

Measuring the teaching presence of online faculty in a blended program for entrepreneurs

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Blended programs have gained immense popularity due to the synergy derived out of online and face-to-face pedagogies. However, in blended programs, at times students tend to compare the utility and value of the online component vis-à-vis face-to-face component. This comparison may escalate to the teaching presence of faculty especially if the professors facilitating the online and face-to-face components happen to be two different individuals. This study reports such an issue faced in a blended program for entrepreneurs and family businesses, where the students complained about less than expected teaching presence of the faculty on the online asynchronous discussion boards (DBs). The taxonomy proposed by Blignaut & Trollip (2003) was utilised by including two more dimensions namely, the DB topics and length of the faculty postings to measure the teaching presence in four completed courses of the program. The findings uncovered various dimensions of the teaching presence including an over emphasis of the faculty on informative postings while neglecting the corrective postings, lack of comprehensiveness and a declining trend in the number of faculty postings, thus impacting the student engagement on the online DBs. The utility of this simple yet effective method of measuring the teaching presence can be extended beyond the completed classes to the ongoing classes for aiding the faculty in conducting mid-course corrections to improve student engagement.

Keywords: blended program; entrepreneurs; teaching presence; online faculty

Introduction and literature review

The immense popularity of blended learning can be attributed to the fact that it derives synergy between the online and face-to-face pedagogies in the best possible way. Bersin (2004) defined blended learning (also called hybrid learning) as a combination of different training “media” (technologies, activities and types of events) to create an optimum training program for a specific audience. Blended learning has been hailed as the most efficient teaching model (Alonso et al, 2005) resulting in higher achievement levels (El-Deghaidy & Nouby, 2007) compared to purely online or purely traditional models of learning. However, some studies did not find any significant difference between the hybrid course and the traditional course in students’ achievement, knowledge retention, satisfaction, and attitude (Delialioglu & Yildirim, 2007). By virtue of being a relatively new pedagogy, online learning component of blended programs is often subjected to more intense scrutiny with respect to the learning experience on part of students. Garrison et al (2000) lay out a conceptual framework that identifies the elements that are crucial prerequisites for a successful higher educational experience. These elements are: cognitive presence, social presence, and teaching presence. The role of professors in the online component is much more diverse compared to that of the traditional face-to-face component. Online instructors should contribute advanced content knowledge and insights in addition to moderating the discussion (Shank, 2001), should possess high interpersonal skills (Derntl & Motschnig-Pitrik, 2005), should conduct closure for the discussion, should provide ‘answers’ for the questions and conclusions for the issues discussed as experts (Lim and Cheah, 2003) and should model the behaviour they expect from the students (Burd and Buchanan, 2004). Extensive faculty interaction with students in online classes results in higher retention rate (Bocchi et al, 2004), adds value to learner perception and satisfaction, and may also positively impact actual learning outcomes as measured by student grades (Restauri, 2006; Bedi & Lange, 2007).

There are some studies which undermine the importance of faculty-student interactions in the online component. A study by Ausburn (2004) revealed that participants in a blended program ranked communication between instructor and students in online chat or discussion forum seventh out of a possible eight, thus arguably rating it as a less important component of the blended environment. A study by Woods (2002) found that more frequent delivery of personalised email from the professor to the students did not increase the amount of student participation in required discussion formats. “Power

distance” is a term which signifies hierarchical difference as deemed legitimate by the members of a group or society (Hofstede, 2001), who feel that there are an elite few (higher up in the hierarchy) with more knowledge, skill and decision making ability (Sagie & Koslowsky, 2000). In a study, it was concluded that in a hybrid learning environment, students with high power distance would prefer to seek feedback from fellow students rather than from the professor (Hwang & Francesco, 2006). However, the study could not establish any significant positive relationship between power distance and participation on the electronic discussion board.

