

Increasing Social Presence Online

Five Strategies for Instructors

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INTRODUCTION

Humans are inherently social creatures. Socialization and connection with a learning community is a central aspect of learning. Although cultivating social presence and connectivity may seem like an afterthought compared to other aspects of course design, the truth is that social connection with other learners can be a key factor in a student's engagement and motivation for a course (Whiteside, 2015).

Largely defined as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affec-

tively into a community of inquiry, social presence is one piece of the community of inquiry model, along with teaching presence and cognitive presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001). With increased social presence, students are more likely to engage in higher order thinking (Garrison et al., 2001), more likely to actively participate in online discussions (Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013), less likely to drop out of their classes (Bowers & Kumar, 2015), and overall more satisfied with their learning experience (Moallem, 2015).

The purpose of this article is to provide easy-to-implement ideas for the online educator wanting to increase social presence, along with research-based reasoning for employing each strategy.

USE SCAFFOLDED, SELF-REFLECTIVE TOPICS TO BREAK THE ICE

In face-to-face settings, many teachers will tell you that the first day can make or break a class. Setting the tone in an online course is equally important. An introduction discussion assignment has long been regarded as a best practice in online courses (Aragon, 2003; Plante & Asselin, 2014). Despite the familiarity of this classic assignment, its effectiveness in establishing social presence is not guaranteed. Some participants may still feel uncomfortable and uncertain introducing themselves for the first time; others may not be engaged due to monotony. As such, the



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design of this assignment is an important consideration. A student's ability to accurately project him- or herself in an online environment is a predictor of academic success in a course (Jokimovic, Gasevic, Kovanovic, Reicke, & Hatala, 2015) and the same study indicated that scaffolded activities where students were guided in how to create an effective discussion post performed better overall in the course.

One interesting example for implementation is to have students complete a short personality test (NERIS Analytics Limited, 2018), read their outcome, and reflect on whether or how this affects how they learn. This assignment engages the learner with an introduction, provides clear guidelines for what to report, and provides opportunity for self-disclosure, both with their result and opinion on their result. This scaffolded, self-reflective introduction concept can be achieved in countless ways depending on the content of the course and creativity of the instructor.

ENCOURAGE PERSONAL REFLECTION AND DISCLOSURE

Once social presence has been established in an introduction discussion, it is important to continue to foster that learning community. Achieving learning objectives is undoubtedly essential and, as such, cognitive engagement with the course content is often the primary consideration when creating a weekly discussion assignment. However, considering content alone can lead to minimally engaged, lackluster discussions which seemingly only seek to meet grading criteria.

One way an instructor can help to create an engaged, collaborative learning environment is by encouraging reflection and disclosure in a weekly capacity. An innovative example of implementation in an online nursing leadership course provided an image of a tree with numbered "jelly babies" in various positions, and encouraged students to self-reflect on

which number they related to in the week's studies. Students found this aspect to be an indisputably valuable, inspiring, and community-building component of the course (Carson, 2014).

CREATE VIDEOS

Instructor-featured videos are a well-known and effective way to increase teaching presence. Video communication helps students to develop an emotional connection with their instructor and to perceive their instructor as a real person (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012). Similar positive perceptions have been noted in instructional videos and webconferencing (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Wang & Antonenko, 2017).

Instructor video can be as simple as a course introduction, instructional videos, weekly check-in videos, individual or group webconferences. Social cues in video like humor, self-disclosure, emotions, and interjecting allusions of physical presence are noticed and preferred by students (Paquette, 2016). By utilizing videos, the instructor encourages social presence to be developed among students by providing an example of how students can also effectively communicate and use social cues in an online course.

UTILIZE VIDEO DISCUSSION BOARDS

While text-based discussion boards are standard in online learning, video discussion boards offer a new and exciting opportunity for students to engage with one another. When compared directly with text-based discussions, asynchronous student-to-student video discussions have been shown to have significantly higher self-reported perceptions of social presence (Clark, Strudler, & Grove, 2015).

Implementing asynchronous video discussion can be done in a number of ways. The aforementioned study (Clark et al., 2015) utilized an instructor-created

Google+ group and Google Hangouts for video discussions. YouTube videos could also be created and embedded within an LMS's text discussion board interface. Yet another option is the popular platform FlipGrid, which allows teachers to create a group for their class, then list weekly discussions as needed. Once inside FlipGrid, students can respond to the instructor discussion prompt with their own videos as well as respond to one another.

PROVIDE AUDIO FEEDBACK

Providing written feedback on student assignments is a time-consuming task. In an online environment, instructors may feel the need to provide several paragraphs of written feedback to provide adequately nuanced and constructive feedback. Even then, a student may not choose to employ suggested changes.

In situations where an instructor wants to provide more effective feedback on assignments, audio feedback may be an ideal option. Students have been shown to be three times more likely to make suggested alterations to assignments that have audio feedback (Ice, Curtis, Phillips, & Wells, 2007). The same study also indicated that students were overall more satisfied and convinced that their instructor had more concern for their learning. Though the aforementioned strategy applies to teaching presence, providing an example of genuineness through audio/video feedback for the student can help set the tone for a caring, constructive learning environment among participants as well. Similarly, this idea could be applied to a peer-review assignment requiring student-to-student feedback.

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, there is no singular strategy to increase online social presence. The existing research shows promising results from a variety of possibilities: scaffolded discus-

sions, self-disclosure, asynchronous videos, video discussions, and audio feedback. Regardless of how it is achieved, it is clear that successful cultivation of social presence can lead to more motivated students, success in the class and, of course, effective online instruction.

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THE TRUTH IS THAT SOCIAL CONNECTION WITH OTHER LEARNERS CAN BE A KEY FACTOR IN A STUDENT'S ENGAGEMENT AND MOTIVATION.