



Strategies for Promoting Presence in your Online Course

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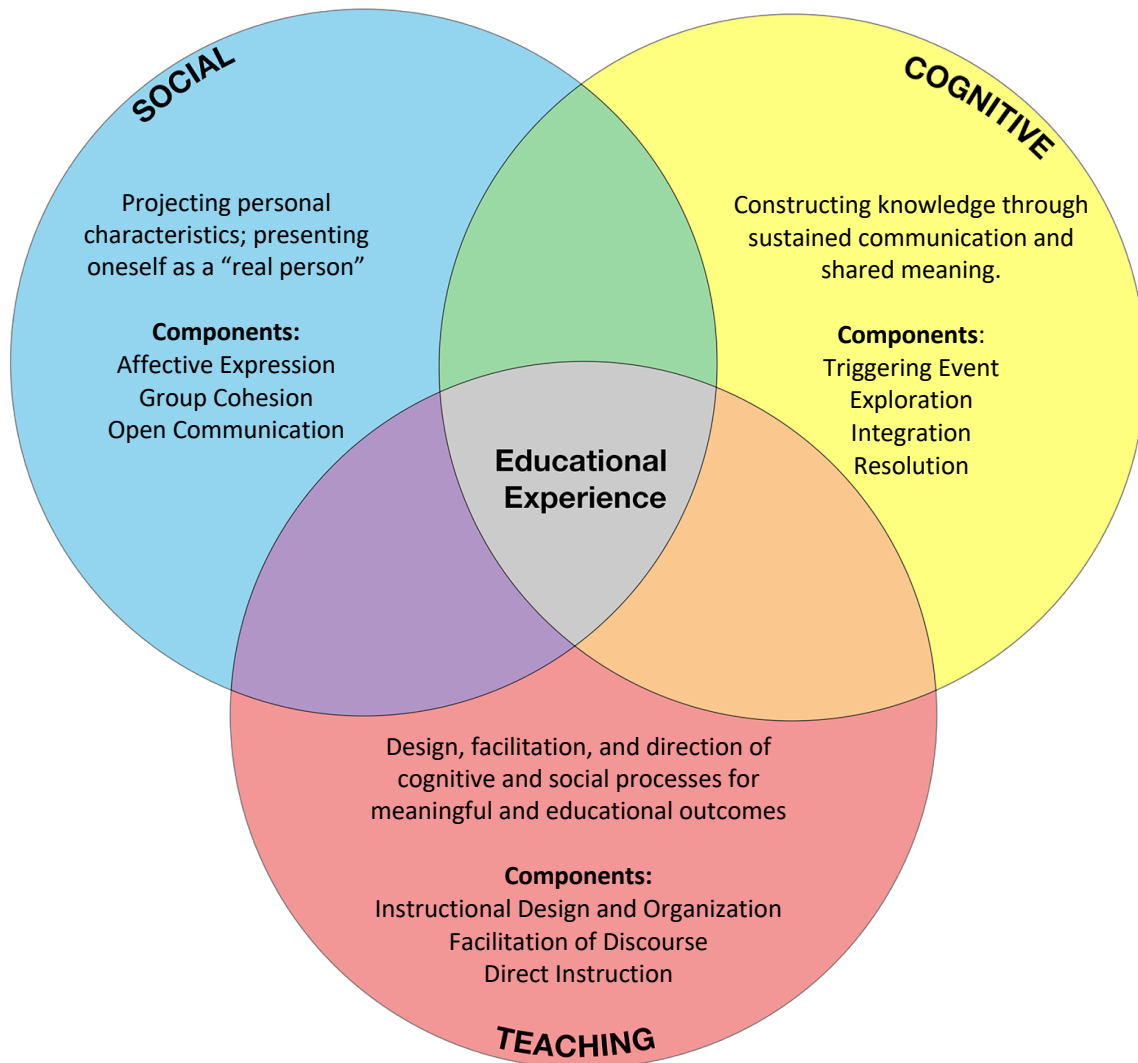


Strategies for Promoting Presence in your Online Courses

Introduction

Presence contributes greatly to creating meaningful and impactful learning experiences. This tip sheet will give you 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 CU Denver/Anschutz faculty contributions over the years as participants in professional development communities.

Creating Presence





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).

The components of Social Presence are:

Affective Expression
Group Cohesion
Open Communication

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 autonomy and decision-making power.

Discussions for whole class or groups to decide

Short surveys

Providing choice in assignment

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* by Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt for examples of online group work

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

Model a good discussion post

Make sure prompts are robust enough for dialogue and that expectations on the scope of answers is clear

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 engagement 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



Cognitive Presence

“Cognitive presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse and is defined as a four stage process of practical inquiry” (Boston et al., 2010, p.69).