Research objectives

In December 2006, Singapore-headquartered online institution Universitas 21 Global (U21Global) joined hands with N S Raghavan Center for Entrepreneurial Learning (NSRCEL) at the Indian Institute of Management Bangalore (IIMB) to create a blended program for entrepreneurs and family businesses. The one-year program is called Management Program for Entrepreneurs and Family Businesses (MPEFB). In addition to regular evaluations of courses, ongoing evaluations for improving instruction and student learning in blended programs have been recommended (Levin et al, 2002; Amrein-Beardsley, 2007; Akkoyunlu & Yilmaz-Soylu, 2008). Therefore, during the first offering of the program (Batch 1), a survey instrument was executed during the Term 2 to gauge the learning experiences of the students. The quantitative data and the subjective comments of the students revealed minimal contributions on the online discussion boards from the IIMB faculty, who were given the responsibility of facilitating the face-to-face as well as the online component of the program. The directors of the program realised that the IIMB faculty neither had the inkling nor the time to actively participate in online discussion. A similar scenario has been reported by Chong (2006). As a result, for the second offering of the program (Batch 2), it was decided that the U21Global faculty would facilitate the online component, while the IIMB faculty would conduct the face-to-face sessions for the program at the IIMB campus. It was expected that both the institutions would be able to thus bring their expertise in the program. Some other modifications were also brought about in the program as per the feedback of students received through the survey (Bedi, 2008). The same survey instrument was executed again for Batch 2 (started in January, 08) students in Term 2. Astonishingly, the feedback received from the students about the U21Global faculty in the online component was not very encouraging, especially compared to the IIMB faculty, who conducted the face-to-face sessions (Figure 1).

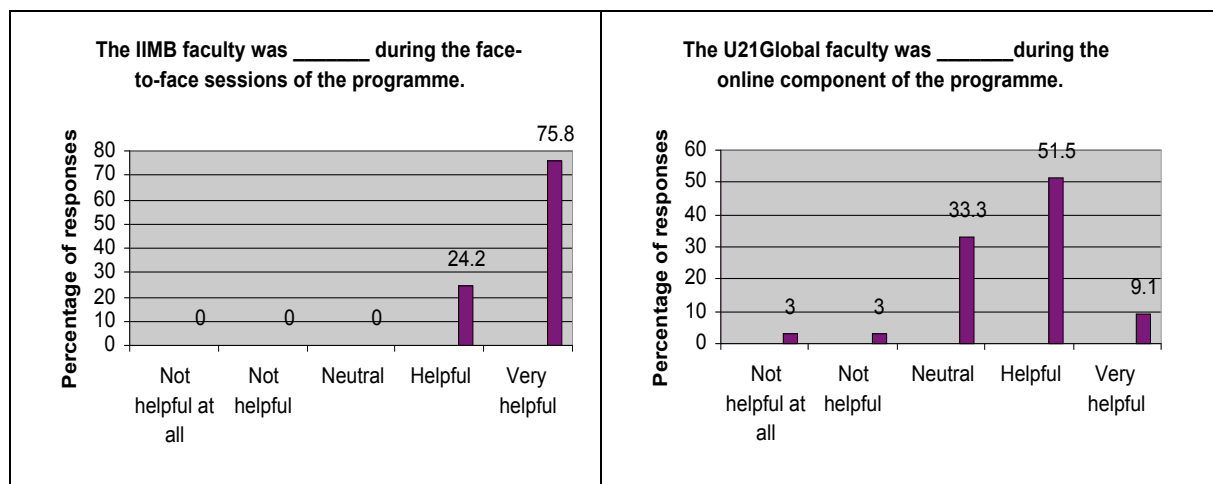


Figure 1: Student feedback about the IIMB and U21Global faculty

The students elaborated about choosing the “Not helpful at all”, “Not helpful” or “Neutral” options for the U21Global faculty in the survey in their subjective comments such as:“(Online) discussions moderation is very poor”; “Quality of (online) discussions is poor”; “It will be more effective if the ‘Face-to-face sessions’ faculty also interacts (with students on the DB)”; “Asynchronous mode of discussions made it difficult to have long discussions”; “Reduce the quantity of discussions (topics) and increase the quality, so that there is more value-add.” Further informal feedback with students revealed that they tended to compare the “value-add” by the U21Global online faculty with that of IIMB faculty in their face-to-face sessions. Thus, this inadvertent “competition” between “online” and “face-to-face” faculty may be very typical of this unique blended program. These findings led to the formulation of the research objectives as under:

1. To gauge the extent of “teaching presence” of the faculty on the online discussion boards (DBs).
2. To identify any trends in the level of student participation on the DBs.
3. To determine any relationships between the level of faculty participation and the corresponding level of student participation on the DBs.
4. To analyse if the length of faculty postings has impact upon student engagement on the DBs.
5. To recommend a simple yet pragmatic self-control tool to aid the faculty in providing a better learning experience to the students on the online DBs.

Method

Bright (2007) reported about a work-in-progress project, which seeks to capture the impact on practice inherent in the collegial development of a theoretically informed framework which enables lecturers to monitor and analyse what they do to create an effective online teacher presence and thereby facilitate a productive online learning environment for their students. The present study utilises the taxonomy proposed by Blignaut & Trollip (2003) to categories the faculty postings (with academic content) into three categories namely, Corrective, Informative and Socratic. This taxonomy was preferred compared to that of Anderson et al (2001), as it recommends each faculty posting to fall in any one of the proposed categories and the categories are more helpful in clearly guiding the actions of the faculty to manoeuvre their interactions with the students on the DB for different results. For example, a “Socratic” posting by faculty would pose some questions to the students and hence, encourage more participation. On the contrary, a “Corrective” posting by faculty may help in curbing a DB thread moving into an unnecessary dimension. “Informative” postings from faculty would be useful in providing new insights and in arousing the interest on part of students. Thus, such postings would also encourage more active participation from the students. In this paper, it is proposed that unless the measurement of “teaching presence” is done on a per DB topic basis in an online class, it would not be useful to guide the actions of the professors facilitating the same. This is in contrast to the study by Blignaut & Trollip (2003), who tried to arrive at faculty participation benchmarks by analysing the cumulative faculty postings for all the DB topics in a class and comparing the same with other classes. Secondly, in this paper, a new dimension about the “length of faculty posting” is introduced in order to gauge the “substance” (or “meat”) in various types of faculty postings. The three categories utilised in this regard are – “1-2 liners”, “3-5 liners” and “6-10 liners”. However, no attempt has been made to gauge the quality of academic content in the faculty postings in this study. The study considers faculty postings only with academic content and neglects all other types of postings by faculty on the DBs. It also does not consider other forms of faculty-student interactions like email, online chat and announcements.

Four completed sections of MPEFB Batch 2 belonging to Term 1 and Term 2 (there are four terms in total) were considered in this study. There were 52 students in Term 1 and 48 students in Term 2 (four students had withdrawn on health grounds/ personal reasons after Term 1 and were granted permission to rejoin during the Term 2 of the next batch of MPEFB). Tables 1 to 4 show the data pertaining to these four sections (Courses A, B, C and D) with appropriate graphs to aid in analysis. All the four sections are different subjects facilitated by four different professors. The colour coding of the various columns in the tables 1 to 4 represents the same colours as used in the corresponding bar graphs/ line charts.

Analysis and findings

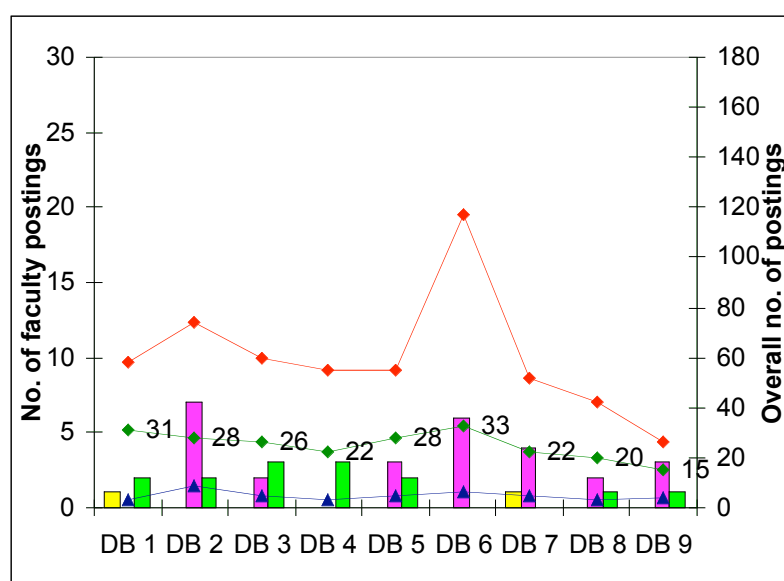
The data and graphs in tables 1 to 4 reveal some interesting findings:

1. The total student postings show a decreasing trend from the first to the last DB topic in all the four courses. However, apart from Course C, a steep jump in the number of student postings at the resumption of online classes after the mid-term face-to-face sessions is observed in all the other three courses.
2. The number of students who participated on the DB invariably decreased from the first to the last DB topic in all the four courses.
3. Apart from Course A, the total number of faculty postings show a decreasing trend from first to the last DB topic in all the other courses.
4. “1-2 Liners” postings constitute a majority of faculty postings in all the four courses.
5. “Informative” postings constitute a majority of faculty postings in all the four courses.
6. “1-2 Liners” constitute a large majority of “Informative” and “Socratic” faculty postings in all the four courses.
7. Apart from Course C, the numbers of “Corrective” faculty postings were minimal compared to “Informative” and “Socratic”.

