

Capitalizing on Social Presence in Online Course Design: Five Strategies That Work

How can we create a more effective, efficient online-course experience for students and instructors?

One thing we know: social presence matters. Social presence, briefly defined as the connectedness between and among students and instructors, is important for learning and key to students' satisfaction in online and blended-learning environments. We know that students continue to report feelings of isolation and disconnectedness in their online learning environments. Thus, downplaying the importance of human connections in online learning may affect student and instructor satisfaction, as well as course outcomes (Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside, & Lewis, 2013; Whiteside, 2015; Whiteside, Garrett Dikkers, & Lewis, 2014).

We also know that instructors play a fundamental, guiding role in cultivating these human connections, especially at the start of a course. Students' levels of motivation within an online course are directly related to the instructor's ability to create connections, facilitate discussion, and initiate activities (Conrad & Donaldson, 2004, 2011; Wu & Hiltz, 2004). This sense of connection is key to the development of social presence in online learning environments. Heightened levels of social presence can lead to greater student satisfaction and higher retention rates (Garrett Dikkers et al., 2013).

What Is Social Presence and the Social Presence Model? Why Is It Important?

For 15 years, our research team has been exploring social presence in online and blended learning experiences. Our research spans K-12 and higher education in varying contexts: virtual public schools, specific programs serving diverse students, high school blended-learning programs, and undergraduate and graduate programs across disciplines. Our qualitative and mixed methods research studies center on exploring students' and teachers' experiences; identifying pedagogical practices and instructional activities intended to build social presence; and understanding the benefits, challenges, and necessary supports for students and teachers.

The culmination of this research led to the development and refinement of the Social Presence Model. This Model suggests that five components determine social presence and influence and guide individuals' meaning-making processes in online and blended-learning environments

(Whiteside, 2015). The five components are Affective Association, Community Cohesion, Instructor Involvement, Interaction Intensity, and Knowledge and Experience. We believe the context-driven integration and intersection of these five components forms a critical literacy for students and teachers in online and blended-learning environments (Whiteside, 2017; Whiteside & Garrett Dikkers, 2015).

What Can Instructors Do in Their Courses?

Our long-term research with instructors and students suggests key strategies that faculty can employ to enhance connectedness in online and blended-learning environments. Some of these strategies are as follows:

- Create Community, Connections, and Spaces
- Individualize With Icebreakers and Activities
- Cultivate Relationships With a Cross-Platform Communication Plan
- Promote Responsibility and Flexibility
- Manage Change Carefully

We briefly discuss each strategy and provide multiple examples of how instructors can use these strategies in their course development, design, and delivery.

Create Community, Connections, and Spaces

We came to online learning as scholar-practitioners who studied online learning in our doctoral courses and then immediately applied our knowledge in the courses we taught as graduate student instructors. Some things worked, others didn't. One key element that has remained in our online course design and delivery is a recognition of the importance of viewing the online classroom as a learning community where "members depend on each other to achieve the learning outcomes for the course" (Paloff & Pratt, 1999, p. 29). This interdependence of learners and instructors in online learning and the importance of fostering connections is supported by Conrad and Donaldson's (2004, 2011) "Phases of Engagement" where instructors are encouraged to focus on developing a nurturing and safe environment for students.

One way to create a sense of ease and connection is to create a video class tour of the online learning environment. Instructors can use one of many available screen capture tools to tour the space while also displaying their own image via a webcam. This is a very effective method for creating connections with students. Instructors can also record

video or audio feedback for students, which helps students better understand their progress in the course. In fact, our research suggests that the earlier the feedback is provided, the more successful the learning experience will be for everyone involved (Whiteside et al., 2014). Additionally, early feedback helps alleviate students' concerns and fear about their progress and builds social presence, both of which can lead to greater student retention.

It is human nature to seek places and spaces where we feel comfortable. Social presence revolves around connecting with each other, feeling part of a community, and being comfortable in the learning space. One major aspect of social presence in online classrooms is making sure there are spaces created that invite collaboration, connection, and community-building. For example, we have found great success with an "Ask-Your-Question" forum that allows students with questions about the course to ask for help before they get too frustrated. This strategy allows classmates to help each other, which reinforces the course community and eases the instructor's workload. Another idea is employing a "Happy Hour" space for virtual office hours as a creative alternative to the brick and mortar school concept of office hours (Lowenthal in Swan, Garrett Dikkers, Whiteside, Ice, Richardson, Lowenthal, & Boston, 2015). These innovative, yet simple practices can show students that you are invested in their learning, connecting with them individually, and nurturing their connections with each other.

