

Evaluating the Students' Learning Presence in Online Learning Communities

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Abstract: *This study evaluates the effectiveness of students' learning presence in Online Learning Communities (OLCs), focusing on their engagement, participation, and self-regulation in the learning process. Using a sequential exploratory mixed methods design, the total sample comprised 620 participants. Phase-1 involved 13 in-depth interviews with staff (6) and administrators (7) by using purposive sampling technique. Phase-2 used survey data from 607 participants (101 paid, 506 unpaid) selected through stratified random sampling across six OLCs. Findings reveal strong student engagement but highlight gaps in self-directed learning and collaborative interactions. The study underscores the need for structured support strategies, interactive learning activities, and well-designed instructional scaffolding to enhance student motivation and critical thinking. By identifying key areas for improvement, it offers practical insights for educators and administrators to refine instructional approaches, fostering more effective and student-centered online learning environments.*

Keywords: Learning Presence, Online Learning Communities, Student Engagement, Self-Regulation, Online Education.

Introduction

Student learning presence is a critical factor in online learning communities (OLCs), influencing their engagement, participation, and overall academic success. Learning presence refers to students' ability to actively participate in the digital environment, organize their own learning, and interact meaningfully with classmates and teachers. It is closely related to self-regulated learning, where students set their own learning goals, manage their time effectively, and appropriately use resources to enhance their learning experience (Akyol & Garrison, 2011). Research shows that strong learning presence contributes to deep academic engagement, which promotes critical thinking and knowledge construction (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). Although online education continues to grow in popularity, there are several challenges in maintaining students' learning presence, particularly in terms of self-directed learning, motivation, and collaborative engagement. Many students face issues such as effective time management, lack of teacher guidance, and limited peer interaction, which can lead to low engagement and academic isolation (Richardson et al., 2017). Although the existing literature highlights the role of instructional and social presence in online learning communities, little research has been conducted on how students' own learning presence influences their online learning experience, especially in developing countries such as Pakistan, where digital education is still in its infancy. This study analyzes students' engagement strategies, self-regulatory practices, and interactions with teachers and classmates to assess the effectiveness of students' learning presence in online learning communities.

It explores the barriers that students face in maintaining an active learning presence and identifies strategies to increase their participation and academic performance. Thus, this study helps to improve student-centered online learning environments, so that students can acquire the skills necessary for autonomous and collaborative online learning.

Research Objectives of the Study

Evaluate the students' learning presence in online learning communities (OLCs)

Research Questions of the Study

What factors contribute to an effective learning presence in online learning communities?

Statement of the Problem

Students' learning presence in online learning communities (OLCs) is crucial for active engagement, self-regulated learning, and academic success. However, many students face difficulties in maintaining consistent participation, organizing their learning process, and staying engaged in virtual environments. Research has widely considered pedagogical and social presence, but less attention has been paid to students' learning presence, especially in the ways they take responsibility for their learning in OLCs. This gap is even more pronounced in developing countries, where online education is still in its infancy and systematic strategies to enhance students' learning presence are lacking. Understanding the factors that influence students' learning presence is essential for designing effective instructional interventions. This study will examine students' learning presence to fill this gap, identify challenges that impact their engagement, and propose strategies to promote self-regulated learning in online education.

Significance of Study

This study is significant because it analyzes students' learning presence in online learning communities (OLCs) and identifies factors that enhance or limit their engagement. It highlights the need to adopt structured teaching strategies, interactive learning activities, and collaborative approaches to improve student participation and academic engagement. This study also examines how demographic factors such as age, educational level, and language proficiency influence learning presence, which will help educational institutions develop inclusive and adaptive online learning environments. Furthermore, it highlights the importance of fostering a sense of community and peer interaction to improve student motivation, retention, and overall academic outcomes. The findings of this study will contribute to improving online educational frameworks, especially on aspects of instructional design, student engagement, and equity in digital education. Ultimately, this study provides practical recommendations for educators and educational institutions to create more effective, student-centered OLCs that align with global best practices.