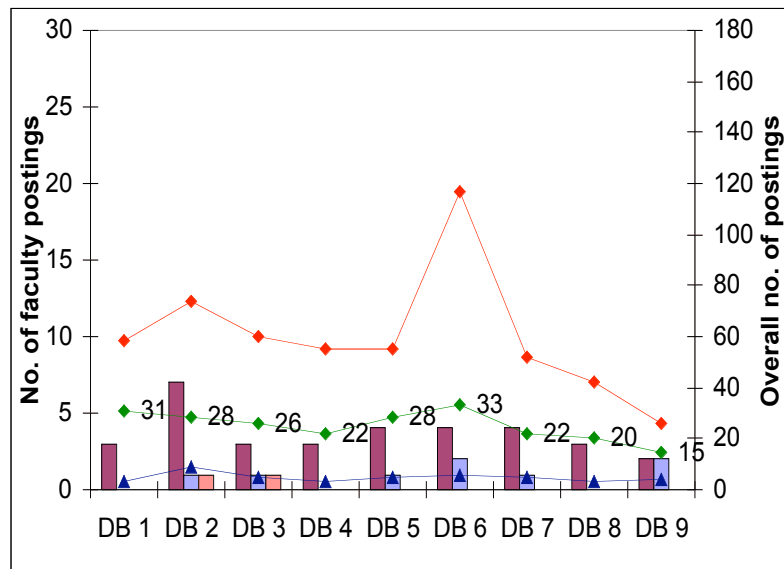
8. Course A shows the lowest number of total postings made by the faculty (only 41), out of which a majority (33) of postings were “1-2 Liners”.
9. In all the four courses, there were no “6-10 Liners” Socratic postings from the faculty.
10. 40 is the highest number of students who participated on a DB in Term 1 courses (A & B), out of the total number of students (52). 37 is the highest number of students who participated on a DB in Term 2 courses (C & D), out of the total number of students (48).
11. In none of the four courses, faculty made a posting of more than 10 sentences.
12. In all the courses, the number of student postings curve closely follows the number of total faculty postings curve. Thus, the strong positive correlation between the two is clearly evident.

Table 1: Faculty participation in Course A – Term 1 (Total no. of students = 52)

	Corrective				Informative				Socratic				Overall total faculty postings				Posts students + fac.	Stud. posts.	Stud. participated
	1-2L	3-5	6-10L	Total	1-2L	3-5 L	6-10L	Tot	1-2L	3-5L	6-10L	Tot	1-2L	3-5 L	6-10 L	Tot			
DB 1	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	3	0	0	3	61	58	31
DB 2	0	0	0	0	5	1	1	7	2	0	0	2	7	1	1	9	83	74	28
DB 3	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	2	2	1	0	3	3	1	1	5	65	60	26
DB 4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3	0	0	3	3	0	0	3	58	55	22
DB 5	0	0	0	0	2	1	0	3	2	0	0	2	4	1	0	5	60	55	28
DB 6	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	6	0	0	0	0	4	2	0	6	123	117	33
DB 7	0	1	0	1	4	0	0	4	0	0	0	0	4	1	0	5	57	52	22
DB 8	0	0	0	0	2	0	0	2	1	0	0	1	3	0	0	3	45	42	20
DB 9	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	1	0	0	1	2	2	0	4	30	26	15
Total	1	1	0	2	19	4	2	25	13	1	0	14	33	6	2	41	582	541	



