

Listening to Adjunct Faculty Voices: A Case Study for Supporting Adjunct Faculty Across Career Stages at a Small Community College

Linda S. Neff

Coconino Community College and Foothill College, USA

Leanna Archambault

Arizona State University, USA

Abstract

Community college adjunct faculty, who teach a majority of first-year courses, face varied challenges related to limited access to ongoing support. This qualitative study examined the effects of an instructional coaching program on community college adjunct faculty's self-efficacy and ability to enhance instructor presence in online courses. Using a multiple case study research design, we investigated the impact of an instructional coaching program on two early-career (<7 years) and two mid- to late-career (>12 years) online adjunct faculty. Self-Efficacy Theory (Bandura 1997, 2005), the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison 2016a), and Richardson et al.'s (2015) operationalization of instructor presence provided the interpretive frameworks for analyzing coaching session data and faculty-student interactions recorded in pre- and post-intervention archived courses. Findings revealed self-efficacy gains across career stages, with early-career faculty demonstrating a stronger willingness to adopt new technologies such as GenAI, resulting in significant improvements in their self-efficacy and application of newly acquired skills. Mid- to late-career faculty expressed higher perceived confidence from their extensive face-to-face teaching experience, with a more cautious and thoughtful approach to implementing new teaching strategies in their course. These results suggest that when ongoing professional development is designed to meet the unique needs of adjunct faculty across different career stages, it can improve their sense of institutional belonging and retention.

Keywords: Adjunct faculty, instructional coaching, community college, instructor presence, regular and substantive interaction, faculty development

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Adjunct or “part-time” faculty at community colleges often face unquestionably challenging, and at times dehumanizing conditions, characterized by minimal institutional support and limited access to faculty development. Recent studies consistently show that adjuncts lack job security, and they are routinely excluded from institutional decision-making and professional development (American Association of University Professors, 2021; Potts, 2021; Tanenbaum, 2024). As a result, they often feel isolated, underprepared, and left out of university conversations (Childress, 2019; Reichman, 2021). Additionally, the lack of structured professional development contributes to decreased faculty engagement and integration, negatively impacting student retention and success (Thirolf, 2016). Despite these circumstances, adjunct faculty represent one of the fastest-growing job sectors in higher education and play a vital role in teaching introductory courses to academically underprepared students (Childress, 2019).

Parallel to the growth in adjunct faculty employment, online course enrollment has also expanded significantly. In 2019, 28.1% of students took some online courses, and 44.7% were enrolled exclusively online (NCES, 2020). While online learning is critical to the long-term success of higher education institutions (Brown et al., 2020), research shows that students in online courses, particularly at community colleges, often perform worse than their face-to-face peers (Xu & Jaggars, 2013, 2014). However, when instructors design inclusive, student-centered online courses, students can perform as well as or better than in face-to-face settings (Garman & Good, 2012). Faculty development that empowers instructors to enhance their instructor presence and foster an active learning environment is essential for bridging this performance gap. Closing these performance gaps calls for targeted faculty development, particularly for adjunct instructors, who frequently face unique barriers and lack access to necessary resources and training.

A recent survey by the Online Learning Consortium (OLC), in collaboration with WICHE Cooperative for Educational Technologies (WCET) and Every Learner Everywhere, noted widespread gaps in resources and support for adjunct faculty, particularly at small institutions where limited personnel complicates faculty development efforts (Davis et al., 2022). Building on these findings, the Supporting Online Adjunct Faculty Playbook offers actionable strategies for preparing and supporting online adjunct faculty (Weber et al., 2022). Inspired by these resources, this qualitative case study explored how innovative approaches could help a small community college in the American Southwest to enhance support for online adjunct faculty across different career stages.

This study explored online adjunct faculty experiences at Southwest Community College (SWCC, a pseudonym). Despite extensive research documenting adjunct faculty barriers, challenges, and faculty development needs, research about the effectiveness of instructional coaching in shaping online teaching practices is scarce (Butter & Gann, 2022). In an effort to work toward closing this gap, we explored how a facilitated asynchronous online training program combined with three follow-up instructional coaching sessions influenced adjunct faculty’s self-efficacy and ability to create meaningful student interactions through instructor presence.

Literature Review

Adjunct Faculty Challenges in Higher Education

Due to a lack of job security, adjunct faculty face difficult and precarious working conditions, often resembling those of gig employees (Tolley, 2018). Despite often teaching a similar course load as tenured faculty, adjunct faculty members are typically hired on a contract basis without access to healthcare, retirement plans, or paid time off (AAUP, 2018). This financial instability and lack of benefits take a toll on an adjunct faculty member's well-being and quality of life. Moreover, their limited access to institutional resources frequently hinders opportunities to develop meaningful relationships with their students and colleagues, contributing to a sense of isolation and disconnection (Childress, 2019; Potts, 2021; Thirolf, 2017).

The lack of institutional investment in adjunct faculty professional growth further exacerbates these issues. Unlike tenure-track faculty, who benefit from robust support and resources, adjunct faculty rarely receive additional institutional support (AAUP, 2018; Kezar & Maxey, 2013), particularly "for anything that costs money and is not related to preparing and delivering discrete course materials" (Coalition on the Academic Workforce, 2012, p. 13). These challenges are more pronounced for online adjunct faculty, particularly when it comes to equitable access to technology, institutional resources, and course preparation time (Center for Community College Engagement, 2014). Without faculty development focused on how to achieve deep and meaningful learning in the online classroom, they often make poor pedagogical choices, resulting in inconsistent learning outcomes and disengaged students (Bourdeaux & Schoenack, 2016).

