Host: I’m sitting here with Dr. Mark Kassel an instructional designer at Robert Morris University, and we are basically talking about teacher presence and distance education in online learning and how teachers maintain a presence and how students perceive that presence there as well. Mark I was wondering in the beginning of a course how an instructor can establish their teacher presence and establish clear expectations and goals when they aren’t physically present.

Dr. Kassel: TO make the most of the online medium, there are a variety of ways you can establish that teacher presence. I think some of the things people forget about are the most basic; announcements, email, and people say “Oh that’s print material we do that all the time”. You can’t decrease the value of the basic forms of communication. SO I think being very proactive by putting out announcements, being a little redundant, sending out that same information but doing it from a personal perspective; don’t print out your syllabus and stick it in – say what you as an instructor expect from your student.

I tell people all the time the minute the course opens, I send out an email even if the course hasn’t officially started yet, and say “Hey the course is open, just wanted you to know. My style of teaching kind of runs along this line, your first due date is going to be Wednesday, so don’t put of going into the course and doing what you need to do.” There are times that I have actually gone in and created videos of myself doing introductions or introducing myself; all things that that make a connection but also connect them to the course. I think having that nice balance of “here I am, I’m your instructor, I’m a real person, you are going to feel me, see me, and I’m part of this”.

Host: What about with weekly topics? How do I convey this is exactly what I want you to do during the week?

Dr. Kassel: The nice part about the weekly appearance of your instructor is that it is another touch point or what I call “An opportunity for engagement” and when we design courses, lots of time we tell people you should have a weekly announcement and weekly overview, and that overview shouldn’t be overly academic; it should be you the instructor, from your perspective, and your own words, telling the students what this week is about and what you hope they will get out of it. If you take it to that personal perspective and out of that highly academic verbiage, what you actually find is they start reading and following it because you are talking to them like you are talking from the classroom perspective. Again, sometimes I’ll do audio, one of my tricks is that at the start of my course is that I’ll have an interaction that is my voiceover but it is an object you can interact with and click on but it is actually “How to get an A from Dr. Kassel”, it sets out expectations for discussions, good suggested weekly schedule, type of assignments you are going to face, and it really clearly plays that out. At the same time I’ll do smaller versions of that, little video, little audio. I like ot use a variety so you aren’t seeing the same thing all the time. That way, people get a little engagement and say “Oh, what am I going to get this week.”

Host: You had mentioned engagement before and engagement during those weeks...how can teachers continually engage their class without using the same tools that might be used in other classes, say the discussion boards, what are some alternative ways you get those students back?
Dr. Kassal: You know it is a delicate balance from what I call in between pacing a good online course which means setting expectations so they kind of know what they are going to have to do every week from creating a variety within that pace so it doesn’t get boring and repetitive. We seem to forget that when we have a discussion in a live classroom...you may lecture, you may have a discussion, you may present them with a case, we may have a debate...we get creative with what we do in a classroom, so why when we get pushed into the online medium do we suddenly become real static and think of discussion as a question followed by responses? Be creative in these mediums. I tell people sometimes I’ll take a topic and present the case that I dealt with...but I won’t give them the whole story ... and I’ll ask them to interact over it. The goals will be, “How did they take the topics we are working on this week and apply it to a real case?” Now, case examples are not anything new in the online world; they are kind of a staple. But when you bring it from your personal professional perspective into your classroom, it isn’t just a case anyone can read about; it is a new challenge. I also say that why do we have to use the same perspective? I’ve actually gone out and used various resources on the web, NPR for example. I actually at one point found an NPR radio show that was fifteen minutes long where a man who had some addiction problems talked about his recovery and a young woman, who is only 21, was struggling with recovery was talking about her road to recovery. This is all for an addiction class. What we did was we talked about relapse prevention planning, which was part of the topic of the week, they supplied us with beautiful examples, and then we had a discussion and the students analyzed what these two people were saying for their weaknesses in their recovery plans. So just by using the web, some creativity, and some material that was already out there, we used a discussion format that included examples that weren’t my static cases, they were done via audio, and we engaged over the topic. Again, instructors can be more creative than I think they have been in the past. I think stimulating that creativity is part of good design.

Host: You talked about instructor presence when they are establishing themselves at the beginning of the course and establishing their expectations during the week but also putting out their activities to the students in an actual activity. What is the balance between how much presence they should actually have versus removing themselves and allowing the students to be more autonomous and actually digging through the materials themselves before an instructor actually jumps in. What is your recommendation on that balance?

Dr. Kassal: You know, I’d love to be able to say here is the perfect formula, 30% of all interaction should be the instructor for example. I’ll tell you as an instructor; I vary by content. So, I tell people for the first few weeks I’m very heavy in discussions because I want them to know I’m there. It increases accountability, but also increases engagement. But it will vary by topic, here is a great example: We were talking about the use of a suicide risk assessment tool in a course. So, they were given an example and asked how would they go about completing this assignment under these conditions. Suicide brings up a lot of emotional reaction even for high level students. So a lot of discussion was going back and forth, so I sat back and monitored and made sure it stayed healthy but I really didn’t interact. Then towards the end of the week I posted a significant summary of their points but I also shared my experience as someone who did an assessment on someone who eventually successfully committed suicide. And that prompted another level of engagement, but I really let them process and struggle
because part of being a therapist in this particular program is understanding that you have to emotionally process and come to grips with the risks and the pressures of being in this position. So I tried to mimic that by not being as present and letting them struggle with the topic, their emotions, and each other. Then I came at the end to pull it together and tie up the loose ends. The idea here really is that this interaction is planned to decrease my interaction to create a specific goal. I wasn’t completely absent from it, but then when I did come in, I came in with a very specific purpose. So that is an example of how you would utilize the content to dictate the instructor’s level of participation based on the goal. Other ones I may have much more interaction because it needs guidance, and needs pushing. Sometimes that guides that formula. I’m a big believer that you have to be careful. Too much participation by the instructor makes the entire topic surround and focus on the instructor. It will actually decrease engagement with the peers and each other in the class, which I think actually lowers the utility of the online classroom. So to really promote engagement not just with the instructor, but with each other, you have to strike that balance around that content. I say that if you are going try to maintain and answer everybody you are going to A: wear yourself out, and B: hurt the overall discussion by decreasing their interactions. I tell people that my general rule is that early in a discussion you’ll find me about a 50% clip, after that you may see it drop to 30 or 35% depending on the content. I find when I’m there 30% I give significant presence without dominating feedback. And then of course my feedback to the students encourages them to interact with each other and require it to be successful.