

Analysing teaching presence in an open distance learning context

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Abstract

Repositioning itself in the open distance learning sphere, Unisa is designing six signature courses. These courses are created especially for full online delivery, and based on heutagogical principles. As such, they may be regarded as a promising pilot project, paving a new pathway for curriculum and course design at Unisa. It would be accurate to say that the signature curriculum project has been, not only a massive learning journey for the project team, but also serves to pilot a complete paradigm shift in terms of teaching and learning at Unisa. This paper compares one of the signature courses with its print-based counterpart to determine what impact the move from print to online teaching is likely to have on student learning.

As direct links have been established between student learning and teaching presence, this paper uses Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer's (2001) model for assessing teaching presence in the two different modes of the analysed course.

Keywords: teaching presence, signature courses, online learning

BACKGROUND

As part of the process of becoming an African university in the service of humanity, Unisa is currently designing six courses or modules (one for each of Unisa's six colleges) using a "signature" lens. These courses are referred to as "signature courses" and form part of an extended process of curriculum transformation in the search for a Unisa-specific brand of open distance learning (ODL).

The focus of such signature courses is mentorship, interaction, critical thinking, communication and media fluency, but they also reflect an appreciation for societal values and the establishment of social cohesion. As technology has become extremely important in all spheres, Unisa hopes that the signature courses will ensure that every Unisa graduate is able to function effectively in the digital age. For this reason, these courses will be fully online. Since, as from 2013, the signature courses will be compulsory for all undergraduate students registering at Unisa for the first time, an estimated 200,000 students should have acquired the competencies advanced in these courses by the time they obtain their first certificate, diploma or degree during the period 2013 to 2020.

The signature course project has been not only a massive learning journey for the various signature course design teams, but is also stirring up a lot of emotion among Unisa academics and course designers. Concerns raised by faculty relate, not only to the perceived restricted internet access of Unisa students, but also to the pedagogic benefits associated with the move from print-based to online teaching.

This paper examines the pedagogic benefits of this move by comparing one of the signature courses with its print-based counterpart in terms of teaching presence.

Anderson, Rourke, Garrison and Archer (2001) define teaching presence as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes”. The association between deep learning and teaching presence is well established (Jiang & Ting 2000; Pawan et al. 2003; Picciano 2002; Shea, Pickett & Pelz 2004; Swan 2001). As “[i]t appears that teaching presence contributes to the adoption of a deep approach to learning” (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005), this paper argues that the mode of teaching with the highest level of balanced teaching presence will be most effective in terms of establishing deep learning.

METHODOLOGY

Our research is based on a model of critical discourse analysis and practical inquiry developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001). This again is framed by a community of inquiry model and used to illustrate the multifaceted components of teaching and learning in a text-based environment. The three elements of this framework are cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Our analyses were largely quantitative in nature, in that we counted the “teaching presence” features of a print-based and online version of a Unisa course. The quantitatively obtained data were then described and interpreted.

Data for this study comprised a print-based and an online version of the same course. The title of the print-based course is *Understanding language usage: an African cultural perspective* (course code AFL1501). The online course is titled *Language through an African lens* (course code AFL1501). The print-based course has been in use at Unisa since 2008 and has now been converted into the signature course that will be offered fully online from 2013. The choice of this particular course derives from the involvement of both authors of this article in its design and development. It also stems from their frustration at constantly having to defend the pedagogic advantages of the move from print to the online environment, while they are well aware of the superior educational quality of the new course.

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