To address these unique challenges, Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) offers a useful framework for exploring teacher readiness to teach online, emphasizing the personal beliefs and experiences that shape an instructor's sense of confidence. According to Bandura (1997), self-efficacy is shaped by four key factors: mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasion, and physiological feedback. For example, successfully implementing a new pedagogical strategy in an online course (mastery experience) has the greatest impact on self-efficacy. Observing skilled colleagues (vicarious experiences) offers instructors a way to visualize success in their own classrooms, whereas encouragement received by peers, students, or instructional coaches (social persuasion), reinforces the instructor's motivation and confidence to tackle difficult challenges. Finally, reduced anxiety when navigating a learning management system (physiological feedback) helps instructors feel at ease and more prepared to teach online. Together, these factors form the basis for understanding how instructors build confidence in online teaching.

Several studies demonstrate a high positive correlation between high levels of self-efficacy, a positive instructor mindset toward online teaching, high teacher and student ratings of instructional quality, reduced instructor anxiety, and improved student learning outcomes (Holzberger et al., 2013; Horvitz et al., 2014; Lee & Tsai, 2010; Liu et al., 2007). To tap into these benefits, institutions can design faculty development programs that focus on building mastery, facilitating observational learning, offering supportive feedback, and addressing instructors' emotional well-being. Building on Bandura's work, this study introduced an adjunct

faculty development program that combines asynchronous training with follow-up instructional coaching to enhance adjunct faculty self-efficacy for online instruction.

Faculty Readiness for Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) in Online Instruction

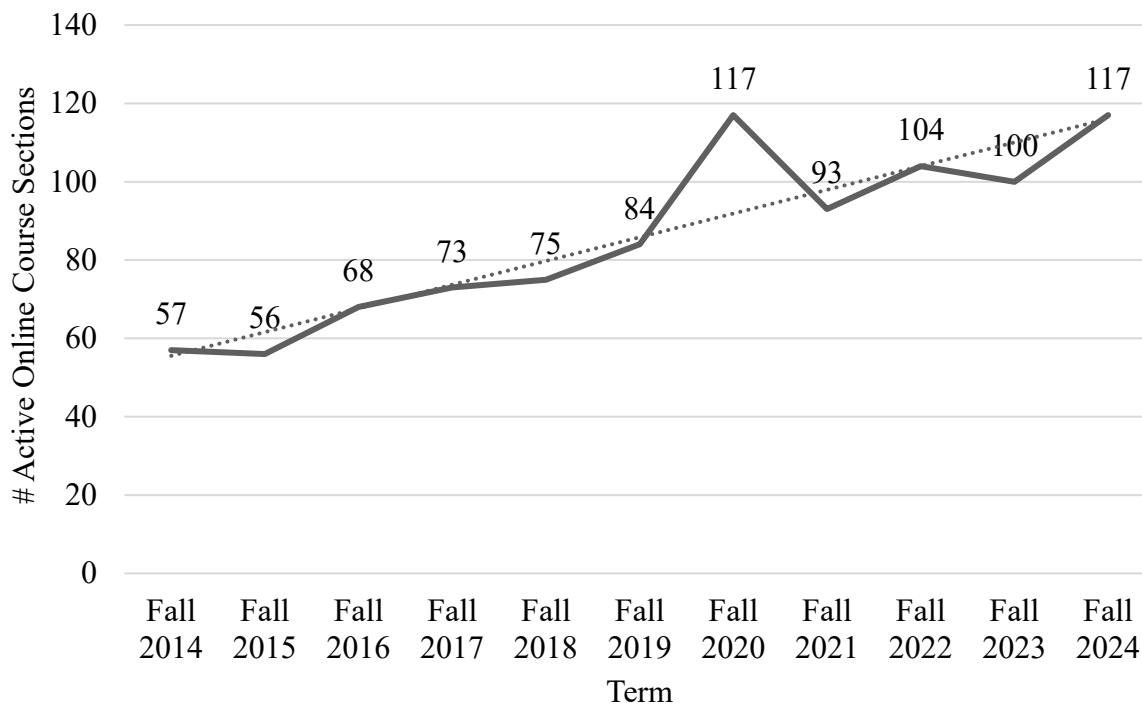
The rapid transition to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic introduced another layer of complexity to the well-documented challenges of adjunct faculty at community colleges. In spring 2020, schools across the United States shifted instruction to online platforms to keep faculty and students safe, a process commonly referred to as Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) (Hodges et al., 2020). Instructional designers and educational researchers made this distinction to ensure that hastily implemented remote instruction was not conflated with high-quality, intentional online course design. In doing so, they hoped to avoid the stigmatization of online learning as a lower-quality option based on these emergency responses. This rapid transition led to innovations in teaching modalities but also politicized the discourse around online learning, as stakeholders debated its effectiveness compared to traditional in-person instruction (Hodges et al., 2020).

In response to these developments, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) revised its definition of distance education, emphasizing the importance of regular and substantive (RSI) interaction between instructors and students as a fundamental measure of high-quality online instruction (34 CFR 600.2). The revised regulations require institutions to provide evidence that faculty engage meaningfully with students by providing direct instruction and individualized feedback, facilitating discussions, and often meeting with students in real-time. Setting them apart from self-paced correspondence courses, institutions need to demonstrate how distance education courses offer structured, regular opportunities for students to engage with their instructors (U.S. Department of Education, 2024). These guidelines help to ensure students receive a quality education that meets Title IV financial aid requirements, positioning RSI as an essential institutional benchmark of online course quality (Toppo, 2018; WCET & SAN, 2023). Responding to these developments, institutions need well-prepared instructors who can effectively apply online pedagogy that meets RSI requirements.

Growing enrollment in online courses reinforces the importance of preparing faculty to engage in effective online teaching practices. Between 2012 and 2021, distance education courses in the United States grew from 26.1% to 37.3% (Brown et al., 2020; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2022). For example, SWCC has witnessed a 26% enrollment decline over the last decade. Meanwhile, SWCC online course offerings increased by 105.3%, likely due to declining face-to-face enrollments (see Figure 1). This shift demonstrates the importance of distance education for institutional survival, but it also comes with its own set of difficulties. In particular, community college students tend to have lower pass rates (60.4% vs. 70.6%) in online courses compared to their face-to-face counterparts, with SWCC mirroring national trends (62.4% vs. 68.9%; Xu & Jaggars, 2013, 2014).

