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Prove You Are Not a Dog: Fostering Social Presence in Online Learning

David J. Mulder
Dordt College, david.mulder@dordt.edu

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Abstract
Learning online can be isolating for students. Some students may prefer to be anonymous—on the outset, at least—until they feel comfortable participating in the course. Many instructors value interaction between students or between the student and the instructor, and without a sense of “presence” in the online classroom, some students will be reticent to participate. It is thus incumbent on instructors and instructional designers to create courses that foster interaction between users to develop this sense of being “a real person” online. This chapter examines the concept of social presence, articulates reasons high social presence is a desirable feature in an online course, and provides examples instructors and designers might draw upon for developing social presence in their own courses.

Keywords
interaction, media richness view, relational view, social presence, teaching presence

Disciplines
Education | Online and Distance Education

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Chapter 10

Prove You Are Not a Dog: Fostering Social Presence in Online Learning

David J. Mulder
Dordt College, USA

ABSTRACT

Learning online can be isolating for students. Some students may prefer to be anonymous—on the outset, at least—until they feel comfortable participating in the course. Many instructors value interaction between students or between the student and the instructor, and without a sense of “presence” in the online classroom, some students will be reticent to participate. It is thus incumbent on instructors and instructional designers to create courses that foster interaction between users to develop this sense of being “a real person” online. This chapter examines the concept of social presence, articulates reasons high social presence is a desirable feature in an online course, and provides examples instructors and designers might draw upon for developing social presence in their own courses.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993, The New Yorker published a now-famous cartoon drawn by Peter Steiner (Fleishman, 2000). The cartoon pictures two dogs, one of them sitting in front of a computer, and commenting to the other, On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog. This was a significant moment in the history of the Internet, because it demonstrated that the concept of the Internet had become so present in culture that it could serve as the punchline for a joke. Online anonymity was something that could be joked about, and even celebrated (Christopherson, 2007; Jones, 2012).

For online instructors and instructional designers, however, this anonymity may not be something to celebrate. Online educators and designers often strive for a level of interaction between learners (Anderson, 2008a; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Northup, 2009; Zheng & Smaldino, 2009; Whiteside, 2017). Interaction implies at least some level of self-disclosure form the participants. Online learners may thus need to be encouraged to give up at least a bit of their anonymity by sharing their thoughts and drawing upon their personal histories and individual backgrounds as they interact together.

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Personal characteristic such as gender expression, ethnicity, or age would, of course, be readily observable in a face-to-face course. Instructors in online settings, however, may not be able to discern many personal characteristics through their online interactions with students (Ko & Rossen, 2010). By the nature of the medium, online students have a level of personal anonymity that face-to-face students simply do not have. While Christopherson (2007) indicated that anonymity in online spaces can have both negative and positive aspects for communication, instructors will likely prefer to have more knowledge about their students! And while many students will be forthcoming, some may prove more reticent and less likely to share about themselves naturally, due to their personal preferences, cultural background, and social styles (e.g., independent vs. dependent, competitive vs. collaborative, or avoidant vs. participative) (Stavredes, 2011). It is along these lines that Dabbagh (2007) argued,

online learners must understand and value the learning opportunities afforded by collaborative and communication technologies in order to engage actively and constructively in learning (p. 220). In other words, some students may need to be coaxed into interaction.

“Interaction” in an online course may not be as straightforward as in a face-to-face learning environment (Hirumi, 2002; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Stavredes, 2011). There are sometimes different norms and practices in the online classroom than the face-to-face classroom (Ko & Rossen, 2010). However, Anderson (2003) argued that educators have always desired that their students interact—regardless of the medium of the course—and Hoskins (2012) went so far as to posit,

social interaction [in educational settings] seems to be a basic need, and technology may sometimes substitute for human interaction to the point where we sometimes attribute human characteristics to technologic devices (53).

Similarly, Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2010) have indicated that collaborative construction of knowledge plays an essential role in authentic online learning. Add to this the fact that meaningful interactions can reduce isolation and anonymity in online courses that might otherwise result in student dissatisfaction, poor performance, and dropping out (Hirumi, 2002), and it is clear to see that student interaction is desirable in online learning.

WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESENCE?

