Making the Implicit Explicit: 
An investigation into teacher presence in face-to-face and online courses

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The term “teacher presence” appears frequently in research about online and distance learning. This paper views teacher presence through the Goffmanian lens, seeing it as multiple presentations of self created through the medium of instruction. The research question concerns how online teacher presence creates a feedback loop to more traditional conceptions of teacher presence. The hypothesis is that the serial nature of online pedagogy and the absence of direct feedback create a requirement for greater explicitness and more careful planning in both curriculum development and delivery, which then modifies face-to-face delivery.

For Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), teacher presence is a critical element in the design of effective learning environments. Although the role of the teacher is acknowledged as critical in all teaching, the term teacher presence appears relatively infrequently in literature about face-to-face teaching and learning. This may be a matter of difference in terminology or it may indicate different conceptualisations of what has been defined as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive, social processes for the purpose of realising personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006, p. 10).

As different modes of teaching and learning delivery continue to proliferate, learning about effective delivery can become a two-way process, with lessons from online learning enriching face-to-face teaching as well as online and distance delivery adapting the principles and practices of classroom pedagogy.

This paper provides a starting point for such an investigation. It draws on existing research and also on interviews with nine subject-expert teachers to investigate the way in which they conceptualised their sense of teacher presence. Of the nine teachers who were teaching in intensive mode courses, five were teaching wholly online and four in blended mode (online and face-to-face). In their planning for online delivery, all explicitly considered strategies which encapsulated their teacher presence. Planning for the presentation of self (Goffman, 2005) was less evident in the accounts of teaching in face-to-face mode. However interviews with those teaching in blended mode revealed that in their face-to-face teaching they were aware of the need to make explicit to the students features of planning and delivery which are often implicit in classroom teaching. Whether the increase of explicitness in their presentation of the course and of themselves is a result of their operating in dual modes is not clear but it raises lines of enquiry for future research into the relationships between teacher presence online and that in face-to-face teaching.

References
Arbaugh J., & Hwang, A. (2006). Does “teaching presence” exist in online MBA courses? The Internet and Higher Education 9, 9 – 21