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Editorial: Instructional communication competence and instructor social presence: enhancing teaching and learning in the online environment

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Editorial on the Research Topic
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Introduction

Research since the early 2000s has pointed to the fast pace at which new technologies are penetrating the academy and thus increasing the demand for online courses and programs (Allen and Seaman, 2007; Schuster and Finkelstein, 2008; Mansbach and Austin, 2018). In Spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic unexpectedly resulted in yet more widespread migration from in-seat classrooms to online education at all grade levels, drastically changing higher education (Aoun, 2020). From the elementary school level through and including higher education, e-teaching and learning has quickly become commonplace with digital platforms taking the place of in-person desks and chairs. An array of issues related to online teaching and learning (OTL) spawned a dynamic body of scholarship in various academic disciplines, intent on examining both the challenges and opportunities inherent in online education as a pedagogical innovation (Morreale and Westwick, 2020; Scherer et al., 2021).

Because of their disciplinary subject matter, scholars in two areas of inquiry, Educational Technology and Instructional Communication, took particular interest in examining online teaching and learning. *Educational Technology* is defined as the study and ethical application of theory, research, and best practices to advance knowledge as well as mediate and improve learning and performance through the strategic design, management and implementation of learning and instructional processes and resources (Association for Educational Communications Technology, 2024). *Instructional Communication* refers to

the study of the human communication process across all learning situations independent of subject matter, grade level, or the learning environment (Myers, 2018). Two of the editors of this Research Topic represent the field of educational technology, in particular the study of "instructor social presence" or more simply "social presence." The other two editors represent the field of instructional communication, which studies the concept of "instructor immediacy." The substance and call for submissions to this Research Topic emerged from collaborative discussions of these editors about their approaches to research about presence and immediacy, particularly in the online environment. The call listed specific topics for contributors and manuscripts including:

1. Critical challenges and unique opportunities in the online environment
2. Discipline-specific approaches to online pedagogy
3. Strategies for instructors' transitioning from in-seat to online education
4. Best practices for designing and developing online courses
5. Instructional methods for engaging students in online courses
6. Methods for assessing student learning in the online environment

The call resulted in 13 submitted abstracts, with 12 invited to submit full manuscripts; 17 full manuscripts were submitted and reviewed by the four editors and by invited external reviewers; and 13 were accepted for publication, for an acceptance rate of 76.47%. Using qualitative thematic analysis (Glaser and Strauss, 1999), the 13 articles clustered conceptually into three topical areas: *Social Presence, Instructional Communication Competence,* and *Other Influencing Factors*. Although used in different ways over the years, *social presence* is generally defined as a sense that one is a "real" person and "there" (Lowenthal, 2010). *Instructional communication competence* is the teacher-instructor's motivation, knowledge, and skill to select, enact, and evaluate effective and appropriate, verbal and non-verbal, interpersonal and instructional messages, filtered by student-learner development and reciprocal feedback (Worley et al., 2007).

Following is a brief commentary about each of the 13 articles that constitute this Research Topic, with particular thanks to the contributing scholars.

Social presence

Meaningful Connection in Virtual Classrooms: Graduate Students' Perspectives on Effective Instructor Presence in Blended Courses

McNeill and Bushaala surveyed 206 college instructors about their knowledge of and attitudes toward online teaching and computer-mediated communication apprehension (CMCA). Survey results suggest instructors' CMCA is a significant negative predictor of instructors' communication satisfaction with online student interactions, job satisfaction, and motivation to teach online.

The i-SUN Process to Use Social Learning Analytics: A Conceptual Framework to Research Online Learning Interaction Supported by Social Presence

Castellanos-Reyes et al. provide a conceptual framework to make network analysis in education (SLA) accessible for researchers investigating learners' interactions in the online environment. Derived from network theory and online learning literature, the proposed framework has three main steps: interaction selection, social presence alignment, unit of analysis and network type, and network statistical analysis tests.

Toward a Comprehensive Framework of Social Presence for Online, Hybrid, and Blended Learning

Kreijns et al. present a framework that combines social information processing, construal level, and telepresence theories to explain social presence. That framework suggests social presence is shaped by the messages we receive, our psychological distance from others, and our sense of being in a shared physical or virtual space.

