an online course. However, even simple instructional moves, such as addressing students by name, or including personal stories as examples can enhance instructor presence (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017.)

Another approach online instructors might consider for boosting their presence is the inclusion of synchronous, web-based meetings as a component of asynchronous courses (Martin et al., 2018). Results of this approach are mixed, but it may merit consideration in some circumstances (Elwood & Brauhn, 2017; Lowenthal, Dunlap, & Snelson, 2017; Watts, 2016). In particular, synchronous web-based meetings may be an effective way for online instructors to hold office hours for their students at a distance when structured effectively (Lowenthal et al., 2017).

Method

The present study is a case study explaining an intervention used to boost instructor presence in an asynchronous online course, and an exploration of the students’ response to this intervention. The use of case studies has a long history in the field of education (Creswell, 2013; Merriam, 1998; Yazan, 2015), but only more recently have they been used in the field of Educational Technology (Mardis, Hoffman, & Rich, 2014; Oliver, 2014). In her explanation of the value of case study methodology for educational research, Merriam (1998) suggested, “case study research in education is conducted so that specific issues and problems of practice can be identified and explained” (p. 34), which is the approach taken in the present study. Further, Oliver (2014) suggested that applied case studies might be the most relevant for practitioners in the field of educational technology because they “directly address the problems of implementation in specific contexts they face when teaching with technologies” (p. 912). This might be the sort of research encouraged by Reeves & Reeves (2015) of shifting from research focused on “things” towards research focused on “problems” (p. 29).

Case studies are, by their nature, studies of the particular (Eisner, 1991; Yin, 2014). Due to the small sample size—often a single case—a key aspect for developing effective case studies is researcher reflexivity (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2005; Stake, 2005). Reflexivity involves careful introspection on the part of the researcher, and an awareness of their own positionality with regard to the case, which they must make explicit in the reporting (Creswell, 2013, Stake, 2005). Richardson & St. Pierre (2005) suggested that a key marker of reflexivity is a sense of self-awareness and self-exposure in the author’s writing. Merriam (1998) urged case study researchers to employ “thick description” in their elaboration of the case (p. 30). Thus, in my exposition of this case, I will be intentional about describing the role I played as the instructor, while also providing a detailed explanation of the context, the problem, the intervention, and the students’ response.

Case study: Reimagining office hours for “Issues in Education”

As a qualitative case study, this report describes an educational intervention I employed to tackle a problem of practice: improving my presence as an instructor, and thus boosting student engagement in online office hours. and inviting students into a learning community. As
the story of this case unfolds, I position myself as a participant-researcher (Creswell, 2013), explain the context for this research and the participants, elaborate on my approach to intervention, share the data I collected from students, and describe the results uncovered. Considering generalizability of qualitative research, Eisner (1991) suggested that the coherence of the narrative is essential, that it holds together and makes sense. My intent in exploring the case is to do just that; the particulars of this case may not generalize to every situation, but as a coherent story of an educational intervention, the reader may find it informative for their own practice. For structuring this report, I appreciated the models of qualitative case studies exemplified by Lewis (2018) and van Rooij and Zirkle (2016).

Research context

I serve as an instructor in Master of Education program at Dordt University. Dordt is a private university located in the upper midwestern United States. The M.Ed. program has seen rapid growth in the past five years, from approximately 60 students in 2015 to approximately 230 students in 2020. This program is a fully online program with no on-campus residency requirements. There are eight tracks in the program, with the largest numbers of students in the School Leadership, Teacher Leadership in Curriculum and Instruction, and Special Education tracks. Courses are offered in the Fall, Spring, and Summer terms. The focus course for this study was offered in asynchronous format during the Summer term, which is a compressed schedule, 8-week course that runs from mid-June through the first week of August. The courses in the program are designed in modules that correspond to the eight weeks of the course, and students moved through the modules as a group week-by-week.

