

Do Business School Faculties Have an Ethical Obligation to Maximize MBA Student Involvement by Developing ‘Online Presence’ to Engage Students Displaced During the Pandemic and Beyond?

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Abstract

The significance of going beyond asynchronous online involvement and moving towards a more interactive engagement with distance-learning students has never been more urgent than in today's covid-19 environment. Students and faculty in traditional face-to-face courses were shifted virtually overnight into an eLearning environment. These students and faculty were particularly vulnerable to this transition. Faculty facing the pandemic may be online instruction novices and a substantial portion of the disengaged students feel they learn better and are more engaged in a traditional learning environment. This paper investigates approaches that can help ease the unexpected transition to online learning to yield a more impactful experience to engage these students in an active learning environment in graduate programs.

Introduction

Today's educational environment is a dynamic, fast-paced merger of brick and mortar campuses offering traditional face to face courses, eLearning programs and courses, while balancing an external environment that is more treacherous than ever. In the short span of seven weeks in the Spring of 2020, most universities experienced accelerated growth in their online course offerings as a result of 'stay at home' orders by the nation's governors (Kelleher 2020). While many educators would argue this was overdue (Gallagher and Palmer 2020), the spark that led the revolution was certainly not welcome and many institutions underprepared and underfunded. College and universities have lagged behind industry dedicating just 5% of their budgets to online IT expenditures and fully 2/3 of campuses remain dedicated to traditional campus-based lectures (Gallagher and Palmer 2020). In the face of the pandemic, this shortfall was glaring.

Online instruction encourages faculty to incorporate many of the same tools as the traditional, face-to-face classroom experience while striving to achieve the same educational objectives. In many instances, however, the online instructional environment requires different strategic approaches to instruction. One of the most significant concerns during this pandemic mandated transition is encouraging a higher level of engagement between faculty and students (and among students). This goal is supported in research as "higher levels of engagement have been shown to increase retention in students and improve student satisfaction" (Garrison 2006).

This scenario poses the question: could moving to the online environment, with increasing environmental and educational stress, be mediated by more proactive and engaged faculty? Ultimately, it seems the question for most faculty is not 'should I be more engaged?', but 'how' can I be more engaged in a stressful, new educational world that leaves faculty pressed for time, learning new technology, and facing more demanding teaching loads.

The desire to identify effective online approaches improving ‘student to student’ and ‘student to faculty’ engagement is not always easy to implement. This is further complicated by strained weekly schedules, teaching loads, and a new educational teaching approach. Additionally, many universities are undergoing this transition to eLearning facing state budget cuts. These cuts can reduce continuing education options for faculty as well needed technology upgrades.

One of the first decisions for many instructors in developing the online curriculum is the decision between synchronous and asynchronous delivery. While synchronous delivery is more complementary to traditional delivery, many courses, programs, students, and faculty prefer asynchronous delivery. This is especially true for working, graduate MBA students. However, this “remote, synchronous” instruction approach is an easier transition in this rushed covid transition and mirrors the early compressed video conferencing approach of the mid 1990’s. Asynchronous delivery offers MBA students the opportunity to determine their own educational and work schedules and develop a custom allocation of their time.

Asynchronous delivery has emerged as more ‘in demand’ during the covid-19 shutdown reflecting the fact that many graduate students are faced with balancing childcare responsibilities and home schooling with their own educational efforts. The asynchronous delivery offers the student the flexibility to select when, where, and how they will work in their environment. This also offers faculty the same flexibility to balance their own children and home schooling requirements with their instructional assignment responsibilities.

Increasing online participation and enhancing involvement offers many benefits to both students and faculty in this increasingly two-dimensional world. Of specific interest is the idea of developing an online “presence” to improve the engagement of both faculty and students. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) “learning occurs within a community of inquiry through the interaction of cognitive, social, and teaching presence.” Historically most faculty began teaching careers when courses were developed targeting the traditional, face-to-face student. As graduate students, today’s faculty were taught the basics of delivering face-to-face content relying primarily on a classic lecture format accompanied by midterm and final exams. Business faculty often supplement this with client-based interactive projects to enhance the development

As faculty strive to deliver the best educational experience possible to their students, there are several strategic adjustments that can yield better satisfaction and results. One of the many options is exploring strategies to increase student involvement in the educational process. This can be accomplished utilizing many different approaches. This paper will explore developing an online presence and discuss the ethical imperative of including this in newly modified courses in the covid-19 environment.