Figure 1

Frequency of Active Online Course Sections by Term at SWCC



Community of Inquiry and Instructor Presence

To address these performance gaps, instructors need opportunities to learn how to create inclusive, student-centered online courses. Professional learning should address the new RSI requirements and incorporate humanizing strategies that promote empathy, instructor presence, and community to boost student retention and success. Building on these insights, the current study investigated how a structured faculty development program that focused on developing self-efficacy for enhancing instructor presence helped instructors meet RSI guidelines and enhanced their readiness to teach online.

Research focused on online faculty learning have frequently drawn on both the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET) to explore the development of self-efficacy in online teaching (Bandura 1997, 2012; Garrison, 2016a; Garrison, 2016b; Robinia & Anderson, 2010). According to the CoI framework, to “achieve deep and meaningful learning,” instruction needs to occur in “a collaborative community of inquiry” (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019, p. 67; Garrison, 2016b). Born out of two decades of empirical research, deep and meaningful learning stems from “the development of three interdependent elements: (a) social presence, (b) cognitive presence, and (c) teaching presence” (Cleveland-Innes et al., 2019, p. 68). An online course design fosters social presence by encouraging students to express their identities through open communication, trust, and group cohesion. Cognitive presence engages students to think deeply and critically about the course content

through reflection and collaboration. Teaching presence refers to the instructional design, facilitation, and direct instruction required to achieve meaningful learning (Garrison, 2016a; Garrison, 2016b). When all the right conditions are in place, these elements enhance student learning, making them essential for online course design.

Grounded in the CoI framework, instructor presence combines both social and teaching presence during a live online course (Richardson et al., 2015). It refers to the actions and behaviors related to authentic engagement between instructor and students (Richardson et al., 2015). On the social side, the focus is on making students feel emotionally connected, fostering a sense of community, and encouraging interaction (Hodges & Cowan, 2012; Pacansky-Brock et al., 2020; Sheridan & Kelly, 2010; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Valle, 2004). The teaching aspect centers on organizing content, guiding discussions, offering direct instruction, and giving timely feedback. Together, these elements ensure students feel supported and receive the guidance they need to learn. When combined, these constructs work in harmony to create an engaging online learning experience through the instructor's presence.

Research shows that pairing CoI-based practices with activities designed to boost self-efficacy yields positive gains on both instructional quality and student performance (Rosser-Majors et al., 2022; Holzberger et al., 2013). Faculty development programs informed by CoI and SET principles create the necessary scaffolding for instructors to enhance their instructor presence and meet the new RSI guidelines. Self-efficacy theory also offers a lens to evaluate how adjunct faculty perceive their ability to improve in this area. Consequently, not only do professional learning programs following these principles prepare faculty to teach online and tackle student performance challenges, but they also cultivate a sense of institutional belonging, ultimately strengthening the entire academic community.

Initial assessments at Southwest Community College revealed low retention rates for adjunct faculty, along with limited professional development opportunities. These factors led to a diminished sense of institutional belonging for online adjunct faculty. In response, we piloted an asynchronous training and instructional coaching program as part of a new onboarding initiative. Using data from student and faculty surveys, as well as coaching session transcripts, findings from the pilot shaped the development of a comprehensive instructional coaching program aimed at improving adjunct faculty readiness and bridging the performance gap between online and face-to-face courses. Informed by the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework and Self-Efficacy Theory (SET), we designed a program that empowers faculty by strengthening their confidence and enhancing their instructor presence in their online classrooms.

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the impact of an instructional coaching program on adjunct faculty across different career stages in the community college setting. Instructional coaching is a collaborative, reflective process where a trained coach works with a faculty member to identify instructional goals, discuss teaching practices, and offer constructive feedback designed to enhance teaching self-efficacy and improve instructional effectiveness (Costa & Garman, 2016; Neff, 2024). Given the recent federal mandates to improve online course quality, the coaching focused on helping instructors boost instructor

presence in the online classroom while building self-efficacy through instructional coaching and iterative practice. This investigation was guided by the following research questions:

RQ1: How did participation in an Instructional Coaching Program (ICP) impact online adjunct instructor self-efficacy for enhancing instructor presence in the online classroom within a community college setting at different stages of their career (early career and mid- to late-career)?

RQ2: How and to what extent did participation in an Instructional Coaching Program impact the knowledge and skills of online adjunct instructors' ability to enhance instructor presence in the online classroom within a community college setting at different stages of their career (early career and mid- to late-career)?

Methods

Aligned with Yin's (2018) framework, we employed a multiple-case study design to thoroughly explore the intervention's impact on early-career (less than 7 years) and mid-to-late-career (more than 12 years) online adjunct faculty. Since the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore how adjunct faculty made sense of and demonstrated their learning, no control or comparison group was needed. The goal was to explore how instructors' self-efficacy evolved and was applied to their learning, with a particular emphasis on variation across career stages. To address the first research question, a deductive qualitative analysis was performed on a stratified random sample of course content, comparing the same course's materials before and after the intervention. To address the second research question, an inductive thematic analysis was conducted on coaching session transcripts to compare early-career (<7 years) and mid- to late-career (>12 years) online adjunct faculty's perceptions and experiences related to boosting instructor presence in their online courses.

Researcher Positionality

Stating the researchers' positionality, or personal and professional experiences related to the study, helped to establish how our perspectives might have influenced the research process and the results (Mertler, 2020). The first author, who led the study, has held various instructional design-related staff and leadership positions since 1997 in both K-12 and higher education contexts. She has also been an adjunct faculty member, teaching both online and in person, for over 20 years. Currently, she is the sole full-time instructional designer for SWCC's Teaching and Learning Center and served as a participant-observer while facilitating the online training and instructional coaching program. Through relationships developed during new faculty orientations, division meetings, and other collaborative projects, she was able to streamline the recruitment process while also building rapport and trust during the coaching sessions. The second author is a professor of learning design and technology, has taught online for over 20 years, and has designed and led multiple professional learning opportunities for faculty and K-12 teachers on online pedagogy. She served as a faculty mentor for the lead author. Due to our collective roles as scholar-practitioners, we were motivated to explore how online adjunct faculty develop self-efficacy to enhance instructor presence across career stages in the community college sector.

