

Eight Ways to Increase Social Presence in Your Online Classes - Faculty Focus | Higher Ed Teaching & Learning

Social presence is an important concept in distance education. So, how can we increase social presence in online teaching? Here are some ideas for you to try.

A welcome letter. It is helpful to send a welcome letter to your students or post it on the online course site at the beginning of the semester. This will make online learners feel welcome and sense the instructor's virtual presence from the very beginning of the course.

A personalized introduction. As instructors, we all know that it is important to hold students' attention in the first class, and this can

be accomplished through many techniques such as an interesting teaser, an overview of a well-planned course, a display of a fun and humorous personality, and more.

Together with a paragraph introducing yourself, it would be nice to add a still image, a hyperlink to a home page if you have one, an audio clip, or a video clip to add a human touch to the online classroom.

Make good use of email. Email can be used in three ways in online teaching: class email, group email, and individual email. Class email is “email broadcast” according to Horton (2000). It is used for important announcements such as schedule changes or correcting misunderstandings or misconceptions. Group email can be used to provide students ideas, guidance, or feedback on group projects. Individual email can be used for many situations such as answering individual questions, providing feedback on assignments, motivating students to learn, and following up with students for special situations.

Use course announcements frequently. Making announcements in a Web-based course is another way to connect with the students. I have been trying to post one to four messages each week, depending on what and whom I teach.

Take advantage of the discussion board. Most online instructors use the discussion board, but not all of us are active in participation. It is important to get involved in the discussion and engaged in the conversation, commenting on students' posts and guiding their learning. We continue to explore how to use discussions effectively. The ways I have tried include both group and class discussions; having a group leader facilitate the group discussion; summarizing the group discussion; and sharing with the rest of the class, using a rubric to grade discussions.

Use synchronous communication to enhance social presence. Immediacy is a critical element in social presence, and communication in real time often enhances social presence when handled well.

Try Web 2.0 tools for fun and collaboration. I tried blogs for a couple of classes, and I've found students enjoyed it. They had fun and a sense of achievement in creating their own blogs. Through the blog creation and communication, there was more interaction between students as well as between the students and me. Some of them maintain the blog and keep communicating with me and other students even after the completion of my course.

A concluding remark and best-wishes statement. After the final

exam, final project, or other type of final learning assessment at the end of the semester, always remember to send all students an email or a class announcement. This message functions as a conclusion of the class. From a welcome letter to a wrapping-up best-wishes statement, you as an instructor show your social presence at both the beginning and the end of the class.

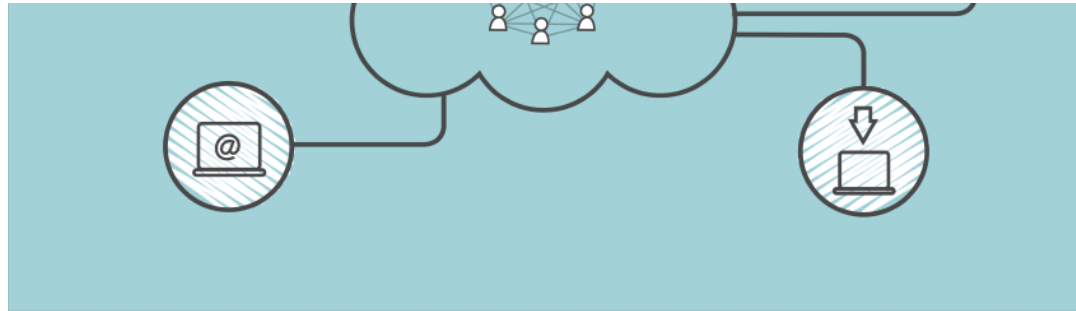
Social Presence and Interaction in the Online Classroom

For more information please contact: Michael Johnson, Teaching and Learning Consultant

8-10 minutes

Fostering a dynamic and interactive atmosphere for your blended or online class can be difficult. If the well is dry, this article has a large variety of suggestions to help stimulate discussion and participation among your students.





“Social presence is defined as the ability of participants in a community to project themselves, socially and emotionally, as real people through a medium of communication,” (Garrison and Anderson, 2003).

In thinking about a community of learners, let us tie in one of the major themes of Lev Vgotsky’s Social Development Theory. Vygotsky’s theory asserts that “social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development.” In essence, social presence is a critical element in the learning process.

Social Presence and Interaction – the Instructor

The course is all built, the students are busy working on assignments, now what do I do? As a new online instructor, or even one that has been teaching online for some time, there are many ways to provide “presence” in your online course.