Background

The idea of cultivating presence was not something that much of a consideration in the past. Faculty and students were traditionally in a social environment with students interacting regularly, with an onsite, face to face instruction, using a systemic approach to teaching that yielded a cognitive and interactive component. Interaction was natural and often encouraged by the instructor. Today’s environment presents new challenges with limited to zero on-campus interaction.

The earliest distance learning programs were correspondence programs in which faculty taught an entire semester course by shipping out a textbook and a guidebook that included assignments, test information and proctoring locations, and mailing envelope to return assignments. This type of program interested a very unique type of student that was a very independent student that could succeed with little to no interaction with faculty or other students. In those days and in this format, very little was expected in terms of establishing any “presence” with the student learner. It had to be a lonely and challenging educational experience that tried to meet many of the same needs that online students of today possess. An asynchronous program in which a student could still work towards a degree without the traditional limitations of a brick and mortar education.

In today’s marketplace, education has become driven by target markets, a high profile ‘presence’ in a local market/state, and growth in student numbers and tuition-based revenues. As states have begun to pay a smaller and smaller percentage of state university budgets, online degree and course options have become more and more popular with university administrators hoping to achieve growth objectives. Traditional state and regional barriers are evaporating with the development of online programs, certificates, and courses enabling students from anywhere to pursue a degree from virtually any university from the comfort of their living room.

In attempting to develop the market, and brand these new programs, academic research began to investigate the unique concerns around the development, design, and effectiveness of online educational options. Specifically, many faculty and students expressed concerns such as “is this format as good as traditional face to face courses, what type of technology and familiarity with technology will be required, and will the end result have the same value and quality as traditional degree programs”. The answer to these questions may still be in debate by many educators and students. Fortunately, as the demand for these programs began to grow, the seeds of inspiration began to take root, and many academics began researching topics that sought to identify effective teaching techniques, unique strategies to encourage engagement, techniques to yield more successful outcomes, and more.

The idea of ‘online presence’ is one of the results of new research streams hoping to identify what and how online programs could ultimately yield a product as satisfying, valuable, and useful as the traditional brick and mortar MBA degree programs. Students absolutely want to feel a sense of “being there, a feeling that they are present in the total learning experience” (Lehman and Conceicao 2010). This is undoubtedly how the evolution of the term online ‘presence’ evolved, and the research stream into the types of online presence and the necessary role it plays in the success of online courses.

Online Presence

Online Presence is divided into three distinct types of presence: Teaching, Cognitive, and Social. As stated earlier, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001) first introduced the academic world to the idea that “learning occurs within a community of inquiry through the interaction of cognitive, social, and teaching presence.” Cognitive presence refers to the ability of learners to construct knowledge together as they engage in interactions. In other words, learners perform better in an environment in which debate, problem solving, discussions, reflections and more yield a level of critical thinking that cannot be reproduced in a solitary environment. Social presence refers to the contributions made to the learning experience through the formation of interpersonal relationships. These relationships encourage greater engagement that can yield a more impactful and satisfying educational experience. Lastly, the construct of teaching presence completes the triad of ‘presence’ that yields an educational experience that can be as satisfying and educational as any traditional program. Teaching presence relates to the construct that the instructor must facilitate learning activities to support cognitive and social presence. Each of these components alone would clearly improve a course and program above the early correspondence efforts, but the synergy of all three components yields a course that is competitive and on par with the outcomes of the traditional, face-to-face classroom.