Students enroll in the M.Ed. program from across North America, and around the world. Approximately 75% of the students in the program are from the United States, with approximately 15% from Canada, and approximately 10% hailing from other countries, including Indonesia, South Korea, China, Thailand, Nigeria, Liberia, and Nicaragua. All students in the program take a shared core of four courses, including Issues in Education, the focus course for this study. While the program is not structured around a cohort model, small class groups are utilized to increase students’ sense of connection and camaraderie with their classmates. Typical class sizes in the program are approximately 20 students.

The problem: Lack of participation in online office hours

I have been teaching online courses since 2010, and much of my early learning about effective online instruction came through the school of hard knocks. I tried things, failed, and learned from my missteps. This is not an uncommon experience for many instructors new to the online classroom (McGee, Windes, & Torres, 2017). I often emulated things I saw other online instructors doing, whether it was actually proving effective or not. One of these teaching moves was offering virtual office hours for students taking my online courses. I began including synchronous office hours for my online students in 2012. What this involved, initially, was including a line on my syllabus listing the hours I would available, and several contact methods for setting up a meeting: email or text, through which we would set up a web conference. In my first six years of using this approach, I had exactly two students take me up on this—not exactly a resounding success! It is embarrassing for me to think this through now, because I was clearly not designing these opportunities for connection with my students’ needs in mind. I was operating out of my own convenience but feeling good about myself for offering students the opportunity to connect.
A kind colleague pointed this out to me once during a conversation about online office hours. I admitted that it was quite pointless for me to just list available hours if I was not going to take any steps to actively reach out to my students in a way that really made me more accessible to them. Office hours were not a substantial part of my instructor presence, and I decided that if I wanted to take this aspect of my teaching practice seriously, some changes were needed. In 2018, I began publishing a link on the main page of my online courses that directed students to a standing web conference meeting. I explained that I would be present during the designated times in the web conference, and they could drop in as desired. This change in approach did have an impact: that year, I had three students actually reach out via that web conference link. While still not an exceptional result, at least I felt I was moving the needle a bit. But the problem remained: if office hours were to be a valuable part of my course—for both my students, and for me as the instructor—a re-imagining was needed.

The intervention: Shifting from “office hours” to “happy hour”

It was about this time that my memory was jogged of an experience I had in grad school when a friend mentioned attending “happy hour” at a local establishment. I remembered a research study I was a part of while taking a course with Patrick Lowenthal at Boise State University, and I recalled the engaging way office hours played out in that course. I did a little sleuthing and found the article that described his own shifting approach to office hours (Lowenthal et al., 2017). I remembered Dr. Lowenthal making the comment in one of our office hours meetings that “Office hours have a marketing problem—no one wants to come to ‘office hours,’ but no one wants to miss ‘happy hour’” (P. Lowenthal, personal communication, July 12, 2015). I decided I had nothing to lose by trying this small shift in re-marketing office hours. While I was making changes, decided to follow a few other suggestions from Lowenthal et al. (2017), including ensuring that office hours were optional, recording the meetings so students unable to participate synchronously could still view the video afterward, and adding an instructional component to each meeting.

After reflection, I decided to host an online “happy hour” each week during the 8-week summer term of 2019, telling students that “the drinks were on them” but welcoming them to participate in optional synchronous meetings. Knowing that I would be teaching four sections of Issues in Education that term, I decided I could have multiple “happy hour” sessions, and I would not restrict attendance to any particular class section for a given synchronous meeting. All students were welcome to choose a synchronous session that would work well for them timing-wise. I decided to schedule a morning session, an afternoon session, and two evening sessions each week. I planned the meetings to be held on Tuesday afternoon and evening, and Wednesday morning and evening. Part of the plan for having meetings at different times of day was to accommodate my students located outside of North America, for whom holding just one synchronous meeting each week would almost certainly prevent them from ever attending.

As for the content of the meetings, I decided that I would have the same basic plan for all four happy hour meetings for a module, and I would publish a brief agenda ahead of time. The general plan for each week’s happy hour meeting included an opening check-in with attendees, a content-oriented presentation from me as the instructor, and then an open time of discussion, wonderings, and clarification based on students’ questions related to course content and assignments. Each happy hour meeting was scheduled to last one hour, with about 20 minutes spent on each of the three segments of the agenda. Students would not be required to attend but were warmly encouraged to participate synchronously in the learning community. I recorded one
of the four weekly meetings for each module, and if students were unable to attend, they were encouraged to watch at least the “lesson” segment of the videos which were published online.

