



Be Connected: Maintaining Humanity in Online Learning and Teaching

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- What is social presence?
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Teaching online courses pose challenges for faculty, who are used to face-to-face (F2F). We are deprived of the ability to “read the room,” to pick up cues from our students’ facial and body gestures, and we lose the spontaneity that comes with being in our classroom. We are missing the social presence of a F2F teaching.

In discussing the importance of social presence in the online classroom, Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt note, “simply getting students to talk to one another [for example in a discussion forum] is not sufficient. Instead, there needs to be a focus on establishing human-to-human contact” before the class begins and throughout the semester.¹ We need to project our teaching personae into an online environment and create a stimulating and supportive environment for our students to learn. Failure to do so may undermine the capacity of our students to learn. This Teaching Tip focuses upon Social Presence.

Because the definition of online learning and teaching modalities can vary, here are the definitions used in this Teaching Tip:

- **synchronous online** (all participants online at the same time)
- **asynchronous online** (participants complete work online at varying times)
- **blended** (all participants meet in-person at times during the semester)
- **hy-flex or multi-modal** (some participants are in-person and others online in instructor-led simultaneous session)

How can faculty maintain human contact in their online course?

Research on social presence in online learning suggests approaches that we can take in online modalities.

What is social presence?

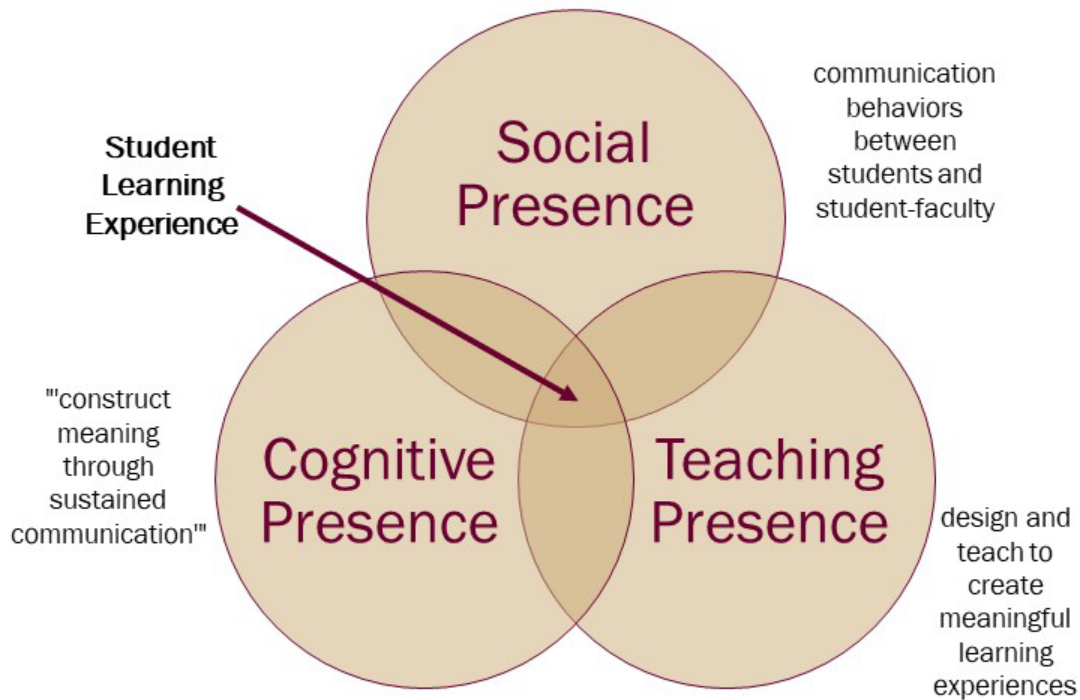
It is part of a triad that promotes a community of inquiry. Social presence are “communication behaviors and perceptions of participants in online discussions” that include:

- “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry,”
- “the degree to which a person is perceived as ‘real’ in mediated communication,”
- “the degree in which participants in computer-mediated communication feel affectively connected one to another, and
- “the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships.”²

The diagram below shows that social presence works in tandem with cognitive and teaching presence to create a student-centered online learning environment. To achieve social, cognitive, and teaching presence requires not only content mastery, but also a teaching practice that is learner-centered and based on backward design principles.