Teaching presence in many ways can be the most important component of the triad, because without the involvement, interest, and contribution of the faculty member, the student may still feel as isolated as the correspondent student of old. The guidance, mentoring, and tour guide function within their fields of specialty undoubtedly increases student satisfaction. The student feels valued, has the ability to develop a relationship with the faculty member, and ultimately feels like a member of the learning partnership in a way that can increase performance, retention, and persistence. The more presence of the faculty member is, the less isolated the student learner feels in the education process. The feeling of community is vital to the success of online students, and it starts with the professor. Active and present faculty members can motivate, encourage critical thinking, increase student participation, and knowledge construction.

Teaching presence can be enhanced through a number of strategies:

- 1) Facilitating Role of the Instructor (Stavredes 2011) helps guide the students in their quest for information and helps encourage learners to be productive, seek advice or assistance, and helps stimulate critical thinking.
- 2) Faculty-Learner Interactions Increase Participation (Phillips 2020) implementing a substantial orientation starting off with information about yourself, your family, businesses-owned, children, and pets.
- 3) Faculty Prompting (Stavredes 2011) helps continue to push students to get out there, interact with other students, and helps stimulate social relationships and interactions to enhance learning.
- 4) Elaboration and Clarification can push students to think bigger and deeper resulting in deeper understanding of material and critical thinking.
- 5) Encouraging varying perspectives enhances the student’s ability to see alternative points of view. It forces the student to see the other point of view, and it may enhance their understanding of the topic. This can be implemented with position papers in which the student is given a statement that they must argue a pro or con position.

Most instructors do all of this and more, and effective strategies to continue interactions can include (but are not limited to) monitoring progress (and prompting where needed), providing prompt and good feedback to enable students grow in their understanding and ability to meet expectations. Faculty should also encourage their students by including instructions to help them become more self-directed, motivated, and successful. These strategies are extremely helpful for MBA students seeking to understand the complex external and internal environment interactions that lead to success in business.

Social Presence

Many people might argue that the missing component for many students in eLearning is the social interaction that makes college so memorable and yields lifelong relationships. Social Presence may not be able to achieve all of the traditional lasting relationships that face to face classrooms, dorm roommates, clubs, and athletics yields, but it helps foster student interaction to achieve enhanced learning. Further, learning relationships that are well fostered can cross from course to course in programs that can yield stable group and study partnerships that foster knowledge development, critical thinking, and leadership/management experiences. Current MBA structures revolve around cohorts that can continue across the curriculum through graduation.

Enhance outcomes related to social presence include:

1. Creation of a Learning Community (Stavredes 2011)
 - a. Discussion Boards help foster relationships and in-depth learning
 - a. The idea is to not have single outcome questions (right or wrong), but encourage far ranging discussions related to topics that foster the discussion of multiple potential answers, outcomes, causal factors, etc.
 - b. Critical Thinking Enhancement
 - c. Enhancement of the Learning Experience through the introduction and debate of alternative points of view, adding to the student's knowledge base and more.
 - b. Faculty can encourage this with their own participation, encouragement, being hospitable, encouraging appreciative behavior, humility, and mindfulness. This all enhances and expands the interaction-learning process.
 - c. Group Projects are often the bane of the marketing students' existence. They are used quite frequently to simulate the real-world business and marketing environment in which teams of creative people work together towards a common goal. Marketing demands this approach at times to prepare students for the real-world experience. These projects do yield stronger relationships in which collaboration helps develop skills, encourages debate, enhanced learning and critical thinking. It is important for faculty to assist teams early on in their formation, determination of roles and responsibilities, and the determination of consequences for team members that are not living up to the group's expectations. Faculty should create a warm, inviting educational environment that sets the stage for shared responsibilities, collaboration, and cooperative learning;
 - a. Conflict Management Procedures and Peer Review procedures also help teams to stay on track and proceed with an effective learning environment.
 - d. The introduction and use of Zoom technologies have opened additional doors to enable more traditional social interaction. Zoom technology can be used to introduce the class, cover a specific topic, or bring in a guest speaker. This also enhances the ability of students to build a network of professional in the business world.

Cognitive Presence

This is often considered the most significant element in the online triad for faculty. This is where the development of learning objectives and strategies for developing discussions, content forms and items, and the ultimate implementation takes shape for the faculty member. At the same time, it is necessary to consider outcomes objectives and assessments to assure success and identify problematic areas.

