

# Teaching-Presence through the Lens of Performativity in the Postdigital Age

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## **Abstract**

*Digital and physical learning environments continuously interact. Teaching is conceptualized not just as “doing” but as an embodied performance that constructs reality. This study explores how Chinese university English teachers perceive and manage student presence and engagement in postdigital classrooms. Framed by the theory of performativity, the research investigates how digital platforms shape teacher-student interactions and pedagogical authority. It addresses two central questions: How do teachers interpret student presence in mediated online spaces, and what strategies do they use to navigate the challenges of these interactions? Adopting a case study approach, this research draws on in-depth interviews with three university English teachers from a liberal arts institution in Beijing. The participants who represent different age groups all had extensive experience with blended teaching, providing rich, practical insights. These three participants are chosen from a larger dataset. A thematic analysis of the interview data was made to identify key patterns in their experiences. The findings revealed differences in how teachers understand online presence. Their understandings ranged from requiring visual confirmation via cameras, to asking for auditory participation, to accepting text-based responses in the chatroom as sufficient. The study shows that these different understandings lead to different teaching strategies. There are three main patterns: some teachers treat the screen like a window into the classroom, others struggle with students who are physically online but mentally absent, and many face a new power dynamic where students’ control over their cameras and mics can challenge the teacher’s authority. In conclusion, the study shows that “presence” in today’s blended classrooms is a complicated idea, shaped by technology, school rules, and the unique relationship between each teacher and student. The findings highlight that to build a real sense of connection, teachers need to be flexible and understanding, rather than just tracking who is logged in. These insights contribute to understanding how to develop more effective and embodied teaching practices in postdigital education. Future research could include a greater number of participants with broader identity, as well as observe online classes over a longer period to provide an even clearer and more detailed picture of these interactions.*

## **Keywords**

*Teaching-presence, teacher-student interaction, performativity, postdigital, case study*

## **Introduction**

Teaching is a social performance, embedded in the daily lives of embodied teachers and students who interact within both physical and digital spaces (Chew, 2022). Central to this is “presence”, defined not as mere existence, but as a state of active connection and interaction between individuals, “a sense of being there or being together” (Lehman & Conceição, 2010, p.3) This concept is social and dialogic. In an educational context, presence becomes a state of aware, receptive, and compassionate engagement with the learning process, enabling educators to respond thoughtfully to the needs of both individuals and the group (Chew, 2022). Consequently, teaching-presence and student-presence are not separate; they are interconnected in a dynamic exchange. This research focuses specifically on the teacher’s role, ie. how their physical and performed presence generates this essential connection. This focus does not negate the importance of student presence but is built upon its acknowledgment (Kennette & Redd, 2015).

Performativity frames teaching not merely as “doing”, but as a repeated practice that continually enacts and affirms its own tangible reality (Alexander et al., 2004). This perspective holds that a teaching act is never neutral or isolated; instead, it actively performs and reinforces the teacher’s embodied identity (such as race and gender), as well as the broader political, socio-cultural, and material structures in which it is situated. Consequently, to decipher what teaching actually “performs”, one must analyze teachers’ bodies and behaviors through a cultural lens (Schechner, 2007), thereby paving the way for richer, more holistic educational practices for all learning

environments. The works of Gourlay (2022) and Gravett (2022) present a nuanced view of presence and absence in postdigital education, where the physical and digital are intertwined. Gravett (2022) employs theories of performativity to analyse how identities are enacted online, in particular, how digital subjects and bodies are shaped, defined, and made unfamiliar. In this context, the teacher's body becomes an "absent presence" (Shilling, 1993, p.9), and their often-discontinuous visibility can challenge traditional classroom authority (Sørensen, 2009). This leads to a critical pair of questions for the postdigital era: How do Chinese college teachers perceive their students' presence in these mediated spaces, and what strategies do they employ to navigate unexpected online interactions? To address the above questions, a performative approach to the teaching-body and presence within the postdigital context is adopted in this paper. It generates new curricular and pedagogical opportunities. These emerge from the convergence of the social, cultural, technological, and material dimensions of education.