**Student participation**

A total of 77 students were enrolled across four sections of the Issues in Education course during the summer term of 2019., with 19 or 20 students in each section. These students ranged from graduate assistants with no K-12 teaching experience, to novice teachers with 1-3 years of experience, to moderately experienced teachers with 4-8 years of experience, to veteran teachers with 9 or more years of experience in the classroom. Students in the various sections of the course were from four different countries: the United States, Canada, Indonesia, and Liberia.

By my tally, 45 of the 77 students taking Issues in Education participated in at least one happy hour meeting during the summer of 2019. Six students attended happy hour all eight weeks of the summer term. Some students always came to the same meeting each week (e.g., always attending the Wednesday morning meeting) while others varied in their choice of which meeting to attend. Attendance varied depending on the rhythm of the term and the topic of the meeting. For instance, in week 4 of the term, when I introduced a major research project that would take them several weeks to complete, 44 students joined in happy hour meetings held during that week to hear more and get their questions answered. In contrast, the last week of the term, only seven students attended happy hour meetings.

**Student response to happy hour**

As part of my normal teaching practice, at the end of each term I invite my graduate students to anonymously share about their experiences in the course. I do this by way an instructor-created survey of mostly open-ended prompts that address different aspects of the course: the course content, the structure of the course, and their impressions of the instructor. In the summer of 2019, I added additional questions specifically about happy hour to gauge their perceptions of this intervention. I built some internal logic into the survey so participants would see customized surveys based on their answers to some of the initial questions. The survey questions about happy hour are included as Appendix A. Of the 77 students taking the course, 56 completed the survey. Of the survey completers, 27 students (48.2%) attended happy hour at least once. 13 students (23.2%) did not attend at all, and 16 (28.6%) reported that while they did not attend, they watched the videos afterward.

Students who attended happy hour meetings were largely appreciative of the opportunity to connect with classmates and with me as their instructor. Main themes that emerged as positive outcomes of participating in happy hour were opportunities for personal interactions with classmates, opportunities to get their questions answered, and opportunities to hear more of their instructor’s thoughts on the content from the readings and discussions. As for advice they had for improving happy hour, no clear patterns emerged, but I gleaned a few helpful suggestions, including ideas such as incorporating more stories into my lessons, offering some prompts for possible discussion topics ahead of time along with the agenda for the meeting, and considering replacing one or more discussion forums with synchronous discussions of the readings. Many students commented that they appreciated having multiple options for meeting times, which made it possible for them attend.

The students who reported that they never attended happy hour had several reasons why they chose not to join in. Nine said they were too busy to attend. Five suggested that when they read the agenda, it did not seem that the meeting would be worth their time. Three reported that
because the meetings were optional, they just opted out. Perhaps the best answer to any question I asked on this survey was in response to the question, “Is there anything that could have made happy hour more appealing, or made it more likely you would attend?” One student who had not attended any happy hour meetings replied with just one word: “Margaritas.”

The students who reported that they watched the videos afterward likewise had varied reasons for not attending the synchronous meetings. Eleven students reported that they were too busy to attend, however none stated that the meetings did not seem they would be worth their time. Seven students reported that the times simply did not work for them, and seven noted that because the meetings were optional, they just opted out. When asked about what could make it more likely to attend, four students wrote comments expressing some version of “If the meetings were required, I would have found a way to make it, but because they were optional, I did not attend.” Another student reported, “I found the videos to be easy to use... I oftentimes forgot about the happy hour sessions taking place, so I would just watch the video afterwards.” Two students expressed gratitude for these recordings, because of their busy summer schedules due to coaching or a side job, and the recordings made things more flexible for them to feel they were fully participating in all aspects of the course.

Summary and plans for next steps

Overall, I was pleased with these results. I felt that my first attempt at re-imagining office hours as “happy hour” was largely successful. While there was certainly still room for improvement, a large majority of students participated, far more than had ever participated in my pre-makeover version of office hours. Further, the feedback they shared with me at the conclusion of the course was a healthy combination of affirmation and constructive criticism.