Cognitive presence is developed when 'learners share their multiple perspectives to construct knowledge' (Garrison, et.al. 2001). It is this formation of the community of learning that that enables students to construct meaning through communication with one another and to a certain extent their faculty member. Unfortunately, this can often be far more difficult to obtain with online students.

That community of learning requires a significant “buy in” by students. In graduate MBA courses, these students are often busy with careers and interactive activities often struggle with implementation. Asynchronous environments can be especially challenging as faculty work to generating effective learning communities.

Critical thinking is the ultimate goal of the cognitive presence enhanced by the faculty member’s strategic development of the course and facilitation of the learning process. Critical thinking is generally the primary objective of most MBA courses, hence the overlap is considerable, and the implementation is the challenge. How do faculty motivate timely, effective interactions with graduate students?

Four components are comprised in critical thinking (Brookfield, 1987):

1. Identifying and challenging assumptions
2. Challenging the importance of context
3. Being able to imagine and explore alternatives
4. Having reflective skepticism

An additional challenge in MBA programs is the move towards 6-7 week mini-mesters. Students then can pick and choose courses for full credit and complete them in ½ the calendar time allotted compared to traditional academic calendars. Many of the strategic and reflective approaches to increasing cognitive presence require time for research, exploration, reflection, and debate. This can prove challenging in the modern business school approach to the MBA degree.

Cognitive presence can be accomplished through a number of classroom strategies and approaches that can include (but are not limited to) a mix of the use of discussion boards, problem-based learning, debates, simulation games and more. The critical component in the success of building the learning environment is for the faculty member to carefully construct the course to enhance cognitive presence and assure that it is encouraged with teaching presence and supported through a successful social presence. This can yield the critical thinking and learning desired, the development of self-directed students that can effectively learn from one another in a healthy social environment.

Strategic Approaches to Develop Effective Online Learning via Increase Online Presence

1. Build the Framework for an Effective Social Presence

Orientation Activities

Extended orientation activities help students meet one another, chat on interesting topics, and find commonalities in their professions, educational background, and leisure activities. It is a modified “first day” of class in which everyone enjoys a “meet and greet”. The instructor can kick off the activity by being the first person to jump into the orientation. The instructor can start the activities with lots of information about themselves, their role at the university and professionally, family, business activities in the community, and research interests. The strategy is to generate interest with interesting tidbits, responses to questions such as “what is something people would be surprised to learn about you?”, identifying favorite apps, etc. It makes the faculty member tangible, human, and an active member of the course. Students see that the faculty member is right in the middle of class from day one. Students will often respond with private messages to the faculty member about posts, and the students have told me love that engaged faculty that are upfront, approachable, and interjecting some humor into the course from day one. It makes graduate students feel more confident to discussing their lives, ambitions, experiences, and a funny story or two.

Discussion Boards

Discussion Boards can form the foundation of the interactive learning community. Once discussion boards are up and running and in full operation relating to content, it is important for the faculty member to stay engaged and present. Students may really take off on a topic and unknowingly head into an offshoot discussion that does not really serve the class as a whole nor advance students towards achieving learning objectives. The offshoot may be a discussion that veers into more social or unrelated topics, or simply heads towards a tangent that may be of particular interest to just one student. Faculty must implement the necessary strategy to gently steer the discussion back towards the topic or a specific area of interest to the other students engaged in this discussion.

Faculty will must identify gentle balance to redirecting yet encouraging additional debate, while avoiding being too direct or harsh, thereby possibly hurting feelings or appearing less than hospitable to a short “side” chat in a content-based discussion board. Faculty should be tolerant to unrelated socializing to a point. As an aside, faculty should always include ‘Netiquette’ to try and avoid any conflicts or out of hand behavior. It is often in these dilemmas that faculty may toss in a specific example that relates to a business used as an example in the course, general business topics, or an interesting anecdote that ties to a lesson objective. The strategy of tying the discussion to personal experiences, research, or business interactions professionally and personally, helps to ensure that faculty has a presence online and is interacting in a social role with the students. Private messages received by faculty on a topic about work experiences, or discussion points as a result of these techniques can help focus students on areas of interest, yet encourage participation, brainstorming, and critical thinking.

