



How teacher presence engages and supports online female postgraduate students at an Australian regional university

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Teacher presence is of particular importance in the online learning environment, as the learning space lacks the inherent physical presence that a teacher in a physical classroom delivers. As a result, those who teach online, need to manufacture and foster teacher presence in the online learning environment. This requires caring online teachers who have refined online interpersonal skills and well-developed instructional design, who are driven to fully engage and support their online students (Martin et al., 2018). Without this strong teacher-student relationship that high quality teacher presence delivers, online students can feel isolated and disconnected from their teacher, resulting in student disengagement and dissatisfaction (Bolliger & Halupa, 2018; Sugden et al., 2021; Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). This study interviewed female postgraduate students studying online at an Australian regional university, a cohort with whom online education is highly prevalent (Latchem, 2018). The degrees students were studying, were designed before COVID-19 as full online offerings. Student interviews provided in-depth descriptions of which teacher presence strategies were most important to the participant sample, why these strategies were important and how participants engaged with the strategies. This study used the five elements of engagement from the Online Engagement Framework for Higher Education (Redmond et al., 2018), to inform the data analysis. Most online postgraduate students in the sample preferred synchronous teacher presence strategies that mirrored the on-campus university experience. These synchronous strategies had a lower level of transactional distance and used several of the five elements of engagement to engage and support students. However, some of the asynchronous teacher presence strategies did not produce enough elements of engagement to allow students to feel adequately engaged and supported. Subjects facilitated by purely asynchronous strategies had a higher level of transactional distance, creating a greater potential for students to feel markedly less supported without skilled teacher presence strategies applied in well-designed asynchronous subjects.

Implications for policy and practice

- Online educators need to develop more frequent and well-designed synchronous teacher presence strategies for online subjects, such as regular interactive online meetings.
- Asynchronous online teachers need to actively, directly and regularly engage their online students using a variety of specialist online teacher presence strategies and skills that target as many of the engagement elements as possible.
- Online education institutions need to ensure online educators teaching in asynchronous subjects, have a high level of online teacher presence skills and a caring approach towards their online asynchronous students to ensure they are adequately engaged and supported.

Keywords: online learning, teacher presence, transactional distance, and student engagement.

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