Participant Recruitment

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approval, the first author recruited SWCC adjunct faculty through voluntary participation using both a purposeful and convenience-based sample. Individual email invitations were sent to the 17 part-time faculty who met the following criteria: (a) instructors who taught an online course in fall 2023 and the same course in spring 2024, (b) those teaching part-time, and (c) those teaching a fully online course (Creswell & Guetterman, 2019). A total of four adjunct faculty members—all women from diverse disciplines and representing two distinct career stages—participated in the study. Two participants, Clara and Eliza (pseudonyms), were early in their careers, while Sophia and Evelyn (pseudonyms) were in their mid- to late-career stage. After obtaining informed consent, participants were asked to share their pre-intervention and post-intervention archived courses. We focused our analysis on course content, including assessment instructions, student feedback, discussion postings, assignment instructions, announcements, and other course messages. In addition, the first author conducted three coaching sessions per participant ($n = 12$) via Zoom between January and May 2024. Each session lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. They were recorded using Otter.ai and analyzed using Dedoose.

When participants were recruited, they were informed that all results would be reported anonymously, and coaching session conversations would remain confidential between the coach and participant. To further ensure privacy, we assured them that none of the session content would be shared with their supervisors. As a result, we decided to use pseudonyms, which the participants approved, allowing us to retain their ethnolinguistic backgrounds to honor their identities (Wang et al., 2024). Collectively, the selected participants provided valuable perspectives into the career-specific experiences, needs, and outcomes of the ICP (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participant Information

Case	Instructor Pseudonym	# Years Teaching	# Years Teaching Online	# Years Teaching at SWCC	Coaching Session Data	Pre- and Post Intervention Course Data
Early-career (<7 yrs.)	Clara	2	2	2	x	x
	Eliza	2	2	2	x	x
Mid- to late-career (>7 yrs.)	Sophia	27	18	25	x	x
	Evelyn	19	14	13	x	-

The early-career participants, Clara and Eliza, both started teaching two years ago. Clara taught a full course load as a part-time instructor at SWCC but did not intend to pursue full-time employment due to low pay and the high cost of living. She wanted to continue teaching as she held down a full-time job and attended graduate school. On the other hand, Eliza hoped to gain a more stable full-time community college instructor position while negotiating multiple responsibilities outside of work. Not surprisingly, they faced diverse challenges and motivations, a common experience among SWCC early-career adjunct faculty.

Alternatively, the mid- to late-career participants, Sophia and Evelyn, had extensive teaching experience with slightly different professional goals. Sophia brought a wealth of

college-level teaching and practical experience to her position, enriching the learner experience. Evelyn, who was a career adjunct instructor, had substantial experience teaching in both K-12 and community college settings and enjoyed working part-time while also pursuing her personal interests.

Intervention

The intervention consisted of a four-week online training program followed by three personalized coaching sessions. The training, [Humanizing Online Learning](#) was modified from an Open Educational Resource (OER) by Marcia Chaudet and colleagues (2024) titled “[Humanizing Virtual Learning](#),” which centered on cultivating awareness, empathy, trust, and presence in online learning. Structured modules emphasized topics like getting to know your learners, the importance of instructor presence and humanizing yourself, building a supportive community, and signaling presence through compassionate and constructive learner feedback. These behaviors (Richardson et al., 2015) are aligned with RSI requirements from the U.S. Department of Education. Following the training, three instructional coaching sessions were conducted to engage faculty in applying these strategies through reflective conversations, goal setting, resource sharing, and feedback.

Data Analysis

Archived Course Observations

To assess the intervention’s impact on participants’ knowledge and skills related to boosting instructor presence in the online classroom, we conducted a deductive content analysis with *a priori* codes from the Instructor Presence Codebook to compare pre- and post-intervention faculty-student interactions that were recorded in three sets of archived courses (Richardson et al., 2015, p. 259). For this study, knowledge refers to the participant's conceptual understanding of effective practices for boosting instructor presence in the online classroom, while skills refer to the demonstrated ability to deploy these strategies in their online course to enhance instructor-student interaction. One participant’s course was excluded because the course modality was different (i.e., fully online and videoconference) between the fall and spring semesters. Interactions were examined from the Welcome modules, syllabi, online communications, discussions, assignment feedback, and announcements (Given, 2008). Due to limited access, all faculty-student communications that occurred outside of the learning management system (LMS) were excluded. A random sample of two items from the beginning (Weeks 1–4), middle (Weeks 5–11), and end (Weeks 12–16) of the course, along with all items in the Welcome module, was selected. Because not all courses had announcements or other interactions to catalog, the number of items differed for each course (Table 2). Consequently, 49 pre-intervention and 59 post-intervention course content items were analyzed.

Table 2

Content Analysis Document Frequency

^a Course	Pre-Intervention Sample Size	Post-Intervention Sample Size
Course 1A	14	21
Course 2B	21	23
Course 3P	14	15

Note. ^aCourse names are kept anonymous to protect the identity of instructors.

Coaching Session Transcripts

To explore the impact of the intervention on participants' self-efficacy for enhancing instructor presence in the online classroom, the first author used Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis process, which involved the following steps: (a) preparing, organizing, and cleaning the data; (b) reading through all the data; (c) summarizing key patterns at both broad and detailed levels; (d) developing and refining the coding framework through deductive and inductive methods; (e) coding the data; (f) grouping codes to form themes; and (g) interpreting the data.