How can instructors and instructional designers help move students in online courses from anonymity toward interaction? To enter into meaningful interactions in the online classroom, learners must develop social presence. Song and Yuan (2015) have distinguished between “interaction” and “presence” in an online environment, suggesting that “presence” is a sense of “being” online that manifests through interactions between individuals (p. 732). They noted that simply interacting online does not automatically result in presence (i.e., an individual does not necessarily feel part of the group simply because she has posted messages to a discussion forum.) However, presence is established through these online interactions (Song & Yuan, 2015).
The concept of Social Presence first entered the literature in Short, Williams, and Christie’s (1976) book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications*. In the book, the authors do just what the title promises: the authors provide an exploration of the social psychology of telecommunications. The authors give significant time and attention to the development of the theoretical construct of social presence, based on research into both face-to-face and mediated interactions. In the preface to the book, the authors explained their beliefs about the nature of communication through media:

_Hitherto, the fact that face-to-face communication has almost always been the most satisfactory form of communication has been a fundamental constraint on society. It may be something of an oversimplification to suggest that cities evolved in order to facilitate human communication but there is wide agreement that the physical and social environments of modern man have been conditioned to a very large extent by his apparent need to travel to acquire information. This supposedly fundamental constraint may be undermined by developments in technology, for no longer need all communication involve physical movement. It is within the scope of foreseeable technology to reconstitute by electronic means a virtual three-dimensional representation of an individual who is hundreds of miles distant. Dazzled by such technological marvels, enthusiastic futurists have speculated about possibilities ranging from education at home, to working by audio-video links from homes no longer located in overcrowded cities (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976)._

This final comment is an interesting speculation from the 1970s about the then-future possibility of online communication. Today, many people communicate through online means that we take for granted in contemporary society (Song & Yuan, 2015). Working—and learning—online today is not constrained by geography. We are able to provide a very real sense of ourselves to others at a great distance by making use of digital communications technologies (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Kehrwald, 2008; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Whiteside, Garrett Dickers, & Lewis, 2017).

There are a variety of definitions given by different authors to try to capture the nature of social presence. Short and colleagues (1976) introduced the term, defining social presence as the “salience of the other” (p. 65). Similarly, Kim (2009) explains social presence as a ‘mediated illusion’ of other as real and the degree of proximity psychologically, emotionally and intentionally to others in a mediated environment (p. 446). Other authors describe social presence as a means of projecting themselves online (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Song & Yuan, 2015). Perhaps the simplest definition is offered by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) when they described social presence as the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication (p. 9).

Kehrwald (2008) has described the research that has been conducted regarding this perception of realness in terms of a “media richness view” and a “relational view” (p. 91), indicating two different ways of thinking about the construct of social presence. Earlier studies often focused on the media richness view, which explored how well a particular medium (e.g., asynchronous, text-only communication) replicates face-to-face communication. In other words, in the media richness view, a learning situation with high level of social presence would create the illusion of non-mediation (Kehrwald, 2008). Other researchers have since supported this viewpoint, that some the affordances of some technologies allow for greater social presence (Fadde & Vu, 2014; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Olson & McCracken; 2015.)
As the prevalence of online learning has developed over time, however, researchers have begun to look less at the technologies themselves, and more at how users interact through these technologies. Thus, the relational view explores not a comparison of how well communicating through a given technology replicates face-to-face interaction, but rather how does that technology allow individuals to perceive others, to connect with them and develop a sense of “proximity and tangibility” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 91). As Stavredes (2011) expressed it, Without awareness of other learners’ presence, it is nearly impossible to develop relationships with peers (p. 132).

Learner interactions in online courses take a number of different forms: student-student, student-content, and student-teacher interactions are all essential aspects (Anderson, 2008a). Individuals with a high level of social presence will then, by design, minimize their anonymity, or at the very least, will project a particular view of themselves that they would like others to see. Kehrwald (2008) described this as an individual’s ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions (p. 94). These interpersonal transactions are essential for authentic, collaborative learning in online settings (Dirksen, 2012; Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010; Horton, 2012; Stavredes, 2011). And while there is some debate about the necessity for high levels of student-student interaction in every online courses (Anderson, 2003; Battalio, 2009; Miyazoe & Anderson, 2010), Mabrito (2004) emphatically stated, Students are most successful in online courses that provide ample opportunities for them to interact with the instructor, other students, and the course content (p. 1), a position echoed by more contemporary authors (Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Whitson, 2015; Whiteside, Garrett Dickers, & Lewis, 2017). Online interactions between individuals require a level of social presence.

Why Do We Want High Levels of Social Presence in an Online Course?

High levels of social presence may seem—even at an intuitive level—to be a desirable aspect of learning online, but are there specific benefits for learning? Aragon (2003) expressed the benefits of high levels of social presence clearly and succinctly, stating,

The overall goal for creating social presence...is to create a level of comfort in which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants (p. 60). Research indicates that there are a variety of positive effects for students studying online when there is a high level of social presence, including higher levels of interaction, greater sense of trust, stronger feelings of community, and higher levels of student satisfaction as a result. Let us briefly consider each of these.

Courses with higher levels of social presence among the students result in higher levels of interaction. Earlier it was noted that Song and Yuan (2015) distinguished between interaction and presence, noting that high levels of presence are demonstrated by highly interactive individuals. Zheng and Smaldino (2009) have suggested that learner-learner interaction (and the accompanying social presence) can reduce the sense of isolation that may be an effect of learning online, help learners adjust to the online learning environment, and gain from the experiences of their fellow learners (p. 114). Thus, high social presence, and the higher level of interaction it may convey, is a highly-desirable benefit. As an illustration of this we might look to Northup’s (2009) study of online learners’ preferences for interaction, where she found that a majority of participants described interacting as part of a community an “essential” element for learning in the online environment. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) have named such a community a “Community of Inquiry,” and social presence is one of the necessary elements within their framework.
As these high-social presence learning communities develop, a greater sense of trust is fostered among the course participants. Anderson (2008b) suggested that the “first task” for an online instructor is to foster a sense of safety and security in the course environment. Anderson encouraged online instructors, *In the absence of this trust, learners will feel uncomfortable and constrained in posting their thoughts and comments* (2008b). Learners who felt comfortable with their classmates and understand their group members are much more likely to work interdependently as they interact online (Koh & Barbour, 2008). Other authors have supported this perspective, finding that high levels of student interaction and high levels of trust go hand-in-hand (Song & Yuan, 2015; Stavredes, 2011).

It is perhaps not surprising that courses with high levels of social presence result in a stronger feeling of community among the participants. Song and Yang (2015) suggested, *frequent meaningful interaction in an online course motivates learners and promotes a sense of community* (p. 733). Along the same lines, Koh and Barbour (2008) noted, *social presence enables students develop effective groups online, which assists the students in building a sense of community in an online class* (p. 2860). A course with a high level of social presence allows a community that is warm, inclusive, and collegial, and makes group interactions appealing, engaging, and intrinsically rewarding (Aragon, 2003). In sum, a course designed for a high level of social presence establishes learners as individuals, but individuals capable of developing relationships and thus essential members of their community of inquiry (Stavredes, 2011).

Courses with higher levels of social presence and communal interaction regularly result in higher levels of student satisfaction with the course. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) found that social presence had a significant positive impact on student satisfaction, even in text-based online interactions; this outcome was also reported by Leong (2011). Hoskins (2012) indicated that complex interaction strategies (evidencing high levels of social presence) are likely to result in high levels of student engagement and satisfaction. This finding is echoed by other authors as well (Khurana & Boling, 2012; Kim, 2009; Northup, 2009; Swan & Shih, 2005; Whiteside, Garrett Dikkers, & Lewis, 2017).

**Social Presence and Teaching Presence**

In a face-to-face class setting, this might be obvious whether or not the teacher is “present” in class: if they are physically located in the room with the students, their “presence” might be taken as a given. But whether teaching online or face-to-face, all instructors cultivate a particular “teaching presence;” they serve as the “facilitator and co-creator of a social environment conducive to active and successful learning” (Anderson, Rourke, Archer, & Garrison, 2001). Teaching presence and social presence are connected in an online learning environment (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017; Stavredes, 2011.) Teaching presence includes all of the actions instructors coordinate to support learners’ social presence, including course design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction. (Anderson, Rourke, Archer, & Garrison, 2001). This can take manifest in different ways, but instructors' own social presence is an essential element for shaping how learners perceive the role of the instructor within the course (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017).