¹ Rena M. Palloff and Keith Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, 2nd ed (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007), 12.

² Karen Swan and Jennifer Richardson, “Social Presence and the Community of Inquiry Framework,” in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*, Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 65.



We have many tools, licensed by Bloomsburg University, at our disposal to create social presence in online environments:³

- ☐ Telephone
- ☐ D2L/BOLT (announcements, email, discussion boards, assignment feedback, audio, video)
- ☐ Husky Success (a.k.a. Starfish) where we can send kudos and "raise flags"
- ☐ Mediasite
- ☐ Google Classroom
- ☐ Microsoft Teams
- ☐ Office 365-OneDrive collaborative tools
- ☐ Online synchronous office hours (or better you call them student success hours or student collaboration time)

Some of the many Apps available outside of BU tech support:

During Summer 2020, faculty crowd sourced and demonstrated some tools and apps they were using. Of course, it makes sense to explore these apps independent of the video demos below. In making decisions about using non-BU supported Tech Tools, consider these factors: cost to student, ease of access and use, goal of the tool and app, layering on too many tools within a course and across the students' course schedule. Here are 10-14-minute videos in which colleagues shared how they use the following:

[Blogger, Christina Francis](#)

[Creating and Sharing Google Forms for a Zoom Session](#)

[Creating and Sharing Office 365-Doc for a Zoom Session](#)

[Flipgrid, Craig Young](#)

[Go React, Jessica Bentley-Sassaman](#)

[Gradescope, Dan McCurry](#)

[GroupMe, Christina Francis](#)

[Inclusive Access/McGraw-Hill Connect, Cheryl Howlett](#)

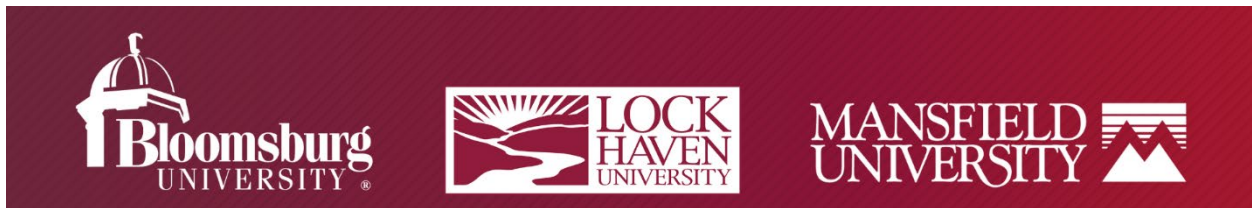
[Kahoot, Rebecca Willoughby](#)

[Kahoot Quiz Game, Christina Force](#)

[MicrosoftTeams, Dan McCurry](#)

[Padlet, Steph Gardner](#)

³ At the time of writing, integration of Bloomsburg, Lock Haven, and Mansfield are still in process. So, not all technology may be equally accessible at all campuses.



[Piazza, Dan McCurry](#)

[Polleverywhere, Arjun Sondhi](#)

[VoiceThread, Julie Ambrose](#)

[TechSmith's Capture
\(formerly Jing\), Lisa Stallbaumer](#)

[Vialogue, Skye Chernichky-Karcher](#)

[Wacom Graphics Drawing Tablet](#)

Remember that the use of any technology tools or media does not inherently humanize online modalities. It is how we use these to bring a presence into the classroom that are essential.

Building Presence through Course Design and D2L/BOLT

Design your course so that it is learner-centered and based on Backward Design: A Powerful Course Design Method with Guidelines.

Introduce each unit, lesson, week, module with short videos or audio files that explains the goals, relevancy to the larger course goals, and how they will be achieved.

Create a course site in D2L/BOLT that is easy to navigate, be clear about participation, and how it will be assessed. Consult [Better Practices for Creating Content in D2L/BOLT](#).

Create variety in the forms of participation so that students (and you) do not fall into a rut. The last thing that you want is a Discussion Board in which compliance is the only motivation to contribute. You will not enjoy reading, and students will not be engaged.

