# Creating Presence in Your Online Course: Culminating Assignment

Imagine that you're interviewing for a position that requires teaching online courses. One of the questions you're asked is, "Tell us what you know about the different types of "presence" in online courses – what are they, why are they important, and how would you create each one in the online courses you would be teaching for us?" How would you respond?

**Your answer to the question:**

There are three types of presence I have considered in creating my courses. They are instructor presence, social presence, and cognitive presence. All three are interrelated, and each can influence students' success in a course.

*Instructor presence* is what I have most control over; it is the role that I play in the classroom and my approach to creating a community of learners through my interactions with students in the course. In current literature, instructor presence has been associated with student persistence and satisfaction (Stavredes 2011), indicating that the relationships we build with our students could meaningfully affect their academic success. Instructor presence begins with the syllabus because this is where we establish communication expectations. In my syllabi, I will clearly outline how and when I will provide feedback and support to students. In addition to describing logistics, like an expected 24-hour turnaround time on emails Monday through Friday and one-week turnaround time on assignments, I would emphasize that in my course questions are encouraged early and often. I would make it clear that to me asking questions does not suggest weakness; it shows students to be responsible learners willing to reach out for support to achieve their goals. As such, all questions are welcome, and I will hold regular office hours as well as set special appointments to make sure students feel confident about course content and expectations, and to otherwise support their academic careers as needed.

In the first days of the term, I always use first day introductory intake cards and icebreakers. The intake cards give me insights into the students' motivations, challenges, goals, and background. The icebreakers humanize me and the other students, creating a community in which each member is valued. I would continue to use this strategy in online courses because I want to start the course off with a tone of collegiality. I would want to let the students know I care about them and plan to tailor the learning experience to the real humans in the course, as opposed to just treating than as numbers. This two-pronged strategy would both give me useful information and create a positive atmosphere.

As the class progresses, I would situate myself as a *guide on the side*, as opposed to being the central focus of class interactions. In discussions, I would spend time weaving discussion threads to stimulate knowledge construction and critical thinking. I would do this by being a strong unobtrusive presence in discussions, going in regularly and directing students to related/conflicting posts while waiting to include my own analysis. I would use summary at the end of the week to bring it all together and insert my additions/clarification/challenges to what they created. I like to use this strategy because it demonstrates that I value student voices. This

encourages students to take themselves and their peers seriously. It also pushes the students to think independently and collaboratively to solve problems.

For major assignments, I prefer to have students turn in drafts and build on their performance throughout the semester, as opposed to having a couple of high-stakes assignments. Through this process, students would be encouraged to review their own work multiple times before submitting it for a final grade. I would create self-evaluation opportunities for all major assignments as well as at the end of all units. These are geared towards supporting student success, metacognition, confidence, and self-directedness, and they explicitly link to course learning outcomes. I want to teach my student how to learn. Giving the tools to self-evaluate in my course could help them begin the practice in other courses. It would also give them a sense of direction and power over their learning experience. This would create presence by opening up spaces for dialogue when students were misperceiving their performance. For example, in a previous course I had a student reflect that they were actively involved in and greatly enjoyed peer review; however, they had not once submitted written peer review feedback. This reflection helped me see that they did not fully understand what was expected of them. In each step, I would offer encouragement, support, and specific feedback to help students overcome roadblocks. I would use this strategy because I want to see students learn and grow, not just replicate content delivered. Their process and evolution as learners is a primary objective. This is an appropriate strategy because of my social constructivist feminist pedagogy. This would make my students active participants in their learning journey. I would work alongside them and provide support, but they would have the opportunity to grow in their unique ways. Personalizing support for each student would allow me to build a strong professional relationship with each person.

Similarly, I would also provide frequent tailored feedback to help students stay on track in daily work. For example, I would monitor progress on a weekly basis and communicate with students, regardless of relative success. All students, including struggling students, would receive timely, personalized, actionable feedback in the form of a feedback note. These notes would help me stay engaged with my students and help them successfully engage in the course. I like the weekly check-in because it becomes an expected communication that students can rely on for feedback, giving them a sense of pattern and confidence that they know where they stand. It would also give me multiple chances for early intervention if students begin to struggle. This is a practice that, in the past, my students have expressed that they appreciate. They tell me that it makes them feel seen, and it personalizes the online environment for them. No student would go more than a week without hearing from me directly, even if they had disengaged in that period.