After this positive outcome to my first attempt, I decided to continue my happy hour experiment. I was scheduled to teach Issues in Education again in the summer of 2020, and I decided to reduce the number of meetings each week to three: a morning, afternoon, and evening meeting each week. This was mainly to help me balance my own teaching rhythm during the summer, and the evening meetings were the most sparsely attended in my experience during the summer of 2019. I made notes for myself after each week’s meetings during the 2019 session about what worked well in the synchronous lesson presentations, and what did not work so well, and I used this information to revise the content of several of the lessons. Time will tell what the next iteration will look like after summer 2020, but I suspect I will continue to use the “happy hour” approach for office hours for the foreseeable future.

Conclusion

A major goal of this study was to illustrate ways that instructors might boost their presence in asynchronous online courses by incorporating synchronous sessions. In my experience teaching Issues in Education in the summer of 2019, this is just what happened. More students than ever before—both by percentage of the total as well as in sheer numbers—participated in office hours after this intervention was put into place. Students reported perceptions of positive benefits for their own learning, and many were actively engaged in first-hand connections with their instructor and colleagues alike. Speaking as the instructor, I too was greatly encouraged by the opportunities I had to build relationships with students, and to give them the opportunity to get to know me as a real person.

This study is a sort of replication study of the work done by Lowenthal, Dunlop, and Snelson (2017) with a few twists in the intervention, and a rather different approach in the
reporting. As a qualitative case study, this study certainly has limitations; it will not generalize to every teaching situation. This is the story of just one instructor who is a participant-researcher taking an active role in this study. That said, I have attempted to position myself reflexively and provide a rich and clear description of the context of the research, the intervention, and the students’ responses, but it remains for the reader to judge the trustworthiness of this report. It is my deep hope that examining this story prods the reader to consider ways that they might leverage synchronous web conferences as a means of boosting instructor presence in their own online courses. Further, I hope that the investigation of this case might inspire more contextualized research in a similar vein in the future. As Reeves and Reeves (2015) encouraged, more replication studies and explorations of problems of practice in Educational Technology will only strengthen the field.
References


Oliver, M. (2014). Fostering relevant research on educational communications and technology. In J. M. Spector, D. M. Merrill, J. Elen, & M. J. Bishop (Eds.), *Handbook of research on educational communications and technology* (pp. 909-918). New York: Springer.


Appendix A: Survey items about happy hour

I really like the idea of happy hour (office hours) for online courses, and I'm working on refining the way I conduct them. Your input on the following is very helpful for me in this!

Did you participate in happy hour at all?
   a. Yes – at least once.
   b. No
   c. I watched the videos afterward.

(Decision logic: If students answered “a” they were directed to section A, if “b” to section B, or if “c” to section C.)

A. I'm glad you were able to come to happy hour at least once! A few questions about your experience in happy hour...
   
   What did you find beneficial about happy hour?
   
   What could make happy hour better?
   
   Were happy hours scheduled at times that worked well for you? Please explain.

B. No worries that you didn't attend, but I am hoping to have more students join us for happy hour in the future, so your responses to these questions will help me better understand why you might have opted out.

   Which of these were reasons for not participating in happy hour? Check any that apply.
      a. I was too busy with other things to attend
      b. It did not seem like happy hour would benefit me
      c. The times happy hour met did not work for my schedule
      d. It was optional, and I just opted out
      e. Other (please explain)

   Is there anything that could have made happy hour more appealing, or made it more likely you would attend?

C. I'm sorry you weren't able to attend in person, but I am glad you watched the videos afterward! I am hoping to have more students join us for happy hour in the future, so your responses to these questions will help me better understand why you might not have been able to join in.

   Which of these were reasons for not participating in happy hour when it was offered live? Check any that apply.
      a. I was too busy with other things to attend
      b. It did not seem like happy hour would benefit me
      c. The times happy hour met did not work for my schedule
d. It was optional, and I just opted out

e. Other (please explain)

Is there anything that could have made happy hour more appealing, or made it more likely you would attend?