

# The Power of Social Presence for Learning

by *Aimee Whiteside, Amy Garrett Dikkers, and Somer Lewis*

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## Key Takeaways

- **Social presence** remains the **key to a successful learning experience**, and understanding social presence, with its **critical connection to learning and community building**, allows us to **better support faculty and students**.
- **Understanding a wide selection of tools, media, and reflective activities** helps faculty assist students in taking responsibility for their own learning.
- **Providing iterative feedback and mindful assessments** helps faculty meet learning outcomes and guide student learning.
- **Implementing change in small steps** is the key to understanding which strategies work and which lead to frustration and discontent.

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Throughout the past decade, we have researched, studied, and explored a variety of face-to-face, online, and blended learning experiences across different modalities, contexts, and audiences. For students and instructors alike, one concept has remained the key to a successful experience: the power of human connectedness for learning.<sup>1</sup>

Our long-term research with administrators, teachers, and students suggests key strategies to better support faculty and students to develop this connectedness.<sup>2</sup> These strategies are as follows:

- Understand social presence for learning
- Create social connections to build community
- Understand a variety of tools and media
- Harness reflection and prior experiences
- Provide early and continuous feedback
- Design with assessment in mind

- Encourage change in small steps

## Understand Social Presence for Learning

Social presence involves a level of connectedness among instructors and students that determines how motivated participants are to take an active role in their own and their peers' meaning-making processes. Educational theorist and practitioner Etienne Wenger explains that learning is the social negotiation of meaning that involves reification (making meaning from abstract information) and participation (active involvement in the social process).<sup>3</sup>

**Joy E. Harris, Director of Educational Technology at the University of Tampa, discusses social presence (3:14 minutes)**

Social presence can maximize the reification and participation in the online learning process. As a student in one of our studies suggests, "A sense of community helps reduce stress and the sense of loneliness. The instructor absolutely needs to get involved in learning and the students absolutely need to be able to communicate!" This student's comment is exceedingly perceptive because, as human beings, we crave connectedness.

Cultivating supportive online learning environments is an art that begins with nurturing connectedness and community through social presence. Thus, we suggest that IT professionals, administrators, faculty, and students begin to advance their understanding of the nuances of online and blended learning, and the importance of social presence, the literature behind it, its foundational theoretical frameworks, and the following simple, practical suggestions.

## Create Social Connections to Build Community

Faculty can purposefully create social areas in their online spaces to encourage community building within the course or program. To help diminish feelings of disconnectedness and isolation among online participants, Rita Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson suggest integrating social activities to establish connection and relationships before adding academic content into the course. In their early work, Conrad and Donaldson called this first phase of engagement "social negotiating"; more recently, they refer to it as simply "connect."<sup>4</sup>

The goal of this first phase of teaching online is to connect with students and give them opportunities to connect with each other and the instructor. The process includes a series of icebreakers, such as assigning and modeling an extended introductory profile with three to five brief but rich paragraphs about the individual to help establish connections within the course community. Faculty can also shape the online learning environment with informal discussion areas, social and informational lounges, or virtual cafés for students.

## Understand a Variety of Tools and Media

A wide array of media is available to help us enrich our course content; however, it is also important to identify various media and resources aimed at connectedness. Examples include collaboration tools (such as Google Docs), shared calendars, blogs, wikis, online discussions, annotation software, and polling tools, as well as various content-specific applications. As always, when introducing new tools, we should consider students' aptitude with technology, their level of interest, their learning needs, the extent and constraints of the content, and the overall context of the learning experience.

## Harness Reflection and Prior Experience

Reflection lends itself as a powerful formative assessment tool, encouraging learners to actively reflect on course readings and assignments in relation to their prior experiences, interests, and career plans. In this metacognitive approach, learners take ownership of their learning and autonomously acquire additional knowledge as needed. Learners determine their current knowledge level, as well as what they hope to learn by the end of the course.

Metacognitive opportunities help learners transfer their knowledge to other situations and tap into prior knowledge and experiences, which can increase their satisfaction.

Also, when instructors purposefully integrate authentic or experiential learning practices — that, when possible, refer to practitioners' actual materials and situations — students obtain critical application skills that will assist their transition into the workplace. As a teacher in one of our studies noted, "A learning community should reflect the way humans live out their lives. The Social Presence Model appears to me to be a model of real-life interactions."