## Research Design

Data were collected from one-on-one, face-to-face, in-depth interviews with three female participants during the summer break in 2024 at a liberal arts university in Beijing, China. This dataset is a small part of a larger case study. The three interviewees represent senior and junior faculty members. A combination of purposeful and convenience sampling was employed to select three participants for this study. The study employed a qualitative, interview-based approach to prioritize the teachers' subjective, lived experiences and their personal interpretations of presence within the postdigital environment. This method was chosen over direct observation of online classes to gain access to the teachers' reflective reasoning, their perceived challenges, and the intentionality behind their pedagogical performances, which are not always visible through screen observation alone. Interviews were conducted in a quiet campus office. To ground the discussion in concrete practice, the researcher and the participant often referred to a shared screen displaying the Tencent Meeting platform interface. This visual anchor helped elicit detailed narratives about specific features (e.g., camera, chatroom) and specific incidents of interaction. The interview protocol was semi-structured, focusing on key themes: (1) How do you define or recognize student "presence" in your online/blended classes? (2) Can you describe a typical interaction and an unexpected or challenging one? (3) How do you navigate situations where student attention or engagement seems absent? (4) How do the platform's affordances (cameras, mics, chat) shape your teaching performance and sense of authority? The data analysis adopted a thematic coding process. The data was read to identify the participants' perception of presence, and the strategies for managing these interactions within the digital assemblage. Data analysis was conducted through multiple rounds of mutual verification by the author and her former classmate who now is studying in a Chinese university, and through member checking to ensure credibility and validity. Ethical approval was granted by the author's institution and the targeted university. Informed consent was obtained from all participants.

## Research Findings

The qualitative data revealed the participants' perceived presence, and how they navigated the dilemmas encountered. The results reflected the participants' positive attitude towards emergency online English teaching instruction modes and current blended teaching modes. However, their understanding of presence differs. For example, Participant X considered that presence involved being seen and being heard; Participant Y emphasized the importance of being heard; Participant Z accepted the presence of her students by seeing the photo or the digital image of them.

### Screen as a Window, Chatroom as a Forum

Digital platforms shape how teachers perceive students' presence through specific features related to being seen and heard. For Participant X, the screen acted as a portal for digital performance (Gourlay, 2020). She maintained that teachers should keep their cameras on, arguing that this practice allowed them to capture students' attention via eye contact. She conceptualized the screen as a window, enabling instructors to visually engage with students, which in turn fostered a sense of being heard. In order to achieve the mutual gaze, Participant X required her students to turn on their cameras while having online classes so that students' presence can be acknowledged or recorded. By contrast, neither Participant Y nor Participant Z demanded that their students should turn on their cameras. For Participant Y, it was the microphone that facilitated the verbal exchange between teachers and students. "As long as I can hear their voices when I ask them questions, I am happy to know they are there." (Y

interview) In fact, Participant Z is the most permissive instructor. She seemed to show more understanding and trust of her students.

I have a quite opening attitude towards students' camera status and microphone status. If they are listening to my lecture while lying in bed, this may be because they feel unwell. So they don't want to turn on their camera. Other possibilities may include students having online classes in the library or on the sportsground? So, I never ask or force them to turn on their camera and mic. As I can see their digital image or their name on the screen, I would accept their attendance. However, I will post some questions in the chat room. If they respond by keying in some words in the chatroom, this is a good proof of their presence. (Z interview)

Participant Z's approach highlights another key feature of the digital classroom, ie. the chatroom functioned as an alternative forum for communication. It allowed students to contribute their opinions in writing at any time, without waiting for their turn to speak. In short, the screen serves as a window through which the three participants can "see" if their students do show up with their cameras on or if their students appear in the form of "an image" with or without a functional microphone. The chatroom turns out to be a non-verbal "expressive space" (Friesen, 2011, p.158) with emojis, symbols, numbers, and texts.