Finding opportunities to communicate with your students in the online environment can seem challenging at first. Think about all the ways in which you connect to your students in the face-to-face environment and then begin to translate these ideas to online. You will find many opportunities to engage and be present. Your role as the instructor in the online environment is every bit as important (if not more!) as it is in the face-to-face classroom.

Be thinking of ways in which you can design your course that supports these four types of interaction:

1. student-to student (ss)
2. student-to-teacher/teacher-to-student (ts)
3. student-to-content (sc)
4. student-to-the-world (sw)

Opportunities may include: sharing of personal stories and experiences, frequent feedback, and continuous conversation.

Sharing of Personal Stories and Experiences

- The icebreaker/creating classroom community. It is essential to set the climate from the start of class. In the online classroom, you can

provide engaging opportunities for students to introduce themselves to you and their classmates. For example:

- A discussion forum where each student makes an introductory post and reply (ss) (ts)
- A wiki where each student provides their name, major, hopes for the class, etc (ss) (ts)
- A community bulletin board (try www.padlet.com) where each student posts their introduction on a class 'wall' (ss) (ts)
- A class metaphor (i.e.: food, running, diving, etc.) to engage students by asking them to post their favorite "food" or exercise activity, etc. (ss) (ts) (sw)
- A collaborative Google slide presentation where each student takes a slide to introduce themselves with text, images and/or video (ss) (ts)
- Ask students to submit introduction videos of themselves using their favorite mobile technology such as [VoiceThread](https://voicethread.com) or [Vine](https://vine.co) (ss) (ts) (sw)
- Posting/Blogging – if you are asking your student to make blog posts, use this method to communicate key concepts, reminders, and current events with your students. (ss) (ts)

- Office hours – encourage just as you would in face-to-face (you can even offer extra credit to encourage them to attend at least one).
(ss) (ts)

Frequent Feedback

- The weekly email – emailing your students a weekly summary provides connections, summarizes the week, gives a preview of the next week, offers tips/suggestions, what went well, what could improve, point to exemplary student work, and encourage students to interact. (ts) For example:
- “After you post your YouTube URL to the Class Blog, don't forget to also paste the URL in the designated Moodle assignment area so you can receive a grade.”
- “The first quiz was a bit 'rocky', however, the technical issues have been fixed for the next quiz.”
- “Take a look at the Weekly Check-in Video on our class blog.
- Office hours – encourage each student to join you for office hours, just as you would in a face-to-face class.
- Require each student to contact you at least once during the course. This can be via chat, video ([Skype](#) or [GoogleHangout](#)) or

any other method that supports synchronous conversation. (ts)

- Offer extra credit to encourage them to attend at least one session. (ts)

Continuous Conversation

- Ask a Trivia question related to a concept to get students engaged (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Post a link in the discussion forum to a current event/article that relates to course content and ask for feedback (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Provide opportunities for discussion, maybe a thought-provoking question to elicit student discussions. (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Including opportunities for collaboration, such as group projects and team discussions that ask students to explore the world around them (ss) (sc) (sw)
- Offer a poll where you ask students' opinions on something related to the course/topic (this can be really fun!). (ts) (ss) (sw)
- Mention the Student Corner ("commons area" for off-topic discussions) and offer some guidance on the purpose. (This engagement is extracurricular but it can help students build

relationships that are advantageous inside the classroom. (ss)

As the instructor, it is important to provide space and encouragement for continuous 'conversation' that supports cognitive processes. Model what you are asking your students to do, so be sure to add/post/create just as they are doing. Then, reply to students' posts and welcome them individually to make that initial connection.

Social Presence – the Student

You are in the online course, working on assignments, now how do you 'meet' your classmates and get the sense that you are not alone? The online student is every bit as responsible for the social presence and interaction in the classroom as is the instructor; it is a two-way communication. Students will find that increasing their participation level also increases their motivation, which is likely to contribute to success in the course. Let's take a look at similar methods to engage: sharing of personal stories and experiences, frequent feedback, and continuous conversation.

Sharing of Personal Stories and Experiences

- Participate in the icebreaker activity and meet at least one other

classmate that you can connect with throughout the course

- Use the course discussion forums and/or blogs to share your experience with classmates and instructor (ss) (ts)

Frequent Feedback

- Use the course discussion forums and/or blogs to communicate with classmates and instructor (ss) (ts)
- Use the instructor's office hours on a regular basis (ts)
- Read all course communication thoroughly so you don't miss out on important announcements/information. (ss) (ts)

Continuous Conversation

- Have a course-related question? Ask it in the course discussion forum. Know an answer to a classmates' question? Answer it! (ss) (ts)
- Want to find out if any of your classmates live in your area and know of any housing available? Ask in the Student Corner forum. (ss)
- Communicate regularly with your group members; they are your