## **Provide Early and Continuous Feedback**

We suggest that instructors offer early and continuous feedback for students on their academic performance, perhaps beginning with a diagnostic in the first week. This early, often formative feedback helps students quickly understand their progress. In fact, our research suggests that the earlier the feedback is provided, the more successful the learning experience will be for everyone involved.

We also suggest that organizations purposefully design automated mechanisms that let faculty maximize personalization without absorbing too much time. For example, you could design an automated template that lets instructors write a single letter to students with key points of feedback, then send it individually to students — personalizing it with their names and adding specific comments as needed.

## **Design with Assessment in Mind**

Including multiple, simple formative assessments in course content helps guide student learning and helps students connect with the content through multiple methods. If social connectedness is a goal in any learning experience, that goal must be connected with course outcomes, activities, and assessments.

In the age of outcomes assessment, closing the loop of effective assessment planning with data-driven changes can yield increased student learning outcomes in future iterations. Although our accrediting bodies might be the driving force, it is also fruitful for us to offer workshops that help faculty build in and measure the effects and results of social presence. We must be driven by pedagogy, but we must also be mindful of mapping our learning outcomes, instructional activities, and formative and summative assessments.

## **Encourage Change in Small Steps**

Not even the most adept, advanced instructor should try to do too much at one time. Multiple, simultaneous new features and interventions can consume instructors' time and begin to chip away at their sanity. Moreover, in the end, it will not be clear which features yielded the results and which caused frustration and discontent. Thus, we strongly encourage incremental, planned change.

## **Conclusion**

Babson Research Survey Group Directors Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman reported that as of 2013 "there has been no drop in the numeric increase in the number of online students" and that the online learning growth rate "is still substantial."<sup>5</sup> They noted the challenges of retention rates, and they also documented several barriers to online learning. Therefore, because faculty and student satisfaction plays a key role in retention rates and because increased social presence often leads to an enriched learning experience, it is advantageous for organizations to support faculty as they integrate social presence into learning environments. In offering the strategies explained here for social presence, we hope to help you maximize connectedness and pave the way for engaged learning experiences that increase student and faculty satisfaction.

## **Notes**

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2. Amy Garrett Dikkers, Aimee L. Whiteside, and Somer Lewis, "Virtual High School Teacher and Student Reactions to the Social Presence Model," *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2013, pp. 156–170; and Amy Garrett Dikkers, Aimee L. Whiteside, and Somer Lewis, "Get Present: Build Community and Connectedness Online," *Learning and Leading with Technology*, vol. 40, no. 2, 2012, pp. 22–25.
3. Etienne Wenger, *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 62–71.
4. Rita Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson, *Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2004), p. 9; and Rita Conrad and J. Ana Donaldson, *Continuing to Engage the Online Learner: More Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2012), p. 14.
5. I. Elaine Allen and Jeff Seaman, *Changing Courses: Ten Years of Tracking Online Education in the United States* (Babson Survey Research Group, 2013), pp. 18, 29–31.

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Aimee L. Whiteside, Ph.D., teaches at the University of Tampa in the Department of English and Writing. Aimee earned a Ph.D. in Rhetoric and Scientific and Technical Communication at the University of Minnesota in August 2007, and she earned a graduate-level Certificate in Adult Learning Technology Integration. Her professional interests include the technical communication, first-year writing, the socio-cultural aspects of learning, blended and online learning, technology-enhanced learning, formal and informal learning environments, community partnerships in education, and reflective practice. She has taught face-to-face, online, and blended courses at the undergraduate and graduate levels in technology-enhanced learning, Internet studies, leadership and small-group communication, oral communication, information design, technical communication, and first-year writing.



## Amy Garrett Dikkers

Amy Garrett Dikkers, Ph.D., Assistant Professor, earned a Ph.D. in Comparative and International Development Education at the University of Minnesota in 2006, a M.Ed. in Secondary English Education from Wake Forest University in 1996, and a B.A. in English from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro in 1995. Before her doctoral study, she taught secondary school English domestically and abroad. The focus of her doctoral study was international development education, specifically the education of children in difficult circumstances, such as street children, ethnic minority children, refugee and immigrant children, and other groups often not served effectively in formal school settings around the world. She has taught face-to-face, hybrid, and

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