*Social presence* is the way that we conceptualize educating whole human beings, not just transferring knowledge. It is fostered by instructors through the creation of space for meaningful, authentic interactions among course members that challenge each person to think critically and gain new knowledge while respectfully sharing their own experiences and perspectives. As a social constructivist, feminist educator, I believe that this is vital to my success in the classroom. Due to the nature of the content I teach (most often international art and social justice), it would be both disingenuous and unproductive for me to teach a course without privileging social presence. It is also vital to achieving my goals because I want to see my students persist and succeed in stretching themselves as learners in college and beyond. In addition to being valuable to college success, the interpersonal and intellectual skills necessary

to succeed in collaborative efforts to problem solve are highly marketable job skills (Stavredes 2011, p. 131).

Three ways to develop social presence in an online classroom are through discussion boards, group projects, and peer reviews (Stavredes, 2011). In all three of these approaches, giving students clear directions can reduce stress and increase their ability to succeed. For example, explicitly sharing Brookfield and Preskill's (2005) nine dispositions with students before they begin participating in discussions could prepare them to engage in the discussion in ways the meet expectations for robust, collegial dialogue (Stavredes, 2011). Additionally, Brookfield and Preskill (2005) suggest a structural/procedural approach to discussions to encourage these interactions to happen more often, "circular response" that requires students to link their post to the previous post in the discussion at the beginning of their contribution (Quoted in Stavredes, 2011, p.138). By giving students both this specific strategy and the general sprit/style of collaboration as expectations would make it more likely for students to recognize what social presence in the discussion should look like.

Similarly, when assigning group projects, I would provide clarity in part through "clearly defined roles" (Stavredes, 2011, p.142) and a detailed conflict resolution guide contract (See Stavredes, 2011, p.146). For example, I would give students the autonomy to assign roles in their group, but I could support their success by first creating the role descriptions as a class. That would allow them to designate members into established positions with measurable, fair deliverable expectations. To proactively prepare for possible conflict, and to reduce the stress and increase the productivity of group projects, I would co-create with students a detailed conflict resolution guide contract (See Stavredes, 2011, p.146). This would empower the students to attempt to resolve any issues that arise themselves like they would as adults in a professional setting, leaving instructor intervention to situations that cannot be resolved internally. This would emphasize my social presence as a coach and the students' social presence to active co-creators of the experience. This is important because asking students to manage their own conflicts without this kind of clear direction could inadvertently increase stress instead of empowering to them.

Peer review would be a regular component of the course, required for each paper. To prepare students to succeed in these efforts, I would co-create with them "a prescribed process" (Stavredes, 2011, p. 146) for peer review that's tailored to the assignment. This resource would specify numerous specific questions on both style and content (Stavredes, 2011, p. 148). This would create social presence by ensuring that peer reviews were meaningful and detailed, avoiding weak "it's good/bad" statements. This practice could be valuable for students in other college courses and beyond.

Recently, Hamann, Pollock and Wilson (2009) highlighted the value of social presence in their exploration of the role of asynchronous discussion broads in online Political Science courses. Their work suggests that the quantity/quality of posts written by students was less correlated to their success in the course than the number of other students' posts they chose to read (without any grade requirement attached). It is most interesting that they conclude this is even more pronounced with students who came to the course with lower GPAs. The best thing an instructor can do, according to this study, is to build community and incentive for students to interact with one another, not just submit assignments in to the instructor. I would be interested to explore; however, if motivation might be the real factor here. Perhaps what they

really learned is that people who care read more (even when it is not required) and do better, as opposed to reading being the causal factor. Although, further research is needed, the role of social presence in online learning is currently being explores in the field's scholarship of teaching and learning.