The components of Cognitive Presence are:

Triggering Event Exploration Integration Resolution

Triggering Event

“First is a *triggering event*, where an issue or problem is identified for further inquiry” (ibid).

- Design discussions and assignments with thoughtful, intentional prompts

Exploration

“Next is *exploration*, where students explore the issue both individually and as a community, through reflection and discourse” (ibid).

- Iterative practice
 - Use drafts and scaffolded projects to allow multiple feedback points and encourage consistent growth
 - Have students do a smaller assignment multiple times with one variable changed (for instance, How does this change if you have a different audience? What if the initial assumption is different? etc)
- Use collaboration, group projects, or team-based learning to encourage deeper dives into the material.
- Incorporate different tools for discussion (such as the Knowmia Conversations feature, Flipgrid, or open annotation tools) to better facilitate different types of discussion
- Project-based learning
 - Focus on process rather than outcome
 - Opportunity for students to test out concepts
 - Consider if you can give your students choice in the format of the final product (aka, do all final reports need to be the same or could they be written report, a video, a webpage, an infographic, etc?)
 - Use small groups for collaborative problem-solving
 - Replicate a workplace-based scenario
 - Better reflective of practice post-degree
 - Assign group roles
- Peer reviews
 - Incorporate into earlier, smaller pieces of larger projects to expose students to multiple approaches/ideas, as well as provide different types of feedback
 - Give students a rubric to help guide their reviews/feedback
 - Use peer review to support iterative work
 - Integrate “lessons learned” from peer-review process into self-evaluation and/or reflection (for example, How did your perspective and/or final product change as a result of peer feedback?)



Challenge 1: Student/peer critiques and depth of feedback.

Have students participate in creating guidelines for quality feedback

Give students the opportunity to ask for specific formative feedback from peers

Offer students rubrics to use in giving peers feedback

Challenge 2: Incorporating guest lectures, and in-class discussions with experts.

Virtual 'site-visits' and talks/recorded lectures by experts

Zoom topic breakout rooms with limited time to ask experts questions (like a speed dating format, but with small groups of students talking with a guest expert)

Have students submit questions in advance of expert Zoom visit or recording so there is less reliance on real-time interactions

Integration

“The third stage is *integration*, where learners construct meaning from ideas developed during exploration” (ibid).

- Incorporate different strategies for discussion (student-led, role-based, shifting audiences) based on the purpose of discussion in the course
- Promote iterative practice by having students create different versions of a project through drafts, ePortfolios, or shifted prompts (for example, perhaps they need to explain one concept to two different audiences).
- Use discussions as an opportunity to have students draw from their own perspective/experience and make connections to course concepts
- Student-led instruction
 - Tap into different motivators
 - Encourage higher-level thinking
 - Opportunity for students to explore topics of interest to them personally in greater depth
 - Could be used with small groups
- Constructive feedback
 - Ensure that feedback is actionable
 - If possible, allow students to respond to feedback with follow-up questions and/or a revised product
 - Use feedback to encourage/expand student strengths by pointing out what’s working well

Challenge 1: Building students’ grasp of complex concepts through scholarly discourse.

Host a debate between individuals or groups (can be synchronous or asynchronous)

Add a short recording explaining or framing the concept to the discussion prompt so students can more easily ask questions, discuss amongst themselves, etc.

Have students create materials to explain the concept to each other and then do a short recording to share with others

Challenge 2: Promoting critical thinking and complex learning.

Layer in opportunities for reflective thinking: blogs, mini-projects, short reflections, etc can be good for this

When possible, replace basic content consumption with opportunities to put concepts into practice

Offer opportunities for students to update/improve work after receiving feedback

Scaffold larger projects or use a multi-stage project to scaffold a complex concept

Resource for problem-based learning/course design: *Creating Wicked Students* by Paul Hanstedt



Resolution

“Finally, the process culminates in **resolution**, where learners apply the new knowledge...”(ibid).

- Provide students with opportunities for self-evaluation and reflection on their coursework and/or learning process.
- Exploration beyond the classroom
 - Assignments that incorporate material not found inside the course (for instance, attend a virtual townhall, visit a local art installation, explore digital repositories, etc)
 - Interviews
 - Student-proposed projects (for instance, identify a workplace problem and apply course concepts to propose/create a solution)



Teaching presence

Teaching presence consists of instructional design and organization, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction. It has often been described as “the glue that makes a community of inquiry function” (Garrison, 2021).