Literature Review

Shea and Bajirano (2010) first introduced the concept of "learning presence" in a study of students' perceptions of online learning settings. They found that the content of many discussion board posts could not be accurately classified as instructional, social, or academic presence. They argue that while social and instructional presence are important indicators of a student's ability to achieve academic presence, it is also important to consider individual differences in learners' self-efficacy. Shea et al. (2014) said that learning presence is associated with the stages of self-regulated learning: planning, implementation, and reflection. In the preparation stage, students work on organizing, organizing, and delegating responsibilities for their learning process. In the performance phase, they interact with each other to ensure that they understand each other, identify any potential problems or challenges, seek and provide help, and participate in the content and discussions. In the reflection phase, students acknowledge the new information they have acquired and share it with the group. According to Shea and Bajirano (2010), self-efficacy, organizing efforts, motivation, interaction with peers that result in

the formation of informal knowledge, and active participation in the learning process are all essential components of the presence of learning. According to Dabbagh and Katsantas (2012), learners are always looking for information to solve problems in their work, academic, or personal lives or to simply satisfy curiosity, and often use digital and networked technologies. The same concept applies when they seek to exchange knowledge. In the redesigned CoI model, this information seeking and sharing strategies would be attributed to “learning presence. According to Shea et al. (2014), learning presence indicates that students are taking responsibility for and actively participating in their own learning. In a study on social media use, Greenhow and Rubelia (2009) found that students have a high degree of control over their own learning, practice formal and informal learning in a variety of settings, and decide for themselves when, how, and with whom to learn. A study by Junko and Loken (2011), which focused on first-year students’ use of Twitter, found that students who integrated social media with their coursework were more consistent, sought help, had deeper discussions, and organized study groups. Shea et al. (2012) highlighted the importance of “learning presence” in studies of online learning, as students actively participate in their learning through social media.

Material and Methods

This study adopts a sequential exploratory mixed methods research design to examine pedagogical presence in online learning communities (OLCs), which consists of two stages. The total sample of the study was 620 (13 for qualitative data and 506 for quantitative data) respondents. At first stage, qualitative data collection involved in-depth interviews with 13 participants, including 7 staff members and 6 administrators, who were selected through purposive sampling to ensure expertise in online teaching and course facilitation. A semi-structured interview protocol based on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, consisting of 19 open-ended questions, was used to explore pedagogical, cognitive, and social presence. The interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted using NVIVO software, adopting an inductive coding approach to identify recurring patterns and themes. The results of this phase helped in the development of a survey tool for the second phase. In the quantitative phase, a survey questionnaire was developed to assess participants’ perceptions of the teaching presence, teaching design, and interaction in OLCs, based on standardized outcomes. The quantitative too was consisted of 34 items, which was developed on the same constructs. The target population consisted of members of six OLCs, including both paid and unpaid members, and the final sample of the study for the quantitative data consisted of 607 participants (101 paid and 506 unpaid). Stratified random sampling was used to ensure proportional representation. The survey data were analyzed using SPSS software, which included descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution, while inferential statistical tests such as t-tests, MANOVA, and regression analysis were used to examine the relationship between teaching presence and student engagement.

Data Analysis

Section I (Qualitative phase)

Section 1 presents the results from the phase one of data collection activity, in which thirteen in-depth interviews were conducted to collect data from online learning communities’ admins and teachers. The purpose of phase one of the data collection activities was to develop in depth understanding regarding stakeholders’ learning presence in OLCs.

Table 1 presents excerpts from teachers’ interviews regarding learning presence in students.

Table 1

Teachers’ views regarding participants’ active participation in OLCs

Sub-themes	Evidence/Supported phrases
Students’ motivation	“Participation is encouraged through motivational session names like Conquer, Perwaz, Sitaron Sey Agey etc., regular monitoring, and sharing of performance charts.

Top performers are recognized to boost motivation” (BEA).

“We motivate students through various techniques, including individual counseling and encouraging active participation in discussions. We use motivational techniques to engage students and facilitate individual interactions when needed” (DOC).

Learning strategies

“We encourage participation by assigning group tasks, such as creating presentations or participating in discussions. Regular engagement activities, like tests and interactive sessions, also motivate students to be actively involved. We recognize and appreciate those who actively participate to maintain high engagement levels” (QEA).

“During lessons, students are encouraged to ask questions and participate in discussions. Instructors address queries in real time to keep the learning environment interactive. Performance scores are made public within the group to foster a competitive spirit. Exceptional performances are rewarded with monetary prizes or other incentives, as announced by Umar Draz” (DOC).

