



## The Importance of Building a Social Presence in the Online Classroom

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**Author's Notes**

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**Author Biography**

Dr. Amanda Joyce is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Murray State University. She teaches courses in Introductory Psychology, Research Methods, and the Psychology of Women and Gender, as well as several courses in her specialty area of Developmental Psychology. Her research interests include childhood cognitive development and best practices for teaching and learning in the college classroom.

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## The Importance of Building a Social Presence in the Online Classroom

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*While important, many of the guidelines put in place to prevent disease transmission during the Covid-19 pandemic (social distancing, quarantining, facial coverings, etc.) have created challenges to building student-student and student-faculty relationships. However, these relationships are, according to the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000), essential to learning. The purpose of this piece is to explore strategies to build social presence in the classroom to benefit students and faculty alike. Strategies such as the strategic use of discussion boards, collaborative assignments, class announcements, extra credit, and more are discussed in the context of improving student learning without significantly increasing the workload of faculty.*

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The Covid-19 pandemic has required both students and faculty to adjust their approaches to learning. Unfortunately, many of the guidelines put in place to prevent disease transmission (social distancing, quarantining, facial coverings, etc.) have created challenges to building student-student and student-faculty relationships. However, these relationships are essential to learning. One popular framework, the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al., 2000), examines how student learning occurs most successfully at the intersection of not just cognitive and teaching presence, but also social presence, which includes elements such as group cohesion and emotional expression. Thus, according to this model, learning relies upon communication, collaboration, and interpersonal relationships.

The Community of Inquiry model has recently inspired best practices in online and blended learning during the pandemic era (Fiock, 2020; Lee et al., 2020; Tan et al., 2020). It should come as no surprise that instructors have found success in this approach, given the research on the importance of social relationships on learning. Students' positive relationships with both faculty and peers increase their academic achievement within in-person (Ullah & Wilson, 2007) and online classes (Joksimović et al., 2015), and frequent interaction with faculty and peers

has been deemed the most significant predictor of students' academic success (Lundberg, 2014).

The purpose of this piece is to explore strategies for building strong social presence in the classroom. Approaches discussed include the strategic use of discussion boards, collaborative assignments, class announcements, extra credit, and more. These techniques are meant to improve student learning without significantly increasing faculty workload. As an instructor, I have applied these techniques to mid-sized courses (30-75 undergraduate students) involving distance learning, but it is expected these techniques could also bolster relationships established in courses of all sizes, including those conducted in person.

### **Techniques for Establishing Social Presence**

Many of us began the pandemic era with emergency remote teaching but are now transitioning to a time in which we can create more intentionally-planned online learning experiences (Hodges et al., 2020). The social presence of an online classroom is established in day-to-day interactions with and among students, and also through scaffolding that may begin months before the semester begins. I have chosen here to emphasize those practices that lend themselves to advanced preparation or to more in-the-semester preparation, depending on instructor needs.

#### *Discussion Boards*

Discussion boards traditionally require students to respond to an academic prompt, which students can find uncomfortable and unnatural (Jaggars & Xu, 2016; Kauffman, 2015). However, there is precedent for using discussion boards to, instead, encourage student connectedness (Woods & Ebersole, 2003), which I have chosen to do in my classes. Discussion boards in my courses are low-stakes assignments spread evenly throughout the semester in order to encourage continued communication and collaboration. Prompts ask students to introduce themselves, to share their favorite study music and study techniques (including an option to invite others to join study groups), and more. I require that students simply post to the discussion board and I grade for completion. However, I find that most make substantive contributions through their posts and replies in order to express themselves to their peers. Students can further show support for one another by “liking” posts, and I award extra credit to the authors of the most liked posts in order to incentivize thoughtful and timely responses.

One popular rule of thumb suggests that instructors can remain active participants on these boards without overshadowing student contributions by responding to approximately one third of student posts (Indiana University, n.d.). While this exact proportion is unverified, research does confirm that while instructors' targeted high-impact, enthusiastic participation on discussion boards can stimulate more discussion among students, excessive instructor participation negatively correlates with student participation (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2007).