Include a discussion forum for students to pose questions about assignments either at the module or course level. Encourage students to help each other work through the challenges, yet be sure to monitor to prevent the dissemination of incorrect information. In those cases, your “voice” needs to be heard. Consult [TALE Teaching Tip: Discussion Boards: Best Practices and Tips](#). [IMDC offers discussion board documentation at their Infobase](#).

Provide timely feedback on assignments that offers constructive advice on how to improve. Ideally, bring your voice into the feedback making use of D2L/BOLT's video or audio options, screen capture tool (e.g. Techsmith Capture), or podcast. [TALE Teaching Tip: Podcasting: A Significant Addition to your Teaching Toolbox](#).

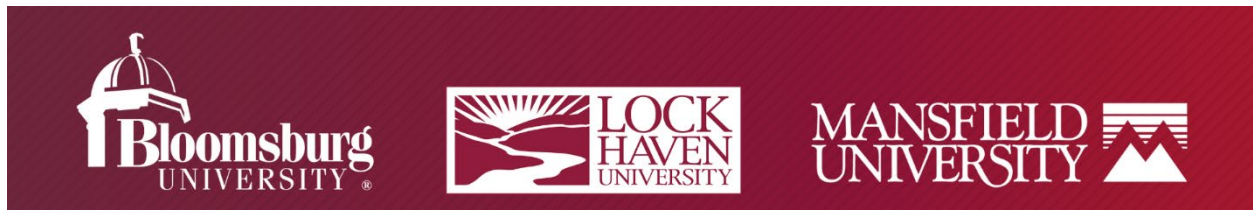
Palloff and Pratt make the following recommendations: encourage students to download readings rather than simply read them within D2L/BOLT. In addition, before posting to a discussion board or other asynchronous format, encourage them to draft in a word document and let their ideas simmer.⁴

As you set up assignments, encourage students to make time to process before they post to discussion boards. Remind students of the importance of studying the content before posting. When reading the posts of others, perhaps step away and return after they have had time to ponder. Then review the guidelines that you have provided for posting. For example, when posting, will you require students to support their claims with evidence from a reading? Make sure they know this is the expectation.

Taking online courses requires students engage in self-regulated learning behaviors, making note of upcoming assignments and preparing to complete them. Help students develop an awareness of managing their priorities, knowing that an online course differs from F2f. Be sure to create that structure in D2L/BOLT content and settings.

Encourage students to keep a planner in which they record all assignments, introduce them to the concept of the BU Study Cycle adapted from Louisiana State University. Here is a [PPT of the Study Cycle](#) (Google) adapted for different modalities including F2F that you can download and edit. Please email tale@bloomu.edu if you have difficulty downloading.

⁴ Palloff and Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, 2nd ed (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007), 78-79.



Be sure to create rules of engagement for interactions in the course, what is sometimes called Online Etiquette or Netiquette. Though you can also encourage students to contribute to its creation. Topics to include are civility, respect, inclusion, timeliness, preparedness, responsibility to fellow learners in discussion forums and group work, and topics that are relevant no matter the modality including academic integrity.

Building Social Presence through Communication

Model the behavior that you expect or hope to see from students. Palloff and Pratt write, “Be a good role model of online participation by being visible on a daily basis, or at a minimum as much as is expected of learners.”⁵

Make yourself available yet set boundaries. You do not need to be available to students 24/7. Indicate to students what your response time will be to email inquiries. If there are times in which you will not respond, let them know (e.g. never check emails after 9 pm or before 8 am; Friday evening and Saturday are reserved for family, etc.).

Send friendly reminders to students within 24-48 hours before a discussion board post deadline. Explore D2L/BOLT's [Intelligent Agents](#), which can monitor student activity in the course and send automated emails when certain things happen or do not. Contact the IMDC staff at BU, your D2L administrator on your campus.

Be willing to reach out to students who have not logged in for a few days. D2L/BOLT offers diagnostic reports. In addition, D2L/BOLT's Intelligent Agent can help you identify students not fulfilling course goals and send automated messages. This is particularly useful for mass enrollment courses. IMDC offers documentation on [Analytics and Engagement](#).

