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## Increasing Social Presence in Online Learning

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### **Abstract**

Social presence is defined as the feeling of community a learner experiences in an online environment, where learners express their emotions and feelings and interact with one another in a way that promotes their learning. Socially interactive learners leads to them being engaged learners. With the growing number of online courses being offered, improving social presence helps stimulate learner experiences in the course, thereby improving learning. Learning management system developers, instructional designers, instructors, practitioners, researchers and scholars all recognize that a major growing trend is improving the social presence experience in online learning for students.

This study focuses on how increasing social presence in online courses increases overall student satisfaction with the course. The logic behind this is because improved social interaction in online courses will enhance learner to learner interactions as well as learner to instructor interactions. To increase student engagement, this study looks at the structuring of online courses so that students have the opportunities for regular interaction with each other, which is vital. Seven methods are implemented, from the literature, in order to increase social presence in online classes through more effective social interactions. These seven methods highlight the use of video, create a safe space for students and the instructor, encourage usage of emotions by all participants in the course, give students empowerment, give students fruitful video feedback, impactful discussion boards, and create opportunities for collaborative group work. It is found that increasing social presence by incorporating these seven practices, based on prior research, increases overall student satisfaction with the course. This is shown in the end of the semester course evaluations for two online undergraduate economics courses and two online graduate level MBA courses. For future research, this has major implications on student retention in online courses.

**Keywords:** Online learning communities, social presence, social interactions, course satisfaction

### **I. Introduction**

Getting students to be present, involved and engaged in their learning is vital in both face-to-face courses and online courses. This is why lecturing at students is ineffective, because it does not get students to be present, involved or engaged in their own learning. When a course is offered online, the classroom interactions and communications that would have existed in a face-to-face section must somehow be preserved. Creating connections is a basic human need; a need that extends into online learning. Online learning involves social aspects, and social interactions are at the heart of the learning process (Rovai, 2002; Sung & Mayer, 2012). Social presence is defined as the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment resulting from learners expressing their emotions and feelings, interacting with one another in a way that promotes their learning (Walther, 1992).

Socially interactive learners leads to engaged learning. Learning management system developers, instructional designers, instructors, practitioners, researchers and scholars recognize that a major growing trend right now is improving the social presence experience in online learning. With the growing number of online courses being offered, improving social presence helps stimulate learner experiences in the course, thereby improving learning.

Quality Matters is a nationally recognized, faculty-driven peer review process that ensures the quality of online course design. According to Quality Matters, there are three types of communication in any course: learner-to-learner interactions, learner to instructor interactions and learner to content (Knowles et. al, 2010). Therefore, in an online course, it is no surprise that improved social interaction will enhance both learner-to-learner interactions as well as learner to instructor interactions. To increase student engagement, structuring online courses so that students have the opportunities for regular interaction with each other is vital (Hamann et. al, 2012). Many studies share findings that do reveal that students in online courses perceive that social interactions improved their learning by enhancing their knowledge, and their critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Lowenthal&Dennen, 2017;Deumert, 2014; Ladysheshy, 2013). Through meaningful dialogue between learners, students learn more from each other because they are able to talk to one another and be actively involved in their own learning process.

Garcia-O'Neill (2016) linked the usage of social media to an improvement in online courses, stating "I believe it was not until great online networking service companies like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Google+, and Snapchat created ways to make users feel and be more sociable that they were able to attract millions of people to use their websites and mobile applications." Garcia-O'Neill believes that for eLearning to keep growing in a similar way that social networks have done, instructors must adopt innovative ways to make learners feel more "sociable" while using the learning tools and systems available. Since technology is here to stay, rather than fighting its influence, universities are incorporating technology to increase student involvement in the classroom and are offering more and more courses, programs and degrees online (Thompson, 2019). Socializing through videos and discussion chatroom boards, that the instructor can break down to large or small groups of students in the course, to discuss material and content together is one such way that social media influences are present in online courses.

This study focuses on how increasing social presence in online courses increases overall student satisfaction with the course. Section II focuses on the literature review, providing an overview of what has been established by other researchers in this area. The unique contribution of this paper to the overall literature is also highlighted. Section III focuses on the methodology, specifically concentrating on how to increase social presence of students in online courses. Section IV presents the results. Section V concludes and provides critical insight on what needs to be done for courses, programs and degrees that are being offered online.

## **2. Literature Review**

In varying degrees, researchers have shown a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Hackman & Walker, 1990; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Tu, 2002). Researchers have also established a relationship between social presence and the development of a community of learners (Aragon, 2003). Researchers have also found a relationship between social presence and perceived student learning (Picciano, 2002; Gunawardena& Zittle, 1997; Mayer, 2005). Sociological theories of community have also been made (Brint, 2001). This paper contributes to the first strand of literature within this field.