In this case study, construct validity was established to ensure that key concepts were accurately defined, measured, and interpreted (Yin, 2018). To establish construct validity, we employed multiple strategies: (a) multiple sources of evidence, (b) a chain of evidence, (c) member checking, and (d) the use of clear operational definitions (Mertler, 2020; Yin, 2018). Data from coaching session transcripts, archived course observations, and field notes were triangulated to validate findings. To enhance reliability, we reviewed transcripts for mistakes, established standardized code definitions with examples to reduce subjectivity, and employed a critical friend to conduct four inter-rater reliability tests using Dedoose to evaluate code application consistency. Each test focused on four to five codes to minimize cognitive load. Inter-rater reliability was assessed using Dedoose, which calculated pooled Cohen's kappa scores ranging from 0.75 to 1.00, indicating substantial agreement and validating the coding scheme (Cicchetti, 1994; Fleiss, 1971).

Together, these strategies strengthened the representation of the constructs under study (Yin, 2018). However, the study did have limitations. First, we could not verify every action—such as emails or meetings—which affected the credibility of some claims. Also, the intervention consisted of a 4-week training followed by a 16-week semester, which was not enough time to fully understand the long-term impact. Finally, the number of participants was limited, with four women who served as adjunct faculty from the same institution. As a result, this limited our ability to generalize the findings. As with most qualitative studies, the findings offer valuable insight regarding adjunct faculty growth; however, it is possible the observed changes occurred due to other contextual factors rather than as a direct result of the intervention. Despite these drawbacks, we believe this study shares important insights about a comprehensive instructional coaching program aimed at improving the instructor presence of adjunct faculty who teach online.

Results

Intervention Impact on Self-Efficacy

Using a multiple case study design, we present a cross-case comparison of the early-career (<7 years) and mid- to late-career (>12 years) cases according to our two research questions. To address the first research question on the impact of an ICP on self-efficacy for enhancing instructor presence in an online setting, we conducted an inductive thematic analysis of coaching session transcripts. This analysis compared the perceptions and experiences of early-

career (<7 years) and mid- to late-career (>12 years) online adjunct faculty regarding their efforts to boost instructor presence in the online teaching environment.

The results revealed that participation in the ICP positively influenced the development of self-efficacy in online adjunct faculty, heightening instructor presence in the online classroom across all career stages. Six themes were uncovered related to the development of participants' self-efficacy for enhancing instructor presence in the online classroom: (a) behavioral steadfastness, (b) awareness and aspiration, (c) exploration and learning, (d) practice and development, (e) belief and confidence, and (f) goal setting and planning (Table 3). Each theme had at least 10 excerpts, providing sufficient data to examine how instructors enhanced their instructor presence across different self-efficacy categories.

Table 3

Self-Efficacy Themes Identified from Coaching Session Transcripts

Theme	Sub-theme Components	Definition	Examples
Behavioral steadfastness	No plans to change	Participants definitively stated they have no intention of trying something new or planning to change how they currently do things in their course.	"I don't rate things that way. I don't think that way." "I don't like pictures, and I don't feel comfortable with pictures."
Awareness and aspiration	Acknowledgment of limitations Anticipating students' and/or teacher needs Open to new ideas Personal reflections	Participants were aware of a new strategy and willing to consider trying it.	"And I said to myself, you know, tone is so important, because they don't see you on a daily basis...But, like a positive, encouraging tone means everything to someone who is searching for...How am I doing? You know?"
Exploration and learning	Learning new skill Learning by observing Seeking guidance Showing hesitation	Participants explored and learned about a new strategy	"...Chat GPT was astounding to me...I couldn't believe what it could do...I even had it write poetry...I was amazed with...how it changes the tone of what...you're writing."
Practice and development	Practicing new skill Setback Making adjustments Achieving success	Participants actively practiced and developed a new strategy.	"I tried...[strategy]... and no one showed up." "So I've been tweaking based on what they tell me in my reflection pieces."

Theme	Sub-theme Components	Definition	Examples
Belief and confidence	Optimistic and affirmative statements Belief in ability to positively impact student learning Perceived confidence Recognition of impact	Participants believed they could perform a new strategy or were confident in their ability to do so.	"But I feel like I've come a really...long way. And I love it,... now I feel like I teach better online than I would in person." "Maybe I like the clarity of it...I'm hoping that this will help ...stop any confusion with students..."
Goal setting and planning	Planning to do	Participants set goals or planned to use a new strategy.	"I want at least one weekly video." "I want to use the [Gen]AI function more to rewrite my comments with a more positive tone, and I want to do that more frequently."

Each of the six themes are further described and discussed in the following section.

Theme One: Behavioral Steadfastness

The *behavioral steadfastness* theme highlighted participants' definitive statements about their reluctance to try new methods in their online teaching practice. For instance, one participant explained her discomfort and unwillingness to use video on Zoom when she shared, "I don't want to do video." This statement reflected her resistance to changing her behavior, as the participant showed no intention of adopting new strategies or modifying her existing approaches. The theme of behavioral steadfastness encapsulated a resistance to change, demonstrating how participants' current beliefs and attitudes towards teaching practices remained firmly rooted, with no plans to alter their methods.

Theme Two: Awareness and Aspiration

The second theme, *awareness and aspiration*, was evident when participants critically reflected on their own limitations, the anticipation of both student and teacher needs, and an openness to new ideas. As Clara shared, "And I said to myself, you know, tone is so important, because they don't see you on a daily basis...But, like a positive, encouraging tone means everything to someone who is searching for...How am I doing? You know?"

Clara's statement exemplified the depth of personal reflection, demonstrating self-efficacy in her capacity to learn and grow while thinking about how she could improve in the future. By anticipating the needs of her students and acknowledging the importance of using a warm tone in her communications, she showed a readiness to enhance her teaching practice. The theme of awareness and aspiration reflected a growth mindset, emphasizing participants' commitment to critically reflect on their personal and professional growth.