### *Collaborative Assignments*

While opportunities for "computer supported collaborative learning" benefit students (Lipponen, 2002, p. 72), students report disliking group work because of problems such as "free riders," difficult group selection, and a fear of peer evaluation (Roberts & McInnerey, 2007, p. 257). I navigate these pitfalls by making collaborative activities optional so that self-motivated students can reap the benefits of said activities without being subjected to the drawbacks of working with those who are less motivated. As further incentive, I provide students who participate with unannounced extra credit points (see Watkins & Daly, 2003). Students may participate in course question discussion boards by asking questions or providing answers to their peers (Joyce, 2020). They may also contribute to crowdsourced notes, available as a class-wide shared Google doc. Finally, students are invited to collaborative Zoom "happy hours" in which they can chat about unclear topics, concrete examples of course material in action, study habits, hobbies, and more. While students hesitate to utilize these options at the beginning of the semester, they often come to value these opportunities and increase their participation as the semester progresses.

### *Class Announcements and Feedback*

A great deal of the social atmosphere of a course, and its subsequent benefits to students, is created through a positive tone set by the instructor (Joyce et al., 2021). For instance, when instructors use a positive tone in their emails and syllabi, students are more likely to positively evaluate and, more importantly, to pass the class, and they perceive the faculty as warmer, more approachable, and more motivated to teach the course (Dickinson, 2017; Harnish et al., 2011). As such, course announcements and feedback on graded work, too, should convey a light, positive tone. Positively framed comments on student work can prevent discouragement among students (Bean, 2011; Kluger & DeNisi, 1996). Announcements could include, in addition to basic reminders of assignments coming due, kudos for good work on discussion boards, reminders about

opportunities for interactions, and encouragement toward outside-of-class activities, such as a virtual speaker series or events sponsored through career services. Instructors concerned about their availability to provide a positive tone at different points in the day or semester can write announcements in advance and schedule for later release.

### *Extra Credit*

As described above, I provide students with many extra credit opportunities as a reward for interacting with one another: for participation in group notes, for asking or answering questions on the course question board, for having the most-liked post in a discussion board assignment, for attending outside events, or for going above and beyond in Zoom discussions. Students and faculty view extra credit opportunities through different frameworks. Specifically, while instructors historically dislike extra credit, worrying that it could encourage an irresponsible attitude, students are more likely to endorse it, citing it as an opportunity for a second chance (Norcross et al., 1989). Pynes (2014) argues that extra credit can be used for the purpose of “academic virtues” (p. 194). Thus, while many would argue it excessive to provide extra credit opportunities only to inflate a student’s grade, offering extra credit for the purpose of building a class’ social learning environment, under this argument, would be justified.

The Chronicle of Higher Education has several recommendations for best practices in offering extra credit (Dunn & Halonen, 2019). Like Pynes (2014), they recommend that the assignments serve the course objectives. Additionally, they suggest that an extra credit policy, including a credit limit, be established in the syllabus and that the instructor not alter this policy during the semester. While many occasions for extra credit, such as previously unannounced research talks, naturally arise throughout the semester, it is possible to stay within syllabus guidelines by offering a “buffet style” extra credit option that allows students to complete an array of extra credit activities until they hit a point maximum for the semester. In my classes, this limit is a point value less than 5% of the final course grade.

### *Additional Considerations*

While building a social environment within a classroom can benefit students and faculty alike, many instructors find it overwhelming to “let go” of interactions that are outside of their control. This is not a completely unwarranted fear. Students have used platforms such as Yik Yak and Facebook to cyberbully classmates and faculty alike (Clark-Gordon et al., 2017; Daniloff, 2009). It is possible that students

will use outside-of-class texting groups, Discords, and more to undermine the strong social climate of a course. However, such instances of poor behavior are less common in classes whose social environment is strong (Shariff, 2008). Thus, a virtual classroom rich in opportunities for social interaction may protect against negative interactions outside of the classroom.

## Student Reactions and Conclusions

Students have reacted positively to my attempts to foster a strong social experience within the virtual classroom. In end-of-semester reflections, students frequently report viewing both their classmates and their instructor as available to them when they have questions. While the confounding factors of the pandemic make it difficult to determine if the improved social environment led to improvements in learning, such a conclusion is supported by theory, and student reflections show that they at least perceive the interactions as beneficial. Based on both my review of the literature and my experiences with students, I intend to continue to emphasize the social environment of my classroom in future semesters, and I hope that readers of this paper will consider doing the same.

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