Teachers’ views exposed that many strategies used in learning communities for the motivation of students, i.e. conducted interactive sessions, encourage them to ask questions during session, communicate with each other for enhancing their learning. Students also get motivation through appreciation and high achievers are rewarded with cash prizes in some learning communities. Some learning communities motivate students through group/session names like Sitaron sey Agey, Perwaz, Conquer etc.

Table 2

Teachers’ views on collaboration among peers in OLCs

Sub-themes

Support and guidelines

Evidence/Supported phrases

“Students are guided to collaborate and contribute by creating opportunities for discussions, sharing materials that prompt interaction, and encouraging them to participate in group activities such as tests and polls” (EM). “Currently, we mostly use open-ended discussions. A topic is designed, and then everyone shares their views on it. We guide students to maintain a good relationship with their peers and collaborate effectively. A positive working environment is essential, and we aim for each participant to be engaged and interactive” (QEA).

Group discussion

“Students are encouraged to collaborate by forming discussion groups for each session. They are engaged throughout the day based on their

availability and are given assignments to present as a group. This fosters collaboration and active participation” (ZOE).

“Sometimes, we assign students various topics for assignments. For example, one student might be asked to prepare an assignment on a short story, while another might be assigned to a novel or poet. This leads to a discussion environment where students share their latest information and conduct Q&A sessions. We generally hold these activities after 9 or 10 PM, as most of our members are available currently” (DOC).

Table 2 showed that group activities are conducted in learning communities to make strong peer interaction and promote collaborations among them. Open-end discussion sessions are conducted and the time for these sessions is finalized on the availability of all participants. In these sessions, each participant has ample opportunities to discuss their points with each other for the clarity of concepts.

Table 3

Teachers’ views regarding self-regulated learning in OLCs

Sub-themes	Evidence/Supported phrases
Recommended resources	“I guide students to seek additional resources by sharing various types of materials. For instance, if there are blogs, YouTube channels, recorded interviews, or PDF notes, I provide these resources to the students. This helps them access a range of information and deepen their understanding of the content” (QEA). “To guide students in seeking out additional resources, I encourage them to explore various materials beyond the core curriculum. I suggest reputable websites, academic journals, Chat GPT, and supplementary texts related to the course content. Additionally, I might provide links to external resources and recommend tools or databases that can enhance their learning experience” (BEA).
Meanings construction	“Students are encouraged to interact and construct meaning by facilitating discussions, providing relevant content, and creating a space where they can ask questions and exchange ideas” (ZE). “We use oral and written tests to assess students' understanding and ensure they are grasping the material. If students struggle with the content, additional time and personalized support are provided to help them comprehend the material better. For students new to a syllabus, such as those studying research or psychology for the first time, we offer personalized time and support. This allows us to address their individual queries and concerns more effectively. Recognizing that students often hesitate to ask questions in class, we provide guidance and support to help them overcome this barrier” (DOC).

Teachers’ comments in the above table also showed that different additional resources are recommended in groups like Youtube blogs, PDF notes, authentic websites links, articles, research papers, Chat GPT, academic journal etc. to improve the capability of students to search out additional resources and become self-regulated learners. Through question answer session, students’ understanding level is assessed. If any student feels reluctance during the session and does not understand any concept, then teachers conduct individual sessions with her/him and give additional time the clarification of their academic concepts.

Section II (Qualitative phase)

This section presents description, interpretation and analysis of the quantitative data. The data were

collected from six online learning communities (DOC, ZOE, QEA, BEA, EM, and ZE) of Pakistan. The total sample comprised 607 participants on online learning communities. The data were recorded in the data files of Statistical Package of the Social Sciences (SPSS). Descriptive statistics, t test, and MANOVA were calculated to examine the students' learning presence in online learning communities.

Table 4

Student Response Percentages (%ages) on Learning Presence

Sr#	Statements	SA	A	A+SA	N	SDA	DA	SDA+DA
1	Motivation for participation in activities	44.7	48.1	92.8	5.4	1.5	.3	1.8
2	Online sessions are interactive in community	41.1	49.1	90.2	7.1	2.5	.3	2.8
3	Learning strategies used in groups are effective	47	47.3	94.3	4.8	.8	.2	1
4	Group activities are effectively structured	38.1	48.6	86.7	10.3	2.5	.5	3
5	Clear support is provided in community	36.5	51.6	88.1	9.9	2.1	00	2.1
6	Self-regulated learning strengthened	37.8	53.7	91.5	7.4	1.1	00	1.1
7	Activities appropriate to educational level	39.7	52.9	92.6	5.6	1.5	.3	1.8
8	Discussions within the community	40.1	48.3	88.4	9.4	2.1	.2	2.3

Table 4 indicates students' responses on learning presence, majority of the students agreed that they were motivated to participate in learning activities, and found the online sessions interactive, learning strategies used in groups were effective, clear support in the community, self-regulated learning was strengthened within the community, activities were appropriate for their educational level, and discussions were meaningful. Though some were disagreed regarding the structure of group activities and suggesting areas for potential refinement.

The results indicate strong student engagement and support within the learning environment, with areas for improvement in the structure of group activities and discussions.

Table 5

Examine learning presence in OLCs

Variables	Mean	SD	t-value	df	p-value	Mean Difference
Learning Presence	1.37	0.39	-229.441	607	0.000	-3.63136

Table 5 indicates that the results of a one-sample t-test examining learning presence Mean = 1.37, SD = 0.39, t-value = -229.441, p = 0.000, Mean Difference = -3.63136.

Overall, it was reflected that poor learner engagement and active participation in online communities.

Table 6

Synthesized Results

Objectives	Theme/Variable	Qualitative results (Phase-I)	Quantitative results (Phase-II)	Integrated results
Evaluate the students' learning	Students' learning presence	Students actively participate in discussions,	Strong student engagement	While students showcase

presence in online learning communities (OLCs)		their viewpoints, and engage with learning materials, showcasing their presence in the learning community.	and support are indicated (student responses), but the t-test reflects poor learner engagement and active participation	active participation in discussions, quantitative data indicate poor overall engagement and participation in learning activities.
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Findings

Qualitative Findings

- Students actively participate in discussions, express their viewpoints, and engage with learning materials, showcasing their presence in the learning community.

Quantitative Finding

- Strong student engagement and support are indicated (student responses), but one sample t-test reflects poor learner engagement and active participation.

Merged Findings

- It was also found that students actively participate in discussions, but quantitative data indicate poor overall engagement and participation in learning activities.

Discussion

This study highlights key aspects of students' learning presence in online learning communities (OLCs). Although students actively participate in discussions, their engagement in structured learning activities, collaborative tasks, and deep cognitive engagement was limited. This suggests that students' presence in online learning is often superficial, and more structured interventions are needed to enhance meaningful participation. A key observation in the study is that there was a significant gap between students' participation in discussions and their overall academic engagement. Although students regularly participated in online discussions, they lacked active participation in problem-solving exercises, collaborative projects, and reflective learning. This is consistent with Moore's (2013) view that intrinsic motivation is essential for continued engagement in online learning. Similarly, Allen and Seaman (2014) also found that if the instructional strategy is not effective, student engagement is passive rather than interactive. These findings are consistent with a study by Dubey et al. (2022), who identified that self-esteem, motivation, and learning attitudes influence student engagement in online learning. However, Perets et al. (2020) argue that the nature of online learning itself promotes cognitive and behavioral engagement in students, which contradicts the findings of this study, as it shows a lack of structured engagement in educational activities. Another important finding is that although students demonstrated the ability to apply concepts practically and participate in discussions, opportunities for deep knowledge construction were limited. This is consistent with Garrison's (2003) concept of cognitive presence, which emphasizes the importance of higher-order thinking for effective learning. Research by Rourke and Anderson (2002) also confirms that structured problem-solving exercises and reflective discourse are essential for deep learning, but this study found these elements lacking in OLCs. Overall, this study highlights the need for more systematic approaches to improving students' learning presence in online education. Incorporating collaborative learning activities, encouraging deep cognitive engagement, and designing interactive activities are among the strategies that can increase student participation and ensure a more meaningful learning experience in OLCs.

Conclusion

The study highlights that while students actively participate in discussions within Online Learning Communities (OLCs), their overall engagement in structured learning activities remains limited. This suggests that students' learning presence in OLCs is often passive rather than active, requiring more structured interventions to enhance meaningful participation. To improve learning presence, institutions must implement strategies that foster active engagement, collaboration, and deeper cognitive processing in online education.

Recommendations

Institutions should adopt strategies including the use of gamification, student-driven discussions, and peer collaboration tasks to increase student participation. It was aligned with Bonk and Graham (2012) study, they provided different and interactive learning experiences for boosting student involvement.

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