Group Projects

One technique that can be used to facilitate group projects and encourage more social presence in MBA courses is to set up Individual Group and/or Project Topic Boards. These are Discussion Boards where students are encouraged to ask ANYTHING related to class, the program, the university, the project, and more. Of course, the primary purpose of the Group Boards is to give these students a safe space across the geographic regions to ask questions, debate strategy on their project, bounce creative ideas off one another, etc. It is a spot for them to use, not have to worry about judgments or criticisms, but to just work together, ask the perceived dumb question, or ask for technology help from one another such as developing and editing presentations.

The additional extra Discussion Board for the Group Project ‘topic’ is to encourage anyone in class can to post questions about the project, expectations, previous experiences, etc. These boards are often used less frequently than the Group Boards, but there are strategies to encourage the students to take advantage of this additional safe, social environment.

2. Strategies to Increase Instructor Presence

Faculty can utilize a variety of techniques to build rapport with students and enhance instructor presence. They are easy to implement and can really introduce an interactive environment.

Interactions to Encourage Participation

Orientation Modules can warm things up and encourage students to participate with both the instructor and one another. Enhanced Orientation Modules can be developed to include three components (Phillips 2020):

1. Orientation Assignment
2. Class Introduction Discussion Boards
3. Profile Updates

Each of these components required and is valued in the final grade Without a grade assignment at the end of the activity, busy students have little investment, participate less, and do not establish the baseline online learning community.

The Orientation Assignment requires them to read the syllabus and answer 10 questions covering a range of questions such as how to contact the professor, best email options, number of modules in the course, general course structure, and feedback guidelines.

Class Introduction Discussion Boards includes answering a few fun questions and then replying to at least three other students. Example questions include topics such as sharing a favorite app and why, dream vacation destination, and designing a luncheon with three people (non-family) the student would love to have lunch with (dead or alive), and more. Responses can be fun, interactive, and generate a great deal of initial interaction.

Profile Updates require a photo (face to a name), major, contact information, hobbies, favorite books and movies. This generally uses a standard format provided by the university.

The enhanced Orientation Module encourages interactions with students and the faculty member. It increases willingness to reach out to one another or the faculty member for questions, generates interesting discussions, travel chats, and more. It’s a lot of fun each semester and the students learn more about one another than in a traditional face to face, classroom environment.

Interactions with Faculty to Encourage Knowledge Construction and Critical Thinking

There are several options in online classes to encourage knowledge construction and critical thinking. Faculty can offer students have a couple of options to really pull together and examine deeper and broader thoughts on a topic. Discussion Boards offer a terrific opportunity to utilize the Socratic Method. The Socratic Method encourages students to engage in critical thinking by questioning ideas (Renz 2020). This can be accomplished in 2 ways ... students question one another, seek alternative points of view, challenge the ideas and conclusions they develop, until they ultimately identify a level of belief in all or some of the ideas presented. The other approach has the faculty member prod students, question their conclusions, pose an alternative explanation, and encourages students to defend their position through developing a strong argument in support or against the idea or conclusion.

An additional strategy to develop critical thinking, encourage knowledge construction/deconstruction, or further analysis is through the use of a simulation game. The MBA students are required to participate in a marketing strategy game in which they must make decisions on production, promotional efforts, pricing, market expansion, product development and selected company. Each week they must analyze the results of their previous decisions, work together, determine cause, effect, correlations, etc. to identify what strategies are working, and the impact of competitive group actions and more. The game allows them to experiment, analyze the marketplace, look at all elements of the marketing mix, and come to conclusions as to what marketing theories are generating the best strategic decisions and results. Simulations are offered across all business disciplines.

In each of these options, the instructor must spend time prompting discussions, asking students to clarify their decision-making process, elaborate on why they saw the results they got, etc. It really ultimately results in some in depth analysis that can be hard to get in the online environment.

3. Cognitive Presence Strategies

Client-Based Projects

The most important approach in MBA programs is utilizing real world, client-based projects. These real-world projects allow the students to work in groups (self-chosen or randomly assigned) to work with a for profit or not for profit organization, charity, or government agency. This approach enables the students to work on applied, real world projects in which local organizations are experiencing a number of problems. The organization may be concerned about declining sales, loss of marketshare, loss of supply chains, employee turnover/layoffs, pandemic effects, and more. Many times, the problems reported may actually be symptoms of the problem. This offers the instructor the opportunity to push the students to dig deeper and identify the root problem prior to brainstorming and looking for potential develop and utilize leadership skills, research and develop solutions. These exercises also encourage collaboration and debate throughout the semester long project. Once the students identify the problem, they can then debate and research options, determine underlying factors that may be exacerbating the problem, debate and collaborate to come to a set of recommendations, and ultimately present findings and recommendations to their client. It is a very rewarding experience for all.

Discussion Boards

Discussion Boards are another approach that are useful in the online courses. A new instructor to online learning could take the narrow view that Discussion Boards might fall under the “busy work” heading. Fortunately, educational research supports the notion that discussion boards truly challenge students by setting up a debate style format. In MBA courses, learners are assigned divergent positions on statements relating to current business issues, innovative product development, and resolution of human resource issues. The students are required to research independently to solidify their position and develop the confidence to defend stated positions. The students then debate and ultimately come to their own positions. The key to achieving learning and ‘presence’ objectives is setting up the debate through the careful development of position statements, assigning opposing positions, and then turning them loose to debate, listen and learn from the other students debating, and ultimately critical thinking and collaboration leads them to developing their own opinions on the topic.

Position Papers

The written debate position paper and presentation has a strict set of requirements with regards to number of cited references number of words, required examples, etc. Therefore, adequate research and effort to build their debate case is required so that all information is credible when they are working towards formulating their final position after the debate! The development of a set of standard expectations is mandatory.

Computer Simulation Games

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Summary

Online presence emerged as one of the most significant factors in the success of students. This proved especially true for the subset of students and faculty that traditionally prefer face to face delivery forms. Fortunately, foundation research is available to help motivated faculty quickly adjust and enable them to work towards the best product possible in compressed time frames. Current results may be mixed, but the foundation of flexibility and alternative delivery systems is firmly in place and the trend continues to demonstrate growth. Future students and faculty can look forward to accessing asynchronous and synchronous delivered courses that are packed with faculty, social, and cognitive presence strategies to improve learning, social opportunities, and enhance the educational outcomes. These new delivery systems are here to stay and strategies to deliver well prepared business leaders of the future is possible thanks to research and strategic exploration in eLearning.

Colleges of Business are particularly impacted by the changing landscape as growth in MBA programs continues to accelerate. The demand for geographic “free” options has widened the playing field and universities across the globe are competing for better and greater numbers of students. The necessity for effective programs investing in offering online presence will increase the appeal of these programs while simultaneously delivering more “hands on” skills to future managers.

Conclusions

As the covid-19 overtook the U.S. the push to provide alternative education delivery systems accelerated a trend to deliver flexible undergraduate and graduate programs. The hastily developed 100% university conversions in the Spring of 2020 resulted in a grab bag of offerings, delivery systems, faculty options, and student choice. While the environmental factors were not desired, many universities used this as an opportunity to dig deeper, become more flexible, and more in tune with the link between learning objectives and outcomes.

Although the domain of university education continues to expand, the needs of students continue to be the same: a good education, job opportunities, and affordability. The ability to reach a greater student base through the convenience of eLearning offers great potential to students and universities. The need for continued research into the effectiveness of the strategic implementation of remote learning will remain. Improving online presence, exploring Zoom alternatives for more personable communication, and tying all activities to well- developed learning objectives is a must!

Universities must continue to balance student needs, safety, and faculty support. The mass conversion to alternative delivery systems requires time, financial support, and continuing education options. Ultimately, this can yield an even better educational system that reaches more students in a more effective and efficient manner.

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