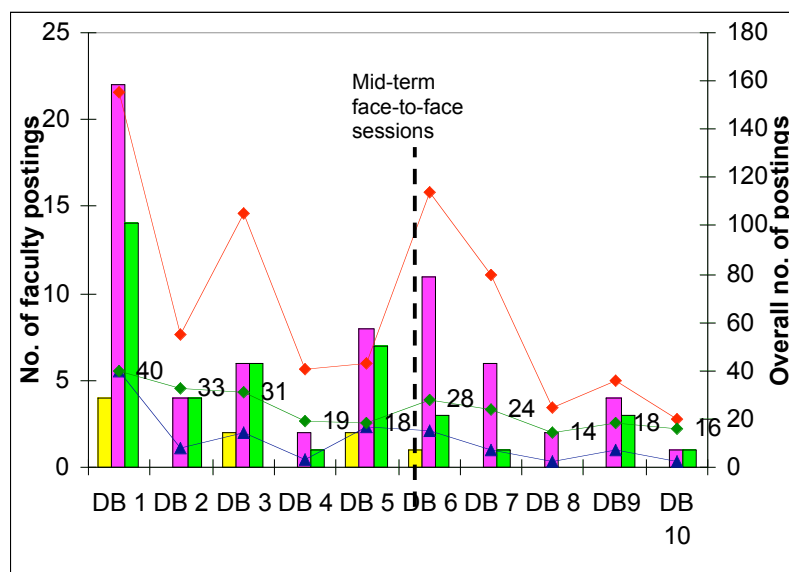
Graph: Type of faculty postings



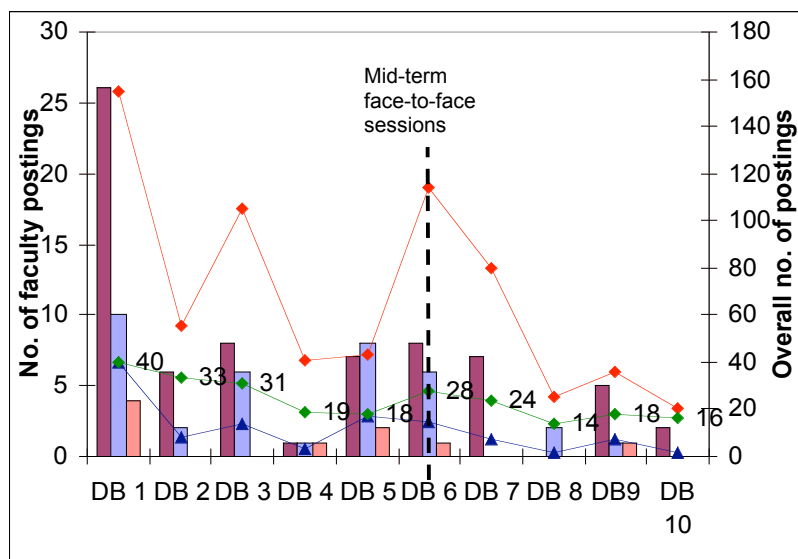
Graph: Length of faculty postings

Table 2: Faculty participation in Course B – Term 1 (Total no. of students = 52)

	Corrective			Tot	Informative			Tot	Socratic			Tot	Overall Tot Faculty Postings			Tot	Posts Stu. + Fac.	Stud. Post ings	Stud. Partic ipated
	1-2	3-5	6-10		1-2	3-5	6-10		1-2	3-5	6-10		1-2L	3-5 L	6-10 L				
	L	L	L		L	L	L		L	L	L		L	L	L				
DB 1	2	2	0	4	12	6	4	22	12	2	0	14	26	10	4	40	195	155	40
DB 2	0	0	0	0	2	2	0	4	4	0	0	4	6	2	0	8	63	55	33
DB 3	0	2	0	2	4	2	0	6	4	2	0	6	8	6	0	14	119	105	31
DB 4	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	1	1	3	44	41	19
DB 5	2	0	0	2	5	1	2	8	0	7	0	7	7	8	2	17	60	43	18
DB 6	1	0	0	1	5	5	1	11	2	1	0	3	8	6	1	15	129	114	28
DB 7	0	0	0	0	6	0	0	6	1	0	0	1	7	0	0	7	87	80	24
DB 8	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	0	2	0	2	27	25	14
DB 9	0	0	0	0	3	0	1	4	2	1	0	3	5	1	1	7	43	36	18
DB10	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	2	0	0	2	22	20	16
Total	5	4	0	9	38	19	9	66	27	13	0	40	70	36	9	115	789	674	