### **Digital Presence, Attention Checked Out**

All participants expressed concern about student inattention in online classes, yet they held different attitudes and employed different coping strategies. To verify that students were mentally "on", Participant X, drawing on her years of teaching experience, consistently asked individual students to answer questions or provide comments. This approach often identified inattentive students who failed to respond in the chatroom or remained silent with their cameras off. This state of engagement exemplifies what Gourlay (2022, p. 65) terms "a form of simultaneous absence and presence, in which one is both 'there' and 'not there'". For Participant Y, this duality meant that when cameras were off, she could not tell who was preparing to answer a question. She contrasted this with the physical classroom, where she could walk over to a student who voiced an opinion or gauge attention through facial expressions. Online, her solution was either to call on a student from the participant list or wait for a volunteer to identify themselves before speaking. Participant Z also acknowledged that students might slack off, but she explicitly rejected the role of a "police officer" who constantly monitors attention. She believed that such "interrogation" would disrupt the "flow and integrity" of her teaching. In brief, digital presence with inattentiveness does happen sometimes, but teachers' perception of and attitude towards this make a difference to their enacted strategies. Presence to them is a relational, embodied, and affective experience that cannot be intellectualized nor individualized.

### **Autonomy Exercised, Authority Challenged**

The data also demonstrate another type of teacher-student interaction in online classes. A teacher in a chairperson's capacity could exercise control over muting students' microphones when she needs them to be quiet or, alternatively, turning off their cameras to avoid a possible breakdown in communication due to a large audience (e.g. 72 students) logging onto the same platform at the same time. Participant X was upset to find her authority challenged by students when she demanded they turn their microphones back on after she set them to mute for a while. As she shared,

I wish I could have a remote control over my students' camera and microphone status so that I could click on anyone to show up and speak. (X interview)

Participant Y noted that the Tencent Meeting platform afforded students a measure of autonomy, allowing them to curate their presence by selectively enabling cameras and microphones, using virtual backgrounds to manage their visual environment, and choosing when to engage via the text-based chat. She thought this autonomy offset teachers' power to an extent. Similarly, Participant Z wanted to give her students emotional support or care when she realized cameras and screens can distort appearances, making people look larger or awkwardly framed and these distortions can distract students or affect how they interact.

I don't want all my interactions to be observable, neither do my students. If they take liberty to turn on their cameras or microphones as they see fit, I don't see why not. Unobserved learning is not necessarily inactive. (Z interview)

Autonomy can be exercised by both teachers and students in different ways. When teachers' request is not met, their authority can be challenged. It is not the digital device or technology that challenges a teacher's authority, it is the human-digital assemblage that matters. Teachers view "presence" as essential for creating active, collaborative, and socially connected learning, whether in-person or online. They typically use visual cues, verbal exchanges, and immediate feedback to assess student understanding and adjust pedagogical strategies accordingly (Goodyear, 2022). However, these conventional signs of engagement are harder to detect in digital spaces. Instead, they become "flickering" (Gourlay, 2022, p.67), making it challenging to differentiate between true presence and passive attendance. This often reflects a form of absence through cognitive disengagement, where students are present online but not mentally participating, which diminishes the effectiveness of synchronous and asynchronous learning activities (Bergdahl, 2022).

## Conclusions

This study shows that teaching in postdigital settings is a continuous performance where "presence" is not a fixed state but a relationally enacted and contested practice. The teachers' differing interpretations of presence such as visual, auditory, or text-based, directly shaped their pedagogical performances, from demanding camera use to fostering chatroom dialogue. These performances, in turn, actively construct the classroom's reality, reinforcing or challenging traditional authority and social bonds. The findings suggest that fostering meaningful engagement is not an alternative to fostering learning but is its essential condition within a performative view; learning is enacted through these very interactions. While this study relied on reflective interviews, future research would benefit from multi-modal data generation to capture the performative, embodied nature of these interactions more fully. This could include observing live or recorded class sessions, screen-capture videos paired with retrospective participant commentary. Such methods, alongside a larger and more diverse participant pool, would provide a richer, more holistic understanding of the human-digital assemblages that constitute postdigital education.

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