Just as a teacher might use his or her physical presence in a face-to-face course to spur students’ active attention and interaction to the learning activities, an instructor in the online classroom will use his or her teaching presence to foster students’ social presence in the course. It is likely that this will happen through the facilitation of the course (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000), but it also can take place at the design level (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). As Garrison et al. (2000) expressed it, it is the responsibility of the instructor to *design and integrate the cognitive and social elements for educational purposes* (p. 92),
and Horton (2012) suggested, *Designing social learning is more like building the theater than acting in the play* (p. 402). Because the focus in this chapter is primarily on course design—rather than online instruction—let us now turn our attention to how online instructors and instructional designers can help the students develop social presence in their courses through the design of the course.

**DEVELOPING SOCIAL PRESENCE IN YOUR ONLINE COURSE**

Larson and Lockee (2014) have suggested that at a basic level, all instruction involves interaction. This interaction must take place at least between learners and the content, but likely with the instructor and/or with other students as well. And while these interactions may be the goal in and of themselves, it is more likely that the interactions will be aimed at accomplishing the learning outcomes of the course (Larson & Lockee, 2014). For courses in which student-student or student-teacher interactions will play a significant role in attaining the learning outcomes of that course, online instructors and instructional designers must deliberate in designing the course to foster a sense of social presence that will allow these interactions to take place (Aragon, 2003; Khurana & Boling, 2012; Swan & Shih, 2005). Designing a course with an intuitive, organized structure can help promote this sort of learning environment (Whiteside, Garrett Dickers, & Lewis, 2017), but this takes intentionality on the part of the instructor. Careful, deliberate planning is key for successful interactions in the online environment.

For those who are comfortable teaching and learning online, it may be hard to remember how it was getting started that first time; the sense of uncertainty and trepidation may be very real, for first time online learners especially (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Stavredes, 2011). It may, in fact, require some specific encouragement from the instructor to get students past these initial fears and start interacting online. In their discussion of guiding learners to engage online, Conrad and Donaldson (2011) suggested, *Interaction and collaboration is not intuitive to many adult learners who have been educated in a predominantly lecture-based environment. Initially, a learner may be more comfortable in a passive student role and will need guidance and the opportunity to become more involved in an online learning environment* (p. 7).

There are many design decisions that can be made at the course level that will allow students the opportunity to interact, and thus develop a greater social presence in the course. Several options include:

- Using ice-breakers at the outset of the course.
- Using a “coffee shop” forum for informal social interactions.
- Incorporating video.
- Incorporating social media.

Examining each of these separately in a bit more detail may provide a clearer sense of how to incorporate them into a course you are teaching or designing.
Using Ice-Breakers at the Outset of the Course

Instructors in face-to-face courses often begin the course with some sort of “getting to know you” activity to help students get to know one another. Online instructors and instructional designers can craft their courses to include the same sort of elements. Many authors advocate developing some sort of “ice-breaker” activity at the outset of the course (Anderson, 2008a; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Horton, 2012; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Leong, 2011). Ice-breakers are intended to humanize the technology-mediated environment and begin to build trust among the learners (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).

There are a wide variety of ice-breakers instructors and designers might choose to employ. Leong (2011) stated,

*It could be as simple as getting students to introduce themselves using discussion postings...This provides the opportunity for online students to get acquainted and promotes trust in relationships early in the course (Leong, 2011).*

Other more elaborate ice-breaker designs include:

- Playing an asynchronous bingo game based on a brief personal biography each learner submits (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).
- Selecting one word to describe you or your life, and then writing a brief post to explain why you selected that word (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).
- Randomly putting students together in a group and encouraging the students to discern *why were we put together* (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).
- Using creative questions to foster the introductions, such as, *Create a ‘soundtrack of your life’ to tell us about your past, present, and future, or You are a superhero! What is your superhero name? What are your superpowers? How do you use them in your day-to-day life?* (Shank, 2011).
- Using wordle.net (or another word cloud creator) to create a word cloud that reflects who they are and what they care about (Shank, 2011).
- Using a digital whiteboard to have learners create communal graffiti (Horton, 2012).
- Inviting learners to upload pictures of something they have created (Horton, 2012).

The essential point of an ice-breaker activity is to get students interacting—and thus demonstrating social presence—but the goal is that they share something meaningful and/or substantial about themselves (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). As Horton put it, *the purpose of such activities is to give learners a non-threatening way to use the collaboration tools while sharing information about themselves* (p. 559).

Using a “Coffee Shop” Forum for Social Interactions

One of the challenges of fully online courses is that students do not have a chance to strike up informal “hallway conversations” the way students in face-to-face learning situations might on their way into or out of class (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). And while it is not necessary that an online course replicate every aspect of a face-to-face course, this is one aspect in which online learners might benefit from greater social presence and the interactions that can be facilitated.
Smith (2008) advocated for the use of a “coffee shop” forum as a way to replicate this sort of informal space for chit-chat and off-topic social interaction. You might choose other names for it; perhaps “the water cooler” or “the teachers’ lounge” or “the crashpad” might be appropriate, depending on the nature of the course content. But whatever the name, providing an informal space for learners to interact can increase their perceptions of social presence (Aragon, 2003; Koh & Barbour, 2008).

Incorporating Video

As early as the 1970s, researchers were interested in the possibilities of video-based communication for increasing social presence in mediated communication (Daft & Lengel, 1984; Rutter, 1984; Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Research into using video as a means for boosting social presence in online learning is ongoing into the present (Fadde & Vu, 2014; Olson & McCracken, 2015; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2011).

Video-based interactions in online learning can be either synchronous or asynchronous. Synchronous video involves users communicating in real-time, such as through a video conference using tools like Skype or Adobe Connect. Asynchronous video communication requires that users record video of themselves for others to view at another time; uploading videos to a platform like YouTube or Vimeo would be an example of asynchronous video. Both synchronous and asynchronous video can be beneficial for increasing social presence in an online learning environment, because the communicators can both hear and see each other (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Fadde & Vu, 2014).

Some online instructors favor synchronous interactions because they mirror face-to-face classroom models (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Shank, 2011). However, asynchronous video may provide some real benefits for learners beyond the social presence it can afford. Conrad and Donaldson (2011) have noted that asynchronous communication allows for more reflection before responding, and that each learner can respond, which is not always possible in synchronous communication. Borup, West, and Graham (2012) found that asynchronous video had a substantial impact on instructor presence and social presence in their courses.

There are many different ways that instructors might use video to support the development of social presence in their online courses in either synchronous or asynchronous formats. Some suggestions include the following:

- Some instructors have found that offering synchronous office hours for online students can be a very effective way to keep students connected and to answer their questions just-in-time (Karabulut & Corriea, 2008; Li & Pitts, 2009). Video conferencing tools such as Adobe Connect, Google Hangouts, or Zoom can be an efficient way to make online office hours a media-rich experience with high social presence. Sharing a link to the online meeting room through your course management system can make it easy for students to access the video conference.
- A twist on the office hours approach is to host an online open house using video conferencing tools (Shank, 2011). Learners prepare a brief presentation of their work in progress, and share it with their classmates through a synchronous video conference to receive feedback and encouragement.
- Digital storytelling can be a highly engaging way to get students to share their work, and in a way that develops social presence at the same time (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010). Digital storytelling
Prove You Are Not a Dog

involves using video, digital photos, music, and narration to tell a story; an expressive and emotive means of communication (Lambert, 2013; Robin, 2008). Instructors might choose to use digital storytelling as a way of presenting content, or they might assign their students to create their own digital stories to demonstrate their mastery of course content.

• Many of the ice breaker activities described earlier could easily be converted to asynchronous video format. Providing learners with tutorials may be helpful for this (Horton, 2012). Simply having students record a brief personal introduction a few minutes in length to introduce themselves may prove an effective way to have students share a bit about themselves and their goals for the course, and foster greater social presence at the same time.

• Many online video platforms (e.g., YouTube) provide users with the functionality of commenting on videos. This feature can be used to foster asynchronous discussions based on a video. Either the instructor or the students can upload a video that presents a problem, a case study, or a question, and the class can comment on the video to discuss the issues raised in the video (Shank, 2011).

It is important to remember that online video often requires more time of students than reading text (Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017). However, the social presence benefits from using synchronous or asynchronous video as part of an online course are substantial, and merit serious consideration on the part of instructors (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Dunlap & Lowenthal 2014).