Individualize With Icebreakers and Activities

Our research, as well as that of other experts, shows that integrating social activities to establish connections and relationships helps kick start the course and allows a successful transition into the course content. Questions for instructors to consider include: Which activities allow students to express themselves quickly and easily? How can the instructor get to know their students? What are some creative mechanisms students can use to share a little more about themselves with their peers?

Consider icebreakers and course activities carefully. For example, there are multiple websites where students can create infographics, word clouds, or short videos using simple word processing skills, drag and drop, and the ability to upload photos.

One specific idea is an activity called a "four-card story" where students gather four photos, images, or short video clips that help provide a comprehensive idea about who they are. They might include a family photo, a picture of a textbook used in their favorite discipline, their favorite movie clip, or a photo of themselves engaged in their favorite activity. Alternatively, instructors might have students design a coat of arms or a shield divided into four quadrants. The instructor can create a complete gallery of the entire class's coat of arms and include it in the Week 1 summary notes.

Most students want to feel like their instructor knows

who they are. Additionally, some students begin an online course with the assumption that they will have some one-on-one time with the instructor. Certainly, an instructor cannot completely individualize a course; however, there are some simple strategies that instructors can employ to make the course feel much more personalized.

Cultivate Relationships With a Cross-Platform Communication Plan

One challenge instructors face in online learning is maintaining the connections that seem easier to make at the beginning of the class. The flexibility of the online learning environment allows instructors to explore and employ a wide variety of communication options, such as phone calls, video conferencing, and text messaging, as means of continuing those relationships. Our research from a large virtual public school shows that instructors achieve success by concurrently leveraging several of these communication modes.

First, most Learning Management Systems (LMSs) have announcements, push notifications, and opportunities to create automated emails. Instructors can use those methods to update students regarding content availability and to remind students about assignment deadlines. Many instructors in our research discuss purposefully using those basic tools as community-building spaces. They regularly praise students for their achievements using the announcements, and they send personal updates to students when they are traveling for conferences or in professional meetings to give students a view into their world outside of class.

Additionally, instructors can suggest that their students sign up for text messaging apps (like Remind or WhatsApp), which allow instructors to automatically push text messages about timely deadlines to their students. Instructors can also individually text or call their students who appear to be falling behind, especially at the start of the course when it is easy for students to misunderstand course organization or expectations. Using an app or website to send reminders maintains the instructors' privacy because they do not need to share their phone number with students, but can still take advantage of the fact that many of them have constant access to mobile technology. The built-in redundancy within a cross-platform communication plan works well with busy students; text messages, in particular, may yield the greatest number of responses from students.

Promote Responsibility and Flexibility

Our research results show that most students appreciate that the online environment allows them to take more responsibility for their learning, while providing them with the flexibility to care for family members, balance work responsibilities, and participate in extracurricular activities. If needed, students can still make arrangements with the instructor, a tutor, or family members to get extra help.

One key aspect is for instructors to promote these online learning features. To support students taking personal responsibility for their learning, instructors must begin with a clear, intuitive organization of the online classroom space. When possible, instructors can provide short explanations for each task with a rubric and examples. Often these explanations work well when they are written and oral, with a combination of text-based document and screen capture voiceover. Additionally, providing a judicious amount of time between lessons or units allows students to better balance their school, work, and home lives. When all of these principles are in place, the instructor's directions and expectations are clear and the tasks are well-paced. Our research shows that students see themselves "figuring it out" and becoming better problem solvers and critical thinkers. Ultimately, when they finish the online experience, most students feel very good about taking responsibility for their learning and leave the course or program feeling a great sense of accomplishment.

Manage Change Carefully

It is second nature for instructors to see how something works and then want to make changes in the next version of the course. Being dedicated to creating a better learning experience for our students is what makes us good teachers. That said, instructors should exercise caution by not changing too much all at one time.

Multiple, simultaneous new features and interventions can consume instructors' time and begin to chip away at their sanity. Just as we provide choices and suggest small-scale implementation for our students, we should also allow ourselves to implement just one new feature at a time. If we implement multiple new strategies and activities all at once, it may not be clear which features yielded significant learning for our students and which caused frustration and discontent. Thus, we strongly encourage incremental, planned change.

Key Takeaways

Our research shows that these five strategies go a long way in helping students feel less isolated and more connected to their instructor, their classmates, and the course content. Overall, the importance of connectedness and social presence in online learning cannot be overstated. As an instructor in one of our studies mentioned:

"Without connection, the students disengage from the course. Connectedness is important for ANY course delivery method, but it becomes more of a focus for hybrid [and online] because it is more difficult to achieve."

As more institutions provide online and hybrid-learning options for students, helping faculty develop social presence in those spaces can lead to deeper learning and much greater satisfaction for all members of the course community.

What are your thoughts about building connectedness in online classrooms? Let us know in the comment section or on [Facebook!](#)

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