Theme Three: Exploration and Learning

The third theme, *exploration and learning*, highlighted the process participants took as they acquired new skills. This process involved observing others, seeking guidance, and occasionally showing hesitation. Evelyn reflected on her experience when she stated “...ChatGPT was astounding to me...I couldn't believe what it could do...I even had it write poetry...I was amazed with...how it changes the tone of what...you're writing.” Her observation of the capabilities of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) illustrated her openness to trying new strategies. As she explored the possibility of using the new strategy, she also sought guidance and experienced hesitation. This willingness to experiment led to continual learning where participants developed confidence in embracing innovative teaching strategies.

Theme Four: Practice and Development

The fourth theme, *practice and development*, emphasized how participants actively engaged in practicing new skills by encountering setbacks, making necessary adjustments, and ultimately achieving success. Evelyn shared how she “incorporated a personal story” as she practiced a new strategy, whereas Sophia mentioned that she tried a new strategy, and no one showed up. Eliza expressed how she “noticed this week...that...a lot more...or maybe...a handful of [students] consistently completed by Friday.” Each of these quotes illustrated the participants’ dedication to their personal growth, as evidenced in their persistence in performing new strategies. Moreover, they demonstrated persistence by continually refining their techniques and overcoming challenges.

Theme Five: Belief and Confidence

The fifth theme, *belief and confidence*, was characterized by optimistic and affirmative statements, a strong belief in the ability to positively impact student learning, perceived confidence, and recognition of the impact on student learning. Perceived confidence represents an individual’s belief in their power to influence what happens in their lives (Bandura, 2010). Through their perceived confidence and an optimistic demeanor, participants consistently demonstrated a belief in their ability to positively influence student learning while also recognizing the positive impacts of their changes. For example, Eliza said, “But I feel like I've come a really...long way. And I love it,... now I feel like I teach better online than I would in person.” This statement exemplified Eliza’s perception in her ability to effect change in how students learn, giving her a sense of agency. Eliza also noted, “Maybe I like the clarity of it...I'm hoping that this will help ...stop any confusion with students...” This statement highlighted Eliza’s belief in the effectiveness of her new strategies and her commitment to enhancing student understanding. She firmly believed in her ability to positively influence student learning and began to recognize some of the impacts of the changes she was making. The theme of belief and confidence demonstrated the participants’ positive outlook and confidence in their teaching abilities, which exhibited a strong sense of self-efficacy.

Theme Six: Goal Setting and Planning

The sixth theme, *goal setting and planning*, illustrated a high level of self-efficacy to transfer new knowledge and abilities to different contexts, such as a future or different course. With newly acquired knowledge and skills, the participants planned and set goals to improve their teaching practice. Evelyn shared, “I want at least one weekly video,” indicating a specific goal to enhance student engagement through regular video updates. She also commented, “I want to use the [Gen]AI function more to rewrite my comments with a more positive tone, and I want

to do that more frequently.” This sentiment indicated her intention to use GenAI to improve the quality and tone of her feedback. The theme of goal setting and planning focused on the participants' beliefs in their ability to improve student learning through strategic planning and deliberate action.

Cross-Case Thematic Analysis Findings - Comparing Early- and Mid- to Late-Career

Adjunct faculty, regardless of career stage, exhibited diverse degrees of self-efficacy in enhancing instructor presence in their online courses. Through the lens of five themes—awareness and aspiration, exploration and learning, practice and development, belief and confidence, and goal setting and planning—early-career and mid- to late-career faculty navigated unique challenges and opportunities in their professional learning.

Early-career adjunct faculty adeptly balanced their own time constraints with their students' diverse needs, demonstrating optimism and openness to strategies that improved course design and student engagement. Comfortable with technology, they applied new skills and engaged in continuous practice, making iterative improvements based on student feedback. Their confidence grew as they observed repeated positive outcomes impacting student learning. Looking forward, they planned to apply these insights in future courses, highlighting the intervention's positive influence on their self-efficacy and instructor presence in the online classroom.

Mid- to late-career adjunct faculty exhibited self-efficacy for boosting instructor presence by recognizing their limitations, anticipating needs, and engaging in personal reflection, which contributed to their professional growth. While very cautious, they explored new skills and made necessary adjustments to their teaching practices, showing a preference for direct, step-by-step instruction. Much of their perceived confidence stemmed from their prior face-to-face teaching experiences and did not easily translate to the online environment. However, their optimistic outlook and belief in their ability to positively impact student learning by enhancing their instructor presence in their online classroom demonstrated their commitment to continuous improvement. Due to personal and professional challenges, they struggled to fully implement their intended changes, leading to fewer mastery experiences compared to early-career participants.

Intervention Impact on Knowledge and Skills

To address the second research question, which examined how the ICP impacted adjunct instructors' knowledge, skills, and ability to enhance instructor presence in their online classrooms, a deductive, qualitative analysis was conducted using a stratified random sample of course content, revealing the type, degree, and quality of interactions between the instructors and their students. This analysis compared content from the same course taught by each instructor in two different semesters—one in the fall before the intervention and one in the spring after the intervention.

Cross-Case Content Analysis Findings

The content analysis of pre- and post-archived courses revealed more observable instructional behaviors, actions, and practices that enhanced instructor presence in the online classroom. Early-career participants benefited the most, showing increases in two of the three

foundational constructs of CoI — social presence (128.6%) and teaching presence (45.5%). For early career participants, the greatest improvements in teaching presence were observed in direct instruction, facilitating discourse, assessment, and design and organization. In addition, the greatest increases in social presence were observed in the cohesive, interactive, and affective sub-elements of the social presence domain.

Specifically, early career participants focused on integrating more emotion into their written communications by using greetings and salutations and addressing students by their first names (221.4%; Table 4). They also aimed to tap into the students' socio-emotional nature by more frequently acknowledging students' concerns and feelings (288.9%) and offering encouragement (166.7%). Much of their effort involved redesigning assignment instructions using the TILT (i.e., Transparency in Teaching and Learning) framework to improve clarity in instructions and grading expectations (52.8% and 66.7%, respectively). Additionally, they improved how they explained concepts, topics, and processes (860.0%).

Table 4

Percent Change in Early-Career Adjunct Faculty's Most Impactful Codes

Element	Sub-Element	Codes	Pre	Post	% Change (#)	+/-
Social	Affective (AF)	AF-Emotion	40	89	122.5% (n = 49)	+
Social	Cohesive (CO)	CO-Greetings and Salutations	34	122	258.8% (n = 88)	+
		CO-Name	14	45	221.4% (n = 31)	+
Social	Interactive (I)	I-Acknowledge	9	35	288.9% (n = 26)	+
Teaching	Assessment (AS)	AS-Info	33	55	66.7% (n = 22)	+
Teaching	Design & Organization (DE)	DE-Clarify	36	55	52.8% (n = 19)	+
Teaching	Facilitating Discourse	FD-Encourage	24	64	166.7% (n = 40)	+
Teaching	Direct Instruction	DI-Clarify	5	48	860.0% (n = 43)	+

In contrast, Sophia, the only mid- to late-career instructor with a complete set of courses available for analysis, experienced a decrease in instructor presence codes post-intervention. She focused on developing her teaching presence more than social presence, making slight gains in course design and organization, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction. While she made slight gains in teaching presence, Sophia experienced decreases in both the affective and cohesive sub-elements of social presence, with no change in the interactive sub-element.

For Sophia, noticeable declines were observed in self-disclosure, warmth in her communications, the use of greetings and salutations, and references to students by name (Table 5). There was also a decrease in communication related to her availability to meet with students. These declines suggested a reduction of course evidence illustrating the instructor's ability to make emotional and social connections with her students in her online course. Most of the increases related to teaching presence included improvements in course design and organization, assignment instruction (134.8%), clarification of grading expectations (67.6%), just-in-time course updates (27.3%), clearer guidance on submitting assignments and finding course resources (31.3%), and more due date reminders (32.5%). In addition, there was a slight increase (10%) in communications where she provided tips about how students could succeed in the course, as well as in the number of prompts encouraging student responses.

Table 5*Percent Change in Sophia's Most Impactful Codes*

Presence	Domain	Codes	Pre	Post	% Change	+/-
Social	Affective (AF)	AF-Self-Disclosure	42	26	-38.1%	-
		AF-Warm	43	24	-44.2%	-
Social	Cohesive (CO)	CO-Greetings and Salutations	101	63	-37.6%	-
		CO-Name	36	18	-50.0%	-
Teaching	Design & Organization (DE)	DE-Avail	40	11	-72.5%	-
		DE-Clarify	23	54	134.8%	+
		DE-Info	33	42	27.3%	+
		DE-Navigation	32	42	31.3%	+
		DE-Establishing time parameters	40	53	32.5%	+
Teaching	Facilitating Discourse	DE-Designing Methods	45	31	-31.1%	-
		FD-Tips	20	22	10.0%	+
Teaching	Assessment (AS)	FD-Prompt	0	21	N/A	+
		AS-Info	34	57	67.6%	+

Discussion and Recommendations

Practical Implications for Adjunct Faculty Development

Based on the results of this study, it was evident that differentiated faculty development programs customized to the needs of early-career and mid- to late-career adjunct faculty are a worthwhile endeavor. While instructional coaching showed promise in fostering noticeable improvements in instructor presence across various career stages, alternative approaches where one-on-one coaching is not possible may be needed. For example, peer mentoring or structured learning communities could complement asynchronous training to meet similar goals, deepening critical reflection, building self-efficacy, and supporting RSI compliance.

Early-career participants gained the most, showing increases in two of the three foundational constructs of CoI—social and teaching presence. As a result, early-career adjunct faculty programs should emphasize the integration of new technologies and innovative

pedagogy. The findings indicated that early-career participants had greater gains in instructor presence by using tools like GenAI-assisted course design, the TILT framework, and personalized feedback.

Given these findings, institutions should consider emphasizing experimentation with new technologies and cutting-edge teaching practices. Doing so not only supports professional growth but also helps foster engaging online learning environments that comply with RSI requirements.

In contrast, the mid- to late-career instructors focused more on developing their teaching presence more so than their social presence. Professional growth programs for mid- to late-career adjunct faculty may need to focus on refining existing practices and providing opportunities for mentorship roles. This study found that the mid- to late-career faculty, while initially hesitant to adopt new strategies, implemented practices centered on setting clear expectations on participation, assignments, discussions, and other student behaviors in an online course. While the course records showed a decline in evidence of instructors making social and emotional connections, coaching session conversations revealed that these connections occurred through face-to-face interactions, emails, and telephone calls. However, these methods did not leave a trace in the online course materials, possibly masking the results. Additionally, both mid- to late-career faculty members preferred hands-on, step-by-step instruction when learning new technologies. Despite this, they had extensive experience in critical reflection and recognized the importance of connecting with students both academically and personally. While they needed opportunities to refresh their technological skills, they were also excellent candidates for mentorship roles, offering valuable guidance to early-career adjuncts.

Tensions in Faculty Growth in Online Teaching

Although the coaching sessions contributed to enhancing self-efficacy for boosting instructor presence in the online classroom, they also uncovered key challenges and tensions, which influenced adjunct faculty experiences. The following tensions revealed some of the complexities associated with adopting effective practices in online teaching and offered insight into navigating participants' journeys.

Time Management

One of the biggest challenges participants faced was time management. Juggling full-time work, graduate school, family care, and teaching multiple classes—often at more than one college—significantly limited participants' ability to implement their desired improvements. Despite their willingness to enhance instructor presence, they struggled to maintain a growth-oriented approach due to time constraints. They faced challenges in providing timely feedback, often extending response times to two or more weeks, which left them disheartened. Additionally, they tended to spend more time focusing on students who needed support while giving less attention to those who had been performing well. Clearly conscientious in their efforts to support student learning, all participants struggled with the practical issues related to time constraints.