Incorporating Social Media

The rise of social media represent a whole new way for learning to take place online; learners can access their networks of friends, experts, and fellow learners easily and freely, and can have ongoing conversations outside the bounds of a conventional learning experience (Horton, 2012). Ostashewski, Reid, and Dron (2013) have reported that the terms “social media” and “web 2.0” are used almost interchangeably to describe the online tools used today to create and share knowledge. These tools definitely do foster collaboration and easy sharing of information, creating a "participatory culture" in which the shared 'wisdom of the crowd' can be more accurate than any single expert opinion (Herrington, Reeves, & Oliver, 2010). Besides the easy access to a wide variety of perspectives and resources available via social media, social networks have an added benefit: many online learners are already using social networks as part of their day-to-day lives outside of school, and are accustomed to having a developed sense of social presence in these networks (Bedard, 2009; DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2008; Ostasheewski, Reid, & Dron, 2013).

It is possible that social networking sites provide a better place for learners to interact online than a traditional LMS; DeSchryver et al. (2009) boldly stated, *Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard and Moodle do not inherently promote a sense of community, social presence, and frequent interaction in the way that Facebook does* (p. 332). Researchers are finding that incorporating social networks such as Facebook (Bedard, 2009; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009) and Twitter (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Conrad & Donaldson, 2011; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009) can be an effective means for elevating social presence in online courses. Some suggestions for their use may prove helpful for instructors and instructional designers to determine how and when to incorporate them into their course designs.
• Using social networking sites as a venue for course discussions may be valuable (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011). However, instructors must be aware that social networks encourage free-flowing conversation similar to that in a face-to-face course (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009). The benefit of this is that social presence is elevated, however, online instructors may have to change their expectations for discussions held via social media as opposed to traditional, LMS-based discussions.
• Providing clear expectations for interactions via social media (e.g., logging in a certain number of times per week) and modeling of appropriate interactions by the instructor are likely to foster better results (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).
• Clear boundaries, such as a closed Facebook group limited to just class members and course tasks may help keep learners focused (Conrad & Donaldson, 2011).
• For educators using Facebook in their online course, it may be wise to not require students to “friend” each other, as this undermines the affordances of that particular social network—being generally based on offline friendships that extend into the the online world (DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009). Instructors can instead create a Facebook group and invite all students to participate in that group, leaving the decision to friend or not to friend up to the individual students (Bedard, 2009; DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009).
• For educators using Twitter in their online course, it would be wise to encourage or require them to “follow” each other, as this facilitates interactions between users in this social network (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009).
• Be intentional about establishing relevance. This might mean recommending people, organizations, or publications for the students to follow, and highlight the importance of connecting with others, both within the course and outside of it (Shank, 2011).
• While social media seems to hold great promise for developing social presence in online learning (Bedard, 2009; Carpenter & Krutka, 2014; DeSchryver, Mishra, Koehler, & Francis, 2009; Shank, 2011), it is important to keep in mind that it is not a panacea, and must be used thoughtfully. And, as Horton (2012) summed up his discussion of online students interacting within a social network: Effective social learning will also require time for learners to...build trust and carry on conversations (p. 41).

Social media is not a panacea that will solve all social presence problems, but because many online learners are already familiar and comfortable with interacting with others through social networks (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009), this can be an effective way to boost social presence if carefully utilized by instructors.

CONCLUSION

Using Gunawardena and Zittle’s (1997) definition for social presence, it can be seen that there are a variety of ways to show yourself as a “real person” online. For online instructors and instructional designers desiring students to interact in meaningful ways, designing for social presence is an essential aspect for the course design! However, with the availability of excellent tools and a wide array of strategies to increase social presence, no one needs to be anonymous in an online course. It should be easy for instructors and students alike to prove you are not a dog.
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Prove You Are Not a Dog


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**ADDITIONAL READING**


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Interaction**: In online learning settings, interactions are essential aspects in which contact is made between learners, between learners and the content, and between learners and the instructor.

**Media Richness View**: This perspective emphasizes the affordances of the technology being used to communicate in a mediated interaction. Technologies with a higher “richness” (e.g., synchronous video) would allow for fuller projection of social presence than technologies with a lower richness (e.g., text only communication).

**Relational View**: This perspective emphasizes the role of intentionality to communicate in a mediated interaction. In the relational view, the technologies being used do matter for projecting a sense of social presence, but not as much as the way those using the technologies employ the tools. For example, synchronous video may allow for more social presence, but only if the user intentionally projects a sense of their “real self.” Likewise, even text-only communication can allow for clear projection of one’s personality, if done intentionally.

**Social Presence**: The quality of being perceived as a real person when interacting through a communications medium.

**Teaching Presence**: The means by which an instructor established him/herself as the authority in the learning space.