



Stepping in as a Student

Increasing Teaching Presence in an Asynchronous Online Course

Teaching presence, or the visibility of the instructor in an online course, has been found to support learner achievement and satisfaction (Cornelius-White 2007). Establishing an effective teaching presence can be elusive, however, as it requires a robust course structure and active instructor leadership (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes 2005). Instructors commonly establish teaching presence by making content videos for their course and responding to students in forum discussions.

Several semesters ago in my online courses on linguistics and international studies, I realized there is another way I can establish my teaching presence meaningfully and creatively: I take the role of a student and post some of the same written work as my students. This includes forum postings, essays, surveys, research assignments, and answers to open-ended questions in homework assignments. In all cases, responses involve demonstrating an understanding of one or more theoretical concepts and applying them to personal examples. (See more on this method of structuring written assignments in [Essays Your Students Want to Write](#).)

How to Do It

- **“My Examples” Serve as Model Responses.** The responses I provide are typically called “My Example” and serve as a model for students to follow. Students find them useful because they show exactly what I am getting at in the assignment in a way the assignment directions may not.

- **Select Appropriate Examples.** I have to choose appropriate examples based on my role as the instructor in the course. My examples can be personal but not uncomfortably so.
 - Since I teach linguistics and international studies, I often refer to my background as a speaker of Slovak and Chinese and the years I spent living and working abroad. My observations and experiences provide unique examples of various issues covered in the course materials.
 - I also reference the gym I go to. Gyms are a setting many students can relate to, and my gym-related examples are based on my personal experience but do not involve interactions that are too sensitive to share.
 - I discuss my family and our daily life, but I am careful to avoid situations that would cause embarrassment.
- **Answer Questions Selectively.** Stepping in as a student takes some finesse. I don't want students to use my responses as a stand-in for completing the reading or watching the video (i.e. I don't want them to copy my responses!). Often I answer only the “personal example” part of the assignment question and not the parts relating to the theoretical concepts I want students to understand. I ask students to provide their own answers to those parts of the question.

Conclusion

I have been stepping in as a student for over two years now. I find it to be an effective and enjoyable way to establish my teaching presence and express my individuality as an instructor. Stepping in gives me a chance to connect with students and test my open-ended questions and assignments to make sure they work as intended. Students have also commented they enjoy reading my examples!

References

Cornelius-White, J. (2007). Learner-Centered Teacher-Student Relationships Are Effective: A Meta-Analysis. *Review of Educational Research*, 77(1), 113–143.

Garrison, D., & Cleveland-Innes, M. (2005). Facilitating cognitive presence in online learning: Interaction is not enough. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 19, 133–148.

About the Author

Helena Riha teaches Linguistics and International Studies. She has taught over 3,300 students at OU in 16 different courses and is currently developing a new online General Education course. Helena is the 2016 winner of the OU Excellence in Teaching

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Award. This is her twelfth teaching tip. Outside of the classroom, Helena enjoys watching her fifth grader design his own Lego creations.

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