Integration of GenAI

The potential of using GenAI for administrative tasks—such as creating rubrics, assignment instructions, and assessments—as well as for enhancing instructor communications

to make them warmer and more engaging, was met with conflict. On the one hand, participants were excited to use GenAI. In fact, integrating its use in the online training seemed to boost self-efficacy for most participants. It was described as a “game changer” for improving clarity and tone. One dilemma arose between teaching students how to use GenAI tools effectively while also ensuring they maintained their ability to engage in the learning process. Several participants recognized how valuable and ubiquitous GenAI was and would be in their students’ futures, but they all feared students would miss out on learning how to learn. However, integrating GenAI into faculty development training—without making it the central focus—proved highly effective. By learning to craft effective prompts, participants found that GenAI helped them improve their teaching while fostering deeper student learning.

Student Engagement Challenges

Another tension involved the relationship between participants’ self-efficacy and level of student engagement. When participants perceived a low level of student engagement and motivation, they were more likely to question the effectiveness of their efforts, leading to a range of emotions from patience to frustration and discouragement. When students delayed or failed to respond, participants’ confidence in developing meaningful relationships with their students declined, underscoring the dynamic relationship between self-efficacy and external validation.

Balancing Instructor Presence and Student Autonomy in Online Discussions

Participants also shared how they chose to encourage student autonomy in the online discussions. Several participants recognized the need to facilitate and guide student learning to meet RSI guidelines, but they worried their presence would stifle self-directed learning. This presents a methodological challenge because RSI specifies that instructors participate in the discussions (as one of the options to demonstrate substantive interactions). At the same time, excessive instructor presence in the discussions can impede student-to-student interactions, limit student independence, and undermine the social nature of peer learning (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007; Zhao & Sullivan, 2017). This tension underscores the broader challenges related to the delicate balance between fulfilling regulations and promoting student ownership of their learning.

Digital Divide and Overcoming Transactional Distance

Transactional distance surfaced as another tension, primarily for mid- to late-career faculty. For example, one participant admitted to relying solely on email and the telephone while avoiding other forms of video-based communication due to her deep discomfort with technology. This limited her effectiveness in interacting with students online. Having started her career as a traditional in-person instructor, she struggled to find ways to connect with students without relying on visual cues or body language. Consequently, she preferred to meet with students in person or over the phone, whereas many of her students preferred to only communicate via chat or Zoom. This created a methodological dilemma as she searched for new strategies to connect with her students using her familiar in-person methods.

Personalization Versus Scalability

The tension between personalization and scalability also surfaced, particularly for those participants who valued one-on-one personal interactions with their students but recognized that such connections do not necessarily scale, placing additional strain on their workload. Participants wanted to make personal connections, but they lacked the time or office space to do so. This desire to form meaningful relationships while balancing course loads and other responsibilities, likely influenced their belief in their ability to fully embrace effective strategies for enhancing instructor presence.

Recognizing Institutional Barriers to Implementation

Overcoming institutional policies and constraints further complicated participants' ability to successfully implement effective practices that meet RSI requirements. One participant faced limitations due to her inability to modify the master course template. Additionally, institutional challenges, such as human resource policies that limit adjunct faculty work hours, are crucial for the success of early- and mid- to late-career faculty development programs. Many community colleges limit adjunct faculty workloads to avoid the costs associated with providing retirement and health care coverage; however, policies vary by state. This limitation, combined with a shortage of adjuncts, often forces colleges to prioritize filling courses over offering the extra hours associated with professional development. As a result, faculty participation in professional development is hindered. These challenges reflect broader systemic issues that impede adjunct faculty from fully contributing to institutional goals and positively impacting student learning. To effectively support the growth and success of adjunct faculty professional development programs, these barriers and tensions need to be addressed.

Acknowledging these tensions and challenges provides valuable insights into the lived experiences of adjunct faculty as they balance their well-being while pursuing their professional growth and improving student learning. These insights reveal the need for institutional support, tailored faculty development, and intentional course design to enable faculty to strengthen their instructor presence to meet RSI requirements. By addressing these issues, institutions can empower faculty to overcome obstacles, excel in their practice, and deepen student learning.

Conclusion

Community colleges play multiple roles in higher education, serving millions of diverse students through dual enrollment, adult education, GED preparation, transfer degrees, and workforce training (CCRC, 2021). Yet, one critical challenge for community colleges relates to the recruitment and retention of qualified adjunct faculty, particularly in the current economic climate of high inflation and exorbitant cost-of-living expenses. As the demand for online instruction grows, providing professional development to adjunct faculty plays a critical role in the success of the institution. To integrate and support adjunct faculty, institutions need to address their precarious working conditions and limited growth opportunities.

Findings from this study suggest that combining instructional coaching with online training can strengthen adjunct faculty's self-efficacy and help them boost their instructional presence in the online learning environment. By supporting adjunct faculty at different career stages, the program's positive impacts were evident, as were key tensions that influenced faculty growth and retention. These findings suggest that when community colleges provide

opportunities for adjunct faculty to connect and learn from each other, it fosters stronger, more fulfilling relationships, thereby increasing their sense of belonging (Thirolf, 2016). Decades of research tell us that a “well-developed sense of identity, confidence, and sense of purpose in our students is correlated with academic achievement and overall student success” (Thirolf, 2016, p. 307). Similarly, fostering a strong sense of belonging among adjunct faculty would likely improve their retention rates, satisfaction, and overall engagement, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for student learning.

Community college leadership needs to explore and implement faculty engagement models that reduce turnover and enable faculty members to develop meaningful and lasting relationships with their students. These relationships can have a profound impact on students beyond their educational journey, extending into their professional careers. By investing in adjunct faculty, community colleges can better serve their community and students while enhancing the livelihoods and well-being of adjunct faculty—both key to institutional success.

Declarations

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

This research was approved by the Arizona State University Institutional Review Board (IRB Protocol HRP503Z, approved March 3, 2023). All participants provided informed consent prior to data collection. Participation was voluntary, and all data were de-identified and stored securely to protect confidentiality in accordance with institutional guidelines.

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