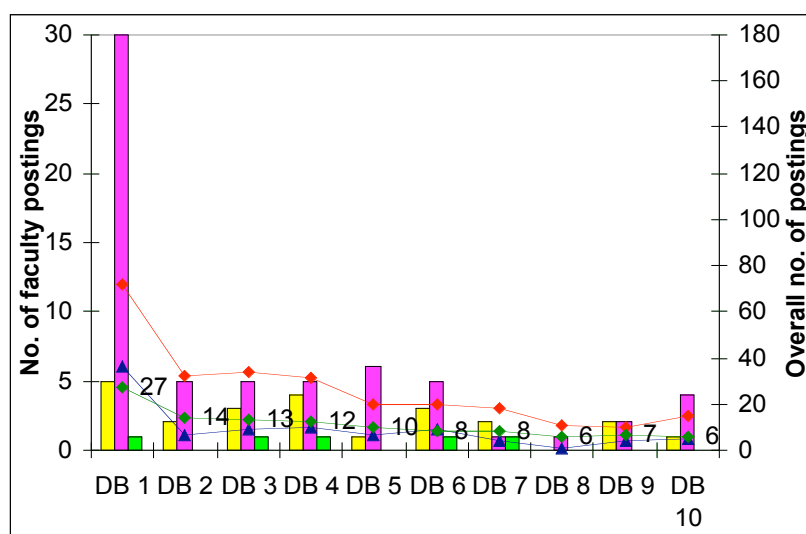
Graph: Type of faculty postings



Graph: Length of faculty postings

Table 3: Faculty participation in Course C – Term 2 (Total no. of students = 48)

	Corrective				Informative				Socratic				Overall total faculty postings				Posts students + fac.	Stud. posts	Stud. participated
	1-2 L	3-5 L	6-10 L	Total	1-2 L	3-5 L	6-10 L	Total	1-2 L	3-5 L	6-10 L	Total	1-2 L	3-5 L	6-10 L	Total			
DB 1	1	3	1	5	20	9	1	30	1	0	0	1	22	12	2	36	108	72	27
DB 2	1	1	0	2	3	2	0	5	0	0	0	0	4	3	0	7	39	32	14
DB 3	1	1	1	3	1	4	0	5	1	0	0	1	3	5	1	9	43	34	13
DB 4	2	1	1	4	0	3	2	5	0	1	0	1	2	5	3	10	41	31	12
DB 5	1	0	0	1	2	3	1	6	0	0	0	0	3	3	1	7	27	20	10
DB 6	0	3	0	3	3	2	0	5	0	1	0	1	3	6	0	9	29	20	8
DB 7	1	0	1	2	1	0	0	1	1	0	0	1	3	0	1	4	22	18	8
DB 8	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	12	11	6
DB 9	1	1	0	2	0	2	0	2	0	0	0	0	1	3	0	4	14	10	7
DB10	0	1	0	1	2	1	1	4	0	0	0	0	2	2	1	5	20	15	6
Total	8	11	4	23	32	27	5	64	3	2	0	5	43	40	9	92	355	263	



Graph: Type of faculty postings

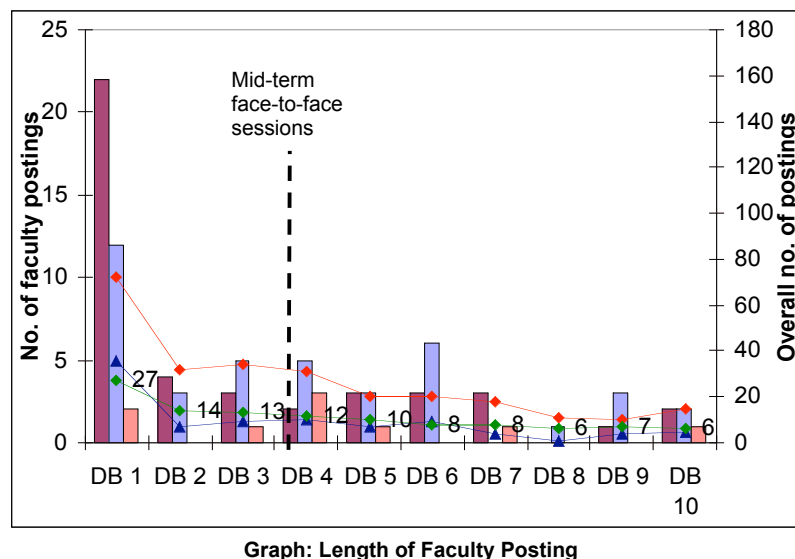
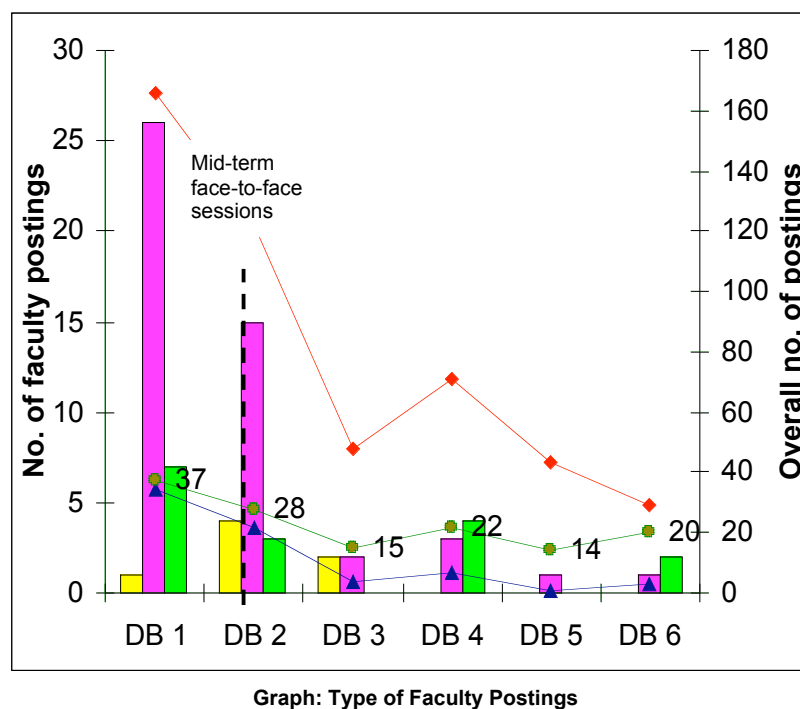
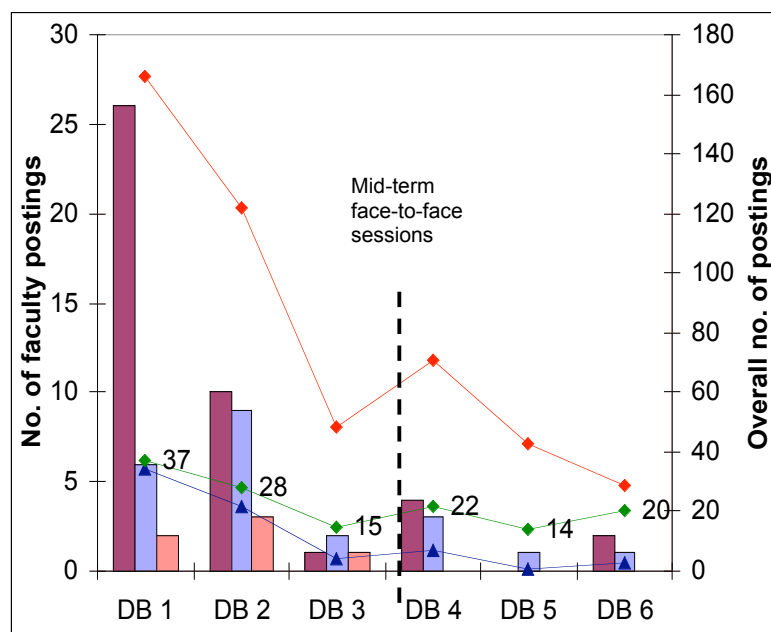


Table 4: Faculty participation in Course D – Term 2 (Total no. of students = 48)

	Corrective				Informative				Socratic				Overall total faculty postings				Posts students + fac.	Student posts	Stud. participated
	1-2	3-5	6-10	Total	1-2	3-5	6-10	Total	1-2	3-5	6-10	Total	1-2	3-5	6-10	Total			
	L	L	L		L	L	L		L	L	L		L	L	L				
DB 1	1	0	0	1	19	5	2	26	6	1	0	7	26	6	2	34	200	166	37
DB 2	1	2	1	4	8	5	2	15	1	2	0	3	10	9	3	22	144	122	28
DB 3	0	2	0	2	1	0	1	2	0	0	0	0	1	2	1	4	52	48	15
DB 4	0	0	0	0	1	2	0	3	3	1	0	4	4	3	0	7	78	71	22
DB 5	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	44	43	14
DB 6	0	0	0	0	1	0	0	1	1	1	0	2	2	1	0	3	32	29	20
Total	2	4	1	7	30	13	5	48	11	5	0	16	43	22	6	71	550	479	





Graph: Length of faculty postings

The above findings helped in analysing the various implications of the “teaching presence” and in fulfilling the research objectives outlined earlier:

1. The “teaching presence” of the faculty has been dominated by “1-2 Liners” and “Informative” faculty postings. This is a clear indication that the value-add by the faculty in improving the understanding of the students has indeed been low. As is obvious, the “professorial” inputs possible through “6-10 Liners” were very few to highlight the value of faculty presence in the online component of the program. This impacted further when the students compared the contributions of the U21Global online professors with their IIMB counterparts who conducted the face-to-face sessions.
2. Student participation measured by the number of student postings and the number of students participated has shown clear declining trends from the first to the last DB in all the four subjects. However, an upsurge in student participation was always observed on the DB immediately after the mid-term face-to-face sessions.
3. There is a strong positive correlation between the level of faculty participation and the corresponding level of student participation on the DBs.
4. The length of faculty postings indeed has a bearing upon student engagement on the DBs. The high number of “1-2 Liners” and sparingly used “6-10 Liners” resulted in declining student posting numbers and the number of students participated.
5. The simple tables and graphs used in the study would aid the faculty in providing a better learning experience to the students on the online DBs. In the study, the tables and graphs have been used to analyse the “teaching presence” after the online classes were already over. The main utility of these tables and graphs would be in monitoring the “teaching presence” during the classes in progress. These tools can be used for self-control of “teaching presence” by the faculty themselves or by the program administrators. For example, if decline in student participation is noticed in the second DB topic, the faculty may like to increase the “teaching presence” by way of more comprehensive postings of different types to keep the students engaged and interested.

This is the first time that such a comprehensive examination of “teaching presence” has been conducted at U21Global. Normally, faculty’s performance in purely online MBA classes at U21Global is gauged by student satisfaction survey (called Student Evaluation of Faculty - SEF) and the report of the Subject Area Coordinator. All the four professors used in the four sections considered in the study have always scored highly on the SEF in the purely online classes and some of them are rated as “Star Professors”.

The students of MPEFB comprise a very unique cohort of entrepreneurs and members of family businesses. The main objective of these “owner-managers” in undergoing such a program is to “acquire knowledge” and “improve managerial skills” to better manage their enterprises. This is in contrast to the students in the MBA or other degree awarding programs and also the participants in the corporate executive education (EE) programs. The levels of student participation in the degree awarding and EE programs is usually very high due to the motivation to acquire the degree or due to pressure from the

company HR to perform well in the EE programs. However, in MPEFB, the student motivation is primarily guided by the utility of the concepts covered and professor's inputs in directly improving their businesses. Thus, the faculty's performance in the online component is gauged by the students on different parameters compared to the degree awarding and EE programs. The online faculty training program (FTP) at U21Global does provide inputs to the faculty about maintaining the faculty presence and to motivate the inactive students to participate in the discussions. However, it does not provide explicit inputs about the types and length of faculty postings and their possible use in keeping the unique cohort of MPEFB students engaged and interested. Thus, in the subsequent terms of the current batch and the future offerings of the program, the program director would conduct one-to-one meetings with the faculty to apprise them of the utility of the tools used in the study in controlling student participation and engagement in a better way.

Conclusion

In earlier studies, the ways of measurement of "teaching presence" in online classes have been proposed. In this study, the unique issues related to the "teaching presence" in the online component of a blended program have been highlighted. The purpose of the asynchronous discussions in this program was to provide an opportunity to this class of entrepreneurs and members of family businesses to share experiences on various facets of their entrepreneurial ventures with each other under the guidance of an online faculty. The issues have been aggravated by the direct comparison of the students between the academic contributions of the faculty facilitating the online component with their counterparts conducting the face-to-face sessions in the same courses. The study utilised the taxonomy proposed by Blignaut & Trollip (2003), however the data of faculty postings was further segregated on two new dimensions namely the DB topics and the length of faculty postings. Recently concluded four courses in the blended program were considered. Analysis of the tables and graphs revealed that the "teaching presence" of faculty was dominated by "1-2 Liners" and "Informative" postings while "6-10 Liners" and "Corrective postings" were rarely present. The declining "teaching presence" from the first to the last DB had directly impacted the student presence measured by the number of student postings and the number of students participated on the discussion board in all the four courses. The method employed in the study to measure "teaching presence" has been found simple yet effective for the completed classes. It is anticipated that the method will be much more useful in continually tracking the teaching presence in ongoing classes on a per DB topic basis either by the faculty themselves or by the administrators of the programs in order to make mid-course corrections to improve student engagement on the online DBs. The study also highlighted the need to refurbish the faculty training program to inform the faculty about the benefits of the continual measurement of their own "teaching presence" and accordingly manoeuvring their postings to improve student engagement on the online DBs. The limitation of this study is the consideration of only four courses pertaining to four different subjects in a blended program. The method used here would have allowed direct comparison between the "teaching presence" of the professors had the courses pertained to the same subject. Perhaps, in such a scenario, it would have been possible to also gauge the quality of academic content in faculty postings, which was not possible to do in this study.

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