Include a discussion forum for students to pose questions about assignments in each module or more generally in the course. Encourage students to help each other work through the challenges but be sure to monitor to prevent the dissemination of incorrect information. In those cases, your “voice” must be heard.

Alternatives to email. Let's face it, our email boxes fill up fast, and we probably don't read everything that comes through in a timely manner. That is why some faculty use one of these tech tools to streamline communication: OneNote and Microsoft Teams are supported by BU. Other social networking tools: GroupMe and Slack provide a user experience that is more comparable to Facebook.

Starfish (a.k.a. Husky Success) enables faculty to send kudos and raise “flags” that activates support with staff in academic support roles. What is more, you can record attendance in Husky Success so that academic support can identify students who might be struggling.⁶

Call students who are not participating or logging in.

Create an instructor persona that outlines your teaching philosophy, share research and creative work and biographical information, put personality into feedback to students, and of course, provide a recent picture.

A picture paints a thousand words. Patrick Lowenthal and Dave Mulder report on the humanizing effect of photos in online interactions. Encourage students to upload a photo of themselves in their profile in D2L/BOLT and Zoom.⁷

Create an opportunity for students to introduce themselves (D2L/BOLT's Discussion Forum, OneNote, Microsoft Teams or tools and apps not supported by BU including: FlipGrid, VoiceThread, GroupMe, Slack, etc).

Develop ways that this asynchronous socialization can continue (e.g. create a Zoom room where students can mingle).

⁵ Palloff and Pratt, *Building Online Learning Communities: Effective Strategies for the Virtual Classroom*, 2nd ed (San Francisco: Wiley, 2007), 150.

⁶ At the time of writing, it is unclear when Starfish will be available at Lock Haven or Mansfield.

⁷ Patrick Lowenthal and David Mulder, “Social Presence and Communication Technologies: Tales of Trial and Error,” in “Social Presence and the Community of Inquiry Framework,” in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*, Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 39.



Community Building Activities - Two Examples

As a rule, I avoid ice-breaker activities, unless they help students make discoveries about my discipline, but in an asynchronous or blended environment, you might want to reconsider. Lowenthal and another colleague, Dunlap, developed the “**virtual paper bag**.” Students select five photographs to illustrate aspects of themselves and encourage other students to explore the results.

1. Have students create a single PowerPoint slide that introduces themselves with images (what city are they taking the course from; favorite activity or hobby; etc.). You can collect the photos in several ways.
2. Have students email a thumbprint size of a headshot, collect and put into a word or PowerPoint document that serves as a photo roster.
3. Have students upload a headshot to a D2L/BOLT assignment folder.

Create a OneDrive-Word or Google Doc, and have students put their photos next to their name with a brief biography.⁸

If students do not want to share their photo, give them the option of an avatar. A variation on the “virtual paper bag” might solicit input from students on their favorite novels, music, television programs, heroes in their discipline, etc. Give students options when appropriate.

Charlotte Nirmalani Gunawardena uses a community building activity in which she creates a “Mutual Interests” discussion forum. After they contribute, she develops a “gallery of student profiles, noting their accomplishments, skills, interests, and cultural backgrounds and the images they posted, and share[s] it with the class.” Her discussion forum to seek assistance is called “Help Wanted, Help Given.” It is left open throughout the semester. When Halloween rolls around, they hold a virtual costume party.⁹

Teaching Large Enrollment Course?

Here are tips from Arizona State University’s (Canvas is their LMS; they have TAs)

- [Managing Student Expectations, leveraging quizzes, and reducing grading load](#) (Part 1 of 3-part series)
- [Managing groups, peer review, and other peer-to-peer interactions](#) (Part 2 of 3-part series)
- [Managing instructor-student communication and presence](#) (Part 3 of 3-part series)

⁸ Patrick Lowenthal and David Mulder, “Social Presence and Communication Technologies: Tales of Trial and Error,” in “Social Presence and the Community of Inquiry Framework,” in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*,” Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 39.

⁹ Charlotte Nirmalani Gunawardena, “Cultural Perspectives on Social Presence: Research and Practical Guidelines for Online Design,” in *Social Presence and the Community of Inquiry Framework*,” in *Social Presence in Online Learning: Multiple Perspectives on Practice and Research*,” Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2017), 124-125.