The components of Teaching Presence are:

Instructional Design and Organization
Facilitation of Discourse
Direct Instruction

Instructional design and organization

Instructional design and organization, “which involves the planning and design of the structure, processes, interaction and evaluation aspects of an online course”(ibid).

- Before class starts, consider your course design and structure online:
 - Consider how your assignments align to your course goals or outcomes.
 - Intentional alignment creates a distinct purpose and path for students. Highlight these purposes to students, and reinforce the “why” for each assignment.
 - Group content logically with meaningful labels.
 - Use headers and labels to organize weekly content/activities in Canvas. This helps students better understand the expected workflow.
 - Have someone who will give you honest feedback about the structure look through the course to make sure the organization is logical to other people
 - Use consistent organization in weekly content and activities.
 - Create a linear workpath, moderating how/when students access content in your modules in Canvas
- Well organized and student-focused syllabus
 - Highlight the “must know” information up front
 - Set expectations
 - Syllabus scavenger hunt or quiz
 - Revisit relevant information from the syllabus at appropriate points during the semester
- Detailed, clear assignment and/or assessment prompts
 - Use naming conventions and title assignments to signpost work and set expectations
 - Purpose of the assignment from the student perspective (aka, why is this part of your learning experience)
 - Provide examples of student deliverables
 - Include additional resources that might be useful in completing projects
- When possible, use a flexible approach and be ready/willing to tweak strategies to better suit a current cohort
- Have as much of the course built as possible before the start of the semester to free up time for interactions with students and your facilitation and instruction of the course as the semester starts



Challenge: Logically administering a course.

Make a plan

Build out static course elements in advance

Get feedback along the way

Walk a peer or colleague through your plan (or even your developed course) and ask them for feedback

Facilitation of discourse

Facilitation of discourse “is described as the means by which students engage in interacting about and building upon the information provided in the instructional materials” (ibid).

- Provide options for online (or via phone) office hours where students can speak to you one-on-one
- Be a presence in class discussions
 - Model good responses
 - Balance of being present without taking over
 - Assess needs of audience
 - Be willing to adjust strategies as the semester progresses
 - Ask thoughtful follow-up questions
 - Provide additional resources for students to follow identified interests
- Weekly introductions or overviews/Regular communications
 - Include information to help students navigate activities
 - Bridge concepts between modules and/or highlight important takeaways
 - Summarize any important key points arising from students discussions
 - Use to help paint a bigger picture and keep students looking at the course holistically
 - Consider if video and/or audio to help students connect with you as an instructor
- Use narrative to bring additional context to course topics
 - Annotate the weekly reading list with a quick note on why each reading is important
 - Be explicit about how topics are related and/or why they will be important for students as they develop their understanding of the topic
- Regular assignments and/or check ins to help students stay on track
 - Weekly assignments
 - Scaffolded projects
 - Standardize deadlines (even if they’re not hard deadlines)

Challenge: Building teaching presence, creating connections with students, and coming across as a “real person”

Humor!

Showing vulnerabilities as an instructor, and also as a person

Modeling the sense of community you’re trying to create

Welcome videos at the start of the semester, which outline how the online format will work, and emphasize that we are all in this “new normal” together (during COVID, specifically).



Direct Instruction

Direct instruction “is described as providing intellectual and scholarly leadership from a subject matter expert in order to diagnose comments for accurate understanding, inject sources of information, direct useful discussions, and scaffold learner knowledge to a higher level...”(ibid).

- Provide regular, timely feedback on student work
 - Multi-modal feedback (audio/video/written/rubrics)
 - Tie into self-evaluation and/or peer feedback when appropriate
- Practice reflective teaching by asking clarifying questions, responding to students needs/feedback, and making adjustments to your instructional approach as needed.
- Use a conversational tone to help establish connection with students
- Short lecture videos to dive deeper into important concepts
 - Consider if adding interactive features will help students process and retain information/explore a concept in more depth
 - Provide opportunities for students to comment or ask follow-up questions

Challenge 1: Reading the room and being responsive to all students.

Offer multiple routes for interacting with you

Recruit students to help bring your attention to questions or side conversations

Use polls or surveys to help collect feedback and make adjustments

Ask your students how they’re doing/feeling about the course!

Invite feedback at any point about any aspect of the course

Set expectations for different routes of communication and make sure to follow through

Challenge 2: Giving meaningful feedback, especially when faced with a large student audience.

Make use of peer-to-peer feedback

Use “highlight reel” feedback to identify broad strengths or areas for improvement for the whole group; encourage students to utilize office hours when they need more individual discussion

Scaffold assignments to make feedback more incremental rather than needing to address all areas at one time



Work Cited/Additional Resources:

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