*Cognitive presence* is the co-creation of knowledge produced by a community of learners. Fostering this is a way that I would challenge students to practice transferable higher-order thinking processes. A way I would specifically develop cognitive presence is through supporting critical thinking (Stavredes, 2011, p. 107), a term that I have found that can cause students anxiety, or that may be misinterpreted by students as a result their previous educational experiences. One strategy I would use to clearly communicate my expectations, and thereby potentially reduce this anxiety and improve results, would be to share with students the Paul-Elder Model of Critical Thinking (Elder and Paul, 2010 cited in Stavredes, 2011, p. 109-112). This model combines general "elements of thought" with specific "intellectual standards" (Stavredes, 2011, p. 110) to guide students through the process of thinking critically when considering a topic. The specific questions provided would assist me in facilitating meaningful discussions that push students to think critically. This strategy would create cognitive presence by helping me facilitate discussions that address multiple perspectives, their foundations, and their implications. It would require students to interact with perspectives beyond their own to create new knowledge in dialogue with disparate points of view. It would also require students to explore the depths of a topic instead of quickly glossing over.

Reflection is a distinct sub-strategy of critical thinking (Stavredes, 2011). In my courses, I would require reflective assignments throughout the term to help students articulate "where they have been, where they are, and where they want to go" (Stavredes, 2011, p.113). This process of considering their goals and abilities in the context of the course would encourage the students to increase their self-directedness by linking course objectives with their personal growth and educational needs. It would facilitate cognitive presence by helping students put their lives in dialogue with the course. As students reflect on their learning in the course, they would be able to identify how their knowledge and views have expanded, changed, or been solidified by the course experience. Furthermore, it would give students the opportunity to address their approach to the course to help them succeed in ways that are most meaningful for them.

Because I study the role of film in international relations, I frequently use videos in my classroom. The online classroom is especially well suited to this approach. A Faculty Focus article (Moore, 2013) inspired one strategy I would employ in an online class. First, I would provide one video, then I would ask students to identify a related video that they put in dialogue with our video through a student presentation of the material. Students would search the internet to find an appropriate addition to our inquiry then create a posting or video explaining their relationship, how they support and/or counter each other meaningfully. These presentations would be the basis for a class discussion. This strategy would increase cognitive presence by making the students co-curators of the course materials. The students would have to think critically and creatively about the course text to be able to consider how their two videos are in dialogue, then to see and challenge the perspectives presented by their peers. This would model the ways in which I want then to put scholarly work in dialogue when they complete research assignments, scaffolding the experience. Their social presence would be highlighted as each student would need to interact with others as they share and react to the new videos. My

instructor presence as a guide would be emphasized as we all work collaboratively to achieve the unit goals.

References

Hamann,Kerstin, Pollock, Philip H., & Wilson, Bruce M. (2009). Learning from "Listening" to Peers in Online Political Science Classes. *Journal of Political Science Education, 5:1, 1-11*. DOI: 10.1080/15512160802612011

Moore, Emily A. (2013). From Passive Viewing to Active Learning: Simple Techniques for Applying Active Learning Strategies to Online Course Videos. *Faculty Focus: Higher Ed Teaching Strategies from Magna Publications, May 20.* Retrieved from https://www.facultyfocus.com/articles/teaching-with-technology-articles/from-passive-viewing-to-active-learning-simple-techniques-for-applying-active-learning-strategies-to-online-course-videos/

Stavredes, Tina. (2011). *Effective Online Teaching: Foundation and Strategies for Student Success*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

**Your Facilitator's feedback on your answer to the question:**

**Your revised answer to the question (if necessary):**

## For Facilitator Use

Your Facilitator will use the following rubric to rate your assignment as "Met" or "Revise." To receive a "Met" rating overall, you must receive a "Met" rating for each criteria.

| Criteria | Description | Rating ("Met" or "Revise") |
|---|---|---|
| Answer is complete. | The question is answered completely. | |
| Answer is correct. | The question is answered correctly in accordance with the information presented in the workshop. | |
| Answer is well-developed. | The answer is at least three paragraphs long and shows synthesis of information presented in the workshop. For each type of presence, the answer includes at least three examples of how to create that type of presence. | |

Overall Rating ("Met" or "Revise"):

Overall Feedback: