

The background of the slide is a blurred photograph showing two hands typing on laptop keyboards. The focus is on the text overlaid on the image.

Feeling Real: Social Presence within Online Discussion Forums

Transforming the Teaching and Learning Environment
Virtual Conference

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Goals of the Session

Participants will leave this session with:

- A working definition of social presence
- Strategies to enrich social presence in an online learning environment
- Multiple online discussion format ideas

Think back to the first day of a professional development training you had never attended before, the first day on a new job, on a new committee, or the first day in a new class. Imagine all the new faces around you. Think about not knowing the rules of this new setting or the ways in which people were expected to act. Think about not knowing the “language” of the group whether this was literally or figuratively true. Although you may have been excited to be there, you may also have felt some degree of nervousness and unease because this was a new educational setting.

What did you do to feel comfortable and make connections with others?

Argon, 2003

Social Presence

- 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 defined - what the literature says...

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).

[Great podcast - SBOSE ENU - Online Social Presence](#)

Without social presence....

- Dropout/decreased engagement
- Feelings of isolation
- Less learning potential

With social presence....

- Enhanced information flow
- Improved learning support/group cohesion
- Improved learning satisfaction

Research shows a clear relationship between students perceived sense of social presence and students perceived learning.

Social presence - Our research themes/goals

1. Social climate
2. “Real person”
3. Membership in the community of learners
4. Quality of the learning experience

Strategies to enrich social presence

1. Course Design (course designers or instructors)
2. Delivery and Management (instructors)
3. Participation (participants)

Specific strategies:

- Student pictures and profiles
- Audio/video tools
- Prompt responses to ?s
- Providing unmoderated discussion places (“Muddiest point”, “Coffeehouse”, “Student Forum”)
- Introduction activities
- Using first names in posts
- Sharing personal experiences

Research question

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

Methodology

- Four discussion formats implemented
 - Small group
 - Large group
 - Synchronous
 - Artifact
- Data Collection
 - Student Surveys
 - Facilitator Reflection

Online Discussion Format

Large Group

1. Implement large group discussion 3-4 weeks into the term
2. Provide forums specifically for community building
3. Acknowledge opportunities for creative interactive response

Online Discussion Format

Large Group

What students had to say:

“Since we are at the end of the course, as opposed to the beginning, I feel more so like my classmates know me, even in these formats that are inherently less personal.”

“Sharing our profiles we were able to connect with other members and recognize our common purpose.”



Online Discussion Format

Small Group

1. “Nested Community”
2. More complex learning

What students had to say:

“Everyone talks like they are sitting right next to you in class, so it makes it a positive experience for learning.”

“...small groups lead to deeper more meaningful connections and a better understanding of each others’ topics.”

Online Discussion Format

Synchronous sessions

1. Tension with the “flexibility” of online learning
2. Increased the sense of “feeling real”
3. Contradicted literature - they had a higher perceived sense of social presence but the results were mixed.



Online Discussion Format

Synchronous sessions

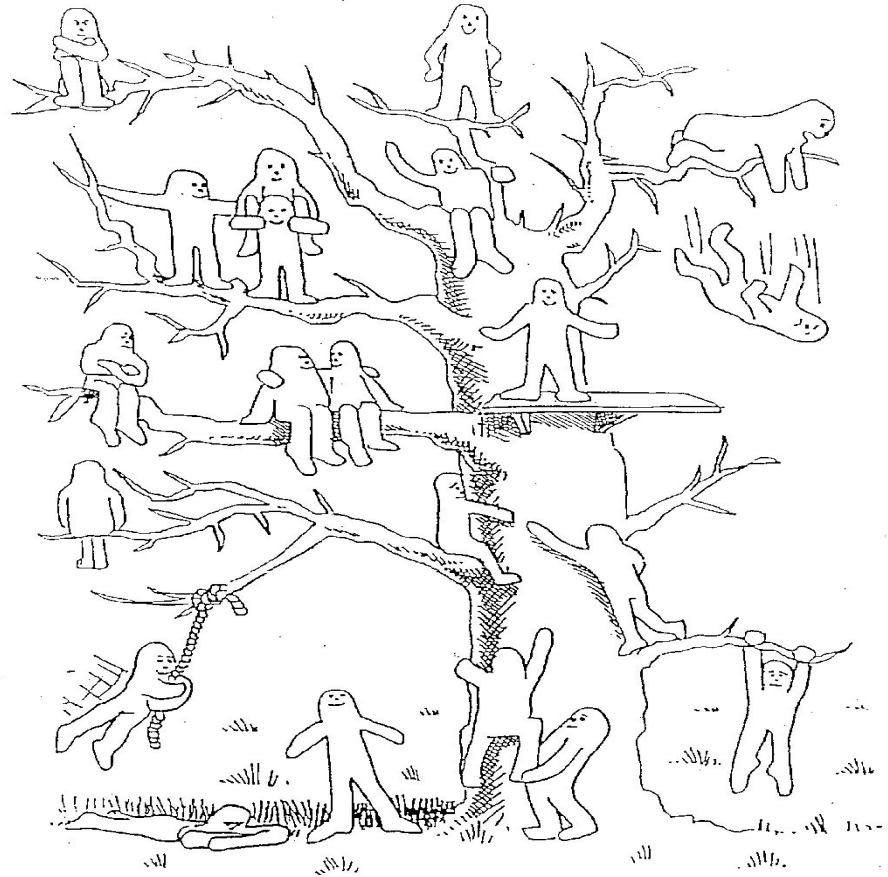
What students had to say:

“We met via Google Hangout and saw the faces behind the screen names. And my oldest daughter even made an appearance due to not wanting to go to bed--can't get more real than that!”

Online Discussion Format *Artifact-based*

1. Quality of learning experience was enhanced.
2. Invested, personal, constructive responses
3. Instructor/facilitator responses
4. Using creative mediums provide ways of knowing students in multiple ways

- Where are you in your practice of developing the conditions for social presence in your courses?



Quiet Reflection for Idea Share

- Self assess- Where are you in your practice of developing the conditions for social presence in your courses?
- How does online context impact student engagement?
- Idea share for developing social presence.
- What has worked well? How do you know?

Idea Share

- **How would do you make connections with others in an online environment?**
- **How does online context impact student engagement?**
- **Idea share for developing social presence.**
- **What has worked well? How do you know?**

