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Social Presence as Best Practice: The Online Classroom Needs to Feel Real

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Due to COVID-19, colleges have moved into digital spaces at an unprecedented scale and pace. A shared concern among faculty and administration is the impact of this move on student-learning outcomes. A commonly touted “best practice” is to provide a fully *asynchronous* experience—preparing lectures, learning activities, and social interactions in advance and posting these for students to access on their own schedule.

However, advocates of this model are asking us to compete with providers that have been doing it longer, have better infrastructure, and may do it better. For example, partnerships between elite universities and technology companies may have an advantage over colleges that are scrambling to transition online (e.g., a projected iStanford and HarvardxFacebook; see Walsh 2020). Our advice: colleges transitioning to online classes should make high-quality digital experiences that are both asynchronous and synchronous and that can prioritize social presence—that is, the “being there” and “being real” presence of others in an online learning environment. To be sure, it is possible to build social presence into both synchronous and asynchronous formats. Our

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contention, however, is that intentionally designing blended synchronous/asynchronous online courses is a highly effective way to both increase student engagement through direct contact with faculty as well as establish a competitive edge against universities of high-quality and mass-digital presence.

Social presence is not a new phenomenon. It has evolved considerably since it was introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976, 65) as “the salience of the other in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions.” Originally, social presence was conceptualized as a quality that varies based on medium—for example, video communication containing higher levels than text-based communication. Subsequent research conceptualized it as the ability of participants to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 1999). Building on this relational aspect, Swan et al. (2008) argued that social presence entails individuals who are affectively or emotionally connected to one another in an online environment. Moreover, Picciano (2002) argued that an emotional sense of belonging is also an important part of social presence. Combining these conceptual components, Öztok and Kehrwald (2017, 263) defined social presence as “the subjective feeling of being with others in a technologically mediated space; the sense of being there, together when being there does not entail physical presence.”

Research suggests that social presence positively impacts student motivation and participation, actual and perceived learning,

course and instructor satisfaction, and retention in online courses (Oh, Bailenson, and Welch 2018). Most of this research focuses on course satisfaction and both perceived and actual learning outcomes. Findings are consistent; however, some evidence is mixed on the relationship of social presence to actual academic performance. Our own research seeks to clarify these relationships. Using a battery of questions asked of students at the conclusion of both online and face-to-face political science research methods courses, we found that higher levels of perceptual social presence increases actual learning outcomes and enhances course satisfaction (Daigle and Stuvland 2020a; 2020b). Two findings stand out in making a case for maximizing social presence in a blended synchronous/asynchronous format as a best practice of online education—especially in light of uncertain futures and global pandemics.

First, we found that by increasing perceptual social presence, student performance matches that of students in face-to-face classes. Table 1 uses OLS to explain actual learning outcomes in the form of knowledge gains based on a pretest/posttest design. The same 20 questions, consisting of content from the midterm and final exams, were asked at the beginning and the end of the course. To measure social presence, a battery of questions in the posttest asks about interactive and relational components of the course. Again, OLS models are run using social presence and course modality as predictors, and then interacting the two.

Social presence is a statistically significant predictor of knowledge gains while controlling for delivery mode ($p < 0.05$), but the

course modality is not a predictor of knowledge gains. When interacted, the effect of social presence does not depend on modality. The model statistics show that, combined, a small portion of variance is accounted for by the original model ($R^2 = 0.040$), and we gain only a little by way of explanatory power

Table 1
OLS Predicting Knowledge Gain from Social Presence and Course Modality

	No Interaction		Interacted	
	B	P	B	P
Social Presence (0–6)	0.312	0.041**	0.283	0.123
Distance Offering (0–1)	–0.311	0.651	–0.593	0.621
SP * Distance			0.095	0.773
Intercept	3.558	0.000***	3.677	0.000***
n	142		142	
R ²	0.040		0.041	
F	0.057*		0.123	

Source: Daigle and Stuvland 2020c.
Note: * $p < 0.1$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Table 2

OLS Predicting Final-Grade Percentage from Social Presence and Course Modality

	No Interaction		Interacted	
	B	P	B	P
Social Presence (0–6)	2.284	0.000***	1.356	0.027**
Distance Offering (0–1)	–3.109	0.193	–12.480	0.003***
SP * Distance			3.149	0.006***
Intercept	73.957	0.000***	77.726	0.000***
n	144		144	
R ²	0.165		0.210	
P	<0.001***		<0.001***	

Source: Daigle and Stuvland 2020c.
Note: *p<0.1, **p<0.05, ***p<0.01.

when we interact social presence and course modality ($R^2=0.041$). Nonetheless, social presence is a significant predictor of knowledge gains.

Second, we considered the relationship of social presence with final grades in the course. The interacted model in table 2 is particularly interesting. The interaction between social presence and modality is statistically significant ($p<0.01$), suggesting a unique effect for the interaction. Although all three regressors in the model are statistically significant (i.e., each has a unique contribution), the interaction being significant implies that the magnitude of effect for social presence is different depending on the delivery modality. Moreover, the course performance gains made by increasing social presence for online students surpasses the gains made by face-to-face students. Thus, there is even more to gain when improving the perceived fidelity of the learning environment if that environment is virtual.

In addition to knowledge gains, our findings confirm the positive relationship between social presence and course satisfaction noted in the literature. For instance, we found that approximately 34% of the variation in student evaluations can be explained when we consider a student's perception of social presence. When compared to the knowledge-gains models, the magnitude of effect is higher and thus instructive for faculty who aspire to better evaluations: increase social presence and you will be evaluated more positively.

Based on the social-presence literature and our own analysis, we recommend that faculty enhance perceptual social presence in their online classes, both synchronous and asynchronous. What does this look like? We believe the most intuitive way is to blend asynchronous content with synchronous interaction. This interaction can take various forms: small-group discussions via video conferencing, office hours, and live mini-lectures. This provides different types of students the option of how to engage with the content and it requires some level of student–student and student–instructor interaction (albeit technology mediated). Instructors can be present, virtually, at scheduled times during the week so that students experience the sense of “being present” and “belonging” online at levels expected in the face-to-face university experience.

Whereas pairing asynchronous classes and course content with synchronous interaction faculty and student interaction may be ideal, we also acknowledge that circumstances (e.g., connectivity and work schedules) may not allow students to attend or tune in to live class sessions. Regardless, we feel perceptual social presence can be enhanced even in a fully asynchronous scenario. In that scenario, we recommend that faculty pursue the enhancement of social presence through asynchronous course components (e.g., incorporating interactive discussion boards and asynchronous lecture content) that allow learners to post questions or comments viewable by the instructor and other students.

Ultimately, a high-quality blended experience uses best practices of both the real-time engagement of synchronous education (i.e., the high social presence in-person experience) and high-quality asynchronous education. This blended model allows for both greater and more varied social presence and, we think, should be considered a best practice for preserving good learning outcomes in the age of small, socially distant classes.

Data Availability Statement

Replication materials are available on Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/OGTHTO>. ■

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