

Feeling Real: Social Presence within Online Discussion Forums

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The presenter will share findings and examples of four teaching strategies that emerged from a qualitative action research study investigating social presence of students in three different graduate level online learning communities. Participants will learn how to enrich online social presence, students' sense of community and feeling like a real person and idea exchange with other participants.

Literature Review

- When we connect with others in new social situations, we create social presence or a degree of interpersonal contact (Argon, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).
- Social presence - “to create a level of comfort” (Aragon, 2003,p. 60).
- ...and “the degree to which participants are able to project themselves affectively within the medium” (Garrison, 1997, p. 6).
- “The ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally, thereby being perceived as ‘real people’” (Garrison and Arbaugh, 2007, p. 159).

Some specific strategies from the literature for improving social presence in the online environment - some of these are course design, some are instructor-dependent, and some are dependent on the students' willingness to engage:

<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Student pictures and profiles● Audio/video tools● Prompt responses to questions● Sharing personal experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none">● Introduction activities● Using first names in posts● Providing unmoderated discussion places<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ “Muddiest point”, “Coffeehouse”, “Student Forum”
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Research question

How does incorporating a variety of discussion forum designs enhance social presence in an online course?

Methodology

<p>Four discussion formats implemented</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Large group● Small group● Synchronous● Artifact	<p>Data Collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">● Student Surveys● Facilitator Reflection
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Results

Large Group (one discussion forum for all course participants)

- Implement large group discussion 3-4 weeks into the term
- Provide forums specifically for community building
 - Student profiles sharing personal and professional information
 - Photos of personal and professional lives (optional)
 - What are you currently reading (outside of assigned reading)?
- Acknowledge opportunities for creative interactive response
 - Provide situational prompts; e.g. Pretend that Gallagher (2009) and Schmoker (2018) were in the same room having an academic conversation about standards and how they apply to the effective teaching of writing. What would they agree on? Use this as your starting point to write a brief portion of their conversation...

Small Group

- 4-6 students in a forum - groups can be private or open
- Instructor assigned - either randomly or around shared work
- Base groups--mixed expertise, job roles or programs
- Job Alike--group students according to their current job role
- Topic Alike--works well when students are conducting research

Synchronous

- Assigning students to meet online, on the phone or in-person to discuss classroom content
- Skype, Google Hangouts, FaceTime, WebX, etc.
- Most important - they talk to each other
- A strategy to improve the timing tension is to share the required session in advance with set calendar days/times.
- Consider “roles” - a note keeper, a facilitator, questioner, a tech person?, etc. - ways to capture the conversation and/or highlights

Artifact

The artifact-based discussion forum included having the student demonstrate and share their understanding of course content material through producing a digital artifact. For example:

- 90 second video responses using Flipgrid
- collages using PicCollage
- create a concept map
- Find a piece of artwork that represents what they have learned/their philosophy/etc..
Provide a rationale for why they chose it and what it represents

By establishing social presence of the individual and honoring the social and historical experiences of the collective; a richer, more engaging learning community may be formed. Rethinking the discussion forums within the online learning environment is a possible strategy for increasing social presence.

Thank you for attending my session! Jennifer Carlson jcarlson17@hamline.edu