Instructional communication competence

Challenges and Instructor Strategies for Transitioning to Online Learning During and After the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Review of Literature

Richards and Thompson pointed to a need for more multidisciplinary and international discussions and examinations of online education pedagogy that bridge disciplinary boundaries. To respond to that need, they provide a literature review about challenges and instructor strategies for online learning transitions during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Faculty Computer-Mediated Communication Apprehension During Shift to Emergency Remote Teaching: Implications for Teacher-Student Interactions and Faculty Organizational Outcomes

Farris et al. investigated whether instructors' computer-mediated communication apprehension (CMCA) would predict their job satisfaction, motivation, and retention, regardless of their preparation for and perceived usefulness of online teaching modalities ($N = 204$). The findings indicate instructor CMCA is a strong negative predictor of those three outcomes.

Graduate Teaching Assistants' Challenges, Conflicts, and Strategies for Navigating COVID-19

Acheme and Biwa found that graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) experienced challenges with (a) online instruction, (b) students, and (c) personal challenges. The GTAs also

reported they (a) employed empathy and flexibility, and (b) created boundaries and consulted others about conflict management strategies.

Wait, I Can't Do That Anymore!: Pandemic Teacher Immediacy in College Communication Classes

Chatham-Carpenter and Malone explored how communication instructors adapted their teaching strategies to maintain immediacy with students during the COVID-19 pandemic. Interviews with 15 instructors revealed efforts to employ traditional nonverbal immediacy behaviors (e.g., eye contact and facial expressions) and verbal strategies (e.g., inviting participation and providing feedback).

Other influencing factors

Distance Learning and Face-to-Face Learning in PBL Course During Pandemic in Pathophysiology Discussion

Chen et al. surveyed the learning effects of face-to-face (FF) and distance learning (DL) in two medical (problem-based-learning) PBL courses. Tutors and students graded both courses for five key areas (participation, communication, preparation, critical thinking, and group skills). Results showed reduced participation, communication, and group skills in DL classes compared to FF classes.

Exploring Undergraduates' Perceptions of and Engagement in an AI-Enhanced Online Course

Sadegh-Zadeh et al. explored 35 students' perceptions of synchronous online learning that occurred in an AI-enhanced online course delivered using MS Teams. Students reported that Microsoft Teams motivated them to participate more actively, leading to a better comprehension of course materials and AI-enhanced features within the Teams platform further augmented the online learning experience.

Having it Both Ways: Learning Communication Skills in Face-to-Face and Online Environments

Eklund and Isotalus examined students' perceptions of a communication skills course that transitioned from face-to-face to online during the COVID-19 pandemic. Five themes emerged from thematic analysis of open-ended responses: positive and neutral perceptions of the course, challenges in online communication, perceptions of public speaking, and feedback effectiveness. Findings suggest that while students valued the online format for its organization and peer connections, they faced difficulties with conversations, non-verbal cues, and differences in online public speaking.

'Hold the Course(s)!' A Qualitative Interview Study of the Impact of Pandemic-Triggered Contact Restrictions on Online Instruction in Community-Based Family Medicine Teaching

Steffen et al. conducted 12 interviews in 2019 and 2020 focused on pandemic-triggered contact restrictions on online instruction in family medicine courses. A six-step model for the digital transformation of family medicine teaching was developed: "The calm before the storm," "The storm hits," "All hands on deck," "Adrift," "Reset course," and "The silver lining."

Low-Income Transfer Engineering Undergraduates' Benefits and Costs of Online Learning During COVID-19

Lee et al. examined how low-income transfer engineering undergraduate students perceived benefits and costs of online learning during the pandemic. The study found the benefits and costs related to (1) the learning environment, i.e., self-regulation skills, saving time, saving money, closer to the family, and working at home; (2) the format of instruction, i.e., studying at own pace and easier to obtain a better grade; and (3) external factors, i.e., housing concerns and financial issues.

Time and Day: Trends in Student Access to Online Asynchronous Courses in Communication Demonstrate Time Poverty in Action

LeBlanc III analyzed data from the learning management system to examine student access patterns in online asynchronous courses. Data from 1,201 students across 31 course sections revealed significant curvilinear trends in access times by day and week, indicating students tailor their study schedules around personal commitments. The results challenge the feasibility of synchronous courses for students and highlight the need f to consider student time constraints when teaching online.

Author contributions

SM: Writing—review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. PL: Writing—review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. JT: Writing—review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. LO: Writing—review & editing, Supervision, Project administration, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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