

Beyond the Screen: Building Meaningful and Professional Connections in Online Learning Environments

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Abstract: *Social presence is an important component of effective online learning because it helps students and instructors establish trust, interpersonal relationships, and meaningful communication. In asynchronous courses, timely and personalized feedback can strengthen instructor presence, participation, and course satisfaction. Social media can further support interaction and extend learners' professional and personal learning networks when used appropriately. Professional standards, privacy considerations, and responsible communication practices are therefore important when social media is incorporated into learning environments. Overall, purposeful strategies for strengthening social presence can support student engagement, satisfaction, and positive online learning experiences.*

Keywords: community of inquiry, social presence, social media, online communication

1. Introduction

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Social presence in any learning environment is necessary to facilitate optimal learning environments. Understanding how people communicate and establish a social presence with one another is especially important in online courses (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). They suggest that social presence is a key component of a Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework which is a model of online learning centered around the theory that learning requires participation in a community based on inquiry. Ammenwerth et al. (n.d.) states that online learning is associated with high dropout rates and suggests that these rates can be reduced when learners take a collaborative approach to learning and establish a community of inquiry. They further describe social presence as the ability of the participants to identify and connect with the group, communicate openly in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships with each other. Social media is a tool that may be used to enhance the social presence of participants in a course as well as increase both their community of inquiry within the course and external from the online course as it can add to the personal learning networks (PNLs) of the learner (Zimmer, 2021).

In a study done by Nasir (2020), they showed that students that reported an increased social presence also reported an increase in course satisfaction and had a higher level of interaction with their peers in online conversations. Their study further suggests that social presence contributed most strongly to students' level of course satisfaction. As creating and maintaining a social presence seems to increase student course satisfaction, and decrease potential course dropout rates, it would stand to reason that it would be beneficial to establish a good social presence from the beginning of a course. We will explore some ways to create a good social presence in online courses. Social presence, online learning, feedback, and professional social media use will drive this narrative literature-based discussion.

Social Presence Methods

Traditional methods of communication in online courses consist of introduction posts and written discussion posts in

the online learning management system (Milovic & Dingus, 2021). These methods are done in an asynchronous format and can provide some interaction between students and instructors. There are, however, better ways to foster more connections between course participants. The learning management system provides many places where a student can interact with the course, instructors, and participants, and therefore becomes a tool that can be used to create a social presence. The traditional methods of discussions and introduction posts are facilitated on this platform. Social media platforms may also add to the tools available through the learning management system. Social media creates a tool for users to create and share content to users without geographical boundaries (Desai et al., 2022). They report that social media use has greatly increased over the last several years rising from 5% of American adults with active social media accounts in 2005 to 72% in 2021. Additionally, social media platforms can create a space for learners to increase their PNLs and increase their social presence in online learning environments (Krutka et al., 2016). Utilizing social media allows users to connect with others in their area of interest or discipline that they may not otherwise be able to connect with due to time or distance factors. They describe some typical social media platforms including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and LinkedIn which are being used by the interventional pain physicians discussed in this study to increase their personal brand, highlight competitive advantages, and disseminate medical literature. Their research showed that physicians with a stronger social media presence had fewer negative online reviews.

Love & Marshall (2022) discuss an enhanced method for providing introductions and feedback in online courses in order to increase social presence through video feedback. Their study suggests that the use of video feedback enhanced the instructor's social presence, strengthened relationships between the instructor and the student, and improved the students' overall experiences in the online courses. Another way that instructors' social presence can be improved is by providing clear course requirements and providing personal and timely feedback to students (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). They report that students in online, asynchronous courses did not place as much importance on face-to-face

communication with their instructors as they did on the timeliness of their feedback.

Best Practices for Social Media Use

When considering the use of social media in any profession, consideration should be given to the fact that once posted on a personal or professional account, the information is no longer private (Desai et al., 2022). They also suggest that professionals using social media platforms should avoid engaging in political, polarizing, or highly controversial topics. Care should also be taken to monitor any and all active accounts, regardless of the frequency of use. It is always possible for an account to be linked to information and if less frequently used accounts are not monitored, these may be linked to information that the user may not realize or want them to be associated with. Desai et al. (2022) give these ten recommendations for best practices in relation to the physicians in their study:

- 1) Refrain from posting political content on a professional account.
- 2) Do not post explicit images or photos.
- 3) Use numbers 1 and 2 as a guideline when liking or sharing information
- 4) Maintain Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) compliance and privacy.
- 5) Do not access patients' social media accounts.
- 6) Physicians should obtain written consent prior to posting any patient images, photos, or testimonials.
- 7) Procedural images should be deidentified before they are shared.
- 8) Pause before posting.
- 9) Guidelines for social media use may allow for a better-balanced viewing of postings.
- 10) If providing patient education, care should be made to provide balanced information.

While these ten guidelines were created specifically for physicians, they do provide some universal best practice recommendations. Caution, respect for the privacy of others, not engaging in highly controversial information, pausing before posting, and providing balanced education information may all be useful and applicable to an educator or a student participating in social media platforms. Vie (2017) adds the recommendations of having a designated point person on the team to coordinate social media efforts, explore options that may not be as familiar as the common platforms, and allow multiple opportunities to share the various ways in which social media is being used in courses to promote pedagogical practices.

2. Conclusion

Social presence is an important component of effective online learning because it strengthens communication, engagement, interpersonal connection, and course satisfaction. Instructors can support social presence by establishing clear expectations, providing timely and personalized feedback, using appropriate video-based communication, and incorporating social media when it serves a clear educational purpose. When social media is used, professional conduct, privacy, and responsible communication should remain priorities. Thoughtful use of these practices can help create a

more connected, supportive, and engaging online learning environment.

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