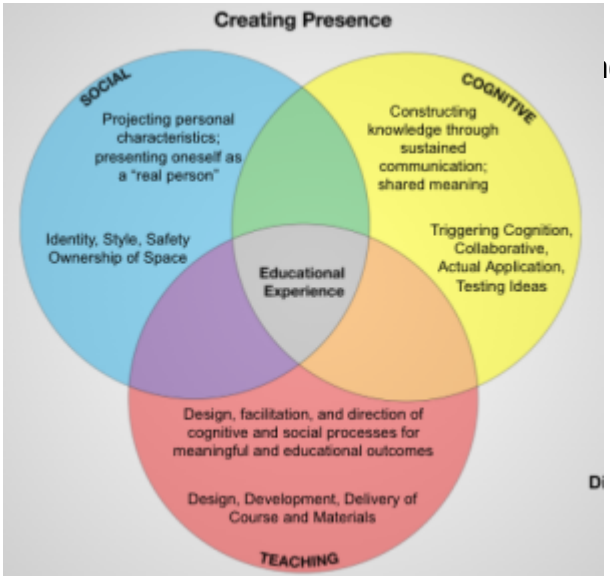
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Strategies for Promoting Social Presence in your Online Courses [1]



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Presence contributes greatly to creating meaningful and impactful learning experiences. In this blog series we'll highlight some tried-and-true strategies for building teaching, social, and cognitive presence in your classes. Also provided are some suggested approaches to addressing common challenges. These challenges and solutions have been collected from the literature surrounding the Community of Inquiry (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000), and from faculty contributions over the years as participants in professional development communities led by the Office of Digital Education. In this post, we'll be focusing on **Social Presence.**

"Social presence is the basis of collaborative learning and the foundation for meaningful, constructivist learning online. In the context of online learning, social presence is described as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as well as their ability to

perceive other learners as ‘real people’.” (Boston et al., 2010, p. 68).

Social Presence

The components of Social Presence are:

Affective Expression

Open Communication

Group Cohesion

Affective Expression

“Affective expression is the ability of online learners to project themselves through such text-based verbal behaviors as the use of para-language, self-disclosure, humor, and other expressions of emotion and values” (ibid).

- Encourage students to set up and/or update their Canvas profiles--Add a bio, photo (or representative image), personal webpage, etc.
- Use icebreakers
- Use introductions as a starting point for building social presence
    - Blend professional and personal angles so students (and you!) get to know each other as multidimensional people
    - Make sure to model by including your own self-introduction
    - Lean into creative expression by encouraging videos and/or other media formats
    - Where possible, consider incorporating course-related elements to introductions (for instance, what students’ perspectives are on the subject matter, what interests them about it, etc)
- Survey Students
    - Use a more formal survey to have students provide information about themselves Create a course community profile based on student responses
- Discussion boards to connect socially (wins, weekend fun, or relating to struggles within the degree program)
- Regular course announcements
    - Use as a social aspect early in the course, but build complexity of what’s shared via announcements to increase teaching and cognitive presence over time
    - Incorporate current/of-the-moment observations to increase social feel and humanize course

Challenge 1: Fighting against the solitary experience.

- Regular opportunities to “put a face with a name” through multimedia responses
- Provide office hours and encourage people to use them
- Creating space (ungraded) opportunities like Zoom coffee and/or student-driven discussion boards, weekly Q&A boards, etc.
- “Call them by their name”- using students’ name as a small way to make students feel included, valued, heard, connected.

Challenge 2: Keeping students engaged and building their motivation and enthusiasm

- Share your own enthusiasm
- Involve your students in setting the tone, making choices, etc. whenever possible
- Help them bridge their own interests and lives with what they’re learning (make content relevant, and allow choices in assignment topics and format when possible)
- Don’t assume they will automatically understand why they should care about the course - be explicit about how what they learn with you will be useful to them in the long run
- Have students rate themselves on participation, engagement, effort, etc. Self-reflection can be a very powerful tool for improvement and motivation!

Open Communication

“Open communication refers to the provision of a risk-free learning climate in which participants trust one another enough to reveal themselves” (ibid).

- Set expectations for community behavior and give opportunities for peer-to-peer engagement throughout the course.
- Speedgrader allows you to leave feedback on assignments, and for students to comment on the feedback. This is a great way to increase communication and set/reinforce expectations.
- Q&A boards for students to help each other with course-related questions
- Discussions to explore topics socially
    - Invite students to share personal perspectives and experiences
    - Expose students to a variety of approaches while also adding a community feel
    - Start to bridge social with cognitive by asking students to connect their own experiences with readings/other materials

Challenge 1: Creating community when there aren't group activities

- Use commonalities to encourage students to connect in different ways
- Encourage study groups or other peer-based meetings
- Provide space for students to connect with one another
- Use what you know about your audience and lean into that (for example, a cohort group in their third year might not need as much assistive structure to connect to one another, but first year students might need more of a push and built-in opportunities to connect)
- Add low-stakes activities that enhance connections without taking away focus from course outcomes, such as gallery space for student work, introductions, peer interviews, etc.?

Challenge 2: Providing students with autonomy and decision-making power

- Discussions for whole class or groups to decide
- Short surveys
- Providing choice in assignment format, topic, etc.

Challenge 3: Balancing speaking up/being honest in communicating with being respectful of others

- Guidelines for what constitutes respectful communication
- Clearly articulate how you will handle issues that arise (and follow through)
- Have students help create a class agreement that will help them frame their own boundaries as a group.

Group Cohesion

"Group cohesion refers to the development of a group identity and the ability of participants in the learning community to collaborate meaningfully" (ibid).

- Make use of peer reviews, giving students the opportunity to provide each other with meaningful feedback, as well as see one another's work.
- Consider group-based activities, such as group projects, collaborative document creation, and student-led inquiry.
- Use Groups in Canvas to create collaborative spaces where students can work together.
- Model good social behaviors and set norms/expectations

Challenge 1: Managing group work

- Zoom sessions with breakout rooms for groups to talk and discuss their project
- Group charters and plans for coordinating on their own, and what strategies are for group members who don't participate.
- Self-rate students' own participation in the group, as well as their teammates
- Using the Canvas "groups" feature
- Reemphasizing the "why" behind group work (it's a similar scenario to team work in the real world; the value of solving a problem as a team vs. alone, etc).
- Check out Collaborating Online: Learning Together in Community [4] by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt for examples of online group work

Challenge 2: Making discussions fun and engaging

- Case studies
- Rotating discussion leaders
- Have students take on different roles in response to a case (different perspectives, devil's advocate, relating to current events, etc)
- Ladder discussions - student responds to a prompt, then adds/changes something that will affect how the next student needs to respond
- Debate a controversial topic

Challenge 3: Building student engagment within large enrollment classes

- Where it makes sense, divide the class into smaller groups
- Video discussions/sharing, such as with Techsmith Knowmia, Flipgrid, etc.
- Interview each other, find common ground

Challenge 4: Balancing depth with dialogue in discussion boards (aka, not too much, not to little)

- Model a good discussion post
- Make sure prompts are robust enough for dialogue and that expectations on the scope of answers is clear

Work Cited/Additional Resources:

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