The increase in student demand for online classes stems from ease of access as students can participate at their convenience, regardless of geographic location, independent of time and place. As the number of students enrolling in online courses in higher education has been on the rise, so too has the sense of isolation in these online courses. A growing concern has been that students' sense of distance in distance learning through online courses may be hurting their ability to learn (Moore, 1980 and Krislov, 2019). Research has demonstrated that social presence not only affects outcomes but also student, and instructor, satisfaction with a course (Richardson and Swan, 2003). Social presence plays an important role in the learning process (Sung & Mayer, 2012). Learning takes place in a social environment, and cognitive understanding and personal construction of knowledge depend on relations with others (Abedin, Daneshgar&D'Ambra, 2012).

One way for students to shoulder the responsibility for learning is for them to be the readers, writers, speakers, listeners, and thinkers in the classroom. This is achieved through active engagement in social interaction with others (Alvermann& Phelps, 2005; Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz, 2011). Interacting with other students has proven to be effective in helping learners to organize their thoughts, reflect on their understanding, and find gaps in their reasoning (Tu, 2002). Underneath the broad umbrella of social interactions and learning, variants can range from peer learning, reciprocal teaching, learning by teaching,

learning by observation, learning by doing, and self–other monitoring. These areas overlap in scholarship and are often an optimal way to help students learn. Different forms of collaborative learning can create ideal circumstances when examining the impact of social interactions on learning and overall student satisfaction in online courses.

Seminal research by Short, Williams and Christie (1976) on social presence found that users of communication media are aware of the degree of social presence of each medium. Social presence, they found, “varies among different media, it affects the nature of the interaction and it interacts with the purpose of the interaction to influence the medium chosen by the individual who wishes to communicate”. Instructors need to maintain building connections between their students, building an environment of rapport, and building a community of learners. This can be done by using tools that can enable them to maintain a high instructor presence in a fully online environment (Thompson, 2019).

Online instructors should be incorporating more media with the uploading of introduction videos to introduce the instructor to humanize them, rather than simply reading introductions. A video to welcome students to the course, share the course layout, and expectations is far more impactful (Ladyshewsky, 2013). We look into how students uploading their own video introductions establishes a sense of community and belonging with each other. Student video presentations are shared in small groups, and with the class as a whole, for impactful interaction that benefits students. Providing quality feedback to students with video instead of only text helps students feel that their instructor is more socially present in an online course. When an instructor presents course content and lecture material on video, it increases instructor presence in an online setting. Adopting online office hours to answer student questions in real time is another way we explore how to help students feel more socially present in online courses.

As education is moving online, instructors need to be deliberate in course design. One cannot simply take syllabi long used in a classroom and start delivering the same lectures virtually. Successful online courses, with high amounts of social presence, use video presentations and multiple methods of connection. These courses include interactive lessons, wikis, discussion boards, and small group projects (Krislov, 2019). For those instructors who find it challenging to engage students online, consider implementing these seven interventions to improve engagement.

Throughout much of the literature on increasing social presence in online courses, seven key approaches to increase social presence emerge. These seven methods increase social presence in online classes through more effective social interactions. The literature establishes that increasing social presence by incorporating these seven practices increases overall student satisfaction with the course. This has major implications on student retention in online courses. Later on, we will show how this study used all seven as a means of intervention for this research study by testing the seven in online courses, as measured by outcomes.

### **1. Usage of Videos:**

Videos are a great way to substitute for in person lectures. Rather than audio-recorded lectures, it is important to supplement this with videos of the instructor instructing. In order to promote social presence in online courses, we must start with effective introductions that incorporate personal profiles, photos and videos in the first week of the course for students to feel more connected to other students and their instructor. With all the technology that is available, why simply have students introduce themselves on the introductions discussion board with only written text? In order to foster social presence, students post a video introduction to take advantage of the body language factor, or a photo of himself or herself. For students who may not feel comfortable with this, you may ask them to post an image that summarizes who they are and what they identify with. It is important to treat students not only as students, but as people. This can be done by having them include in their profiles what it is that they enjoy doing in their free time.

Similarly, it is important for instructors to provide an instructor profile with photo and welcome video about who they are and their credentials. A video welcoming students to the course and outlining all course details and expectations helps to increase social presence at the very start of the course. In their study, Borup et al (2012) establish that a large majority of students indicated feeling that the video-based communication made their instructor seem more real, present, and familiar, and that these relationships were similar to face-to-face instruction. Video communication affects students' social presence positively. Therefore, it should be incorporated as much as possible in online settings.

## **2. Create a Safe Space for Students and the Instructor:**

As with introduction boards and icebreaker activities at the start of the course, creating a “Student Cyber Café” or “Course Lounge” that students can use throughout the duration of the course helps to create social opportunities for students to connect with each other, promoting a sense of community. This particular forum in an online course also allows students to experience and work their way through their frustration when concepts are difficult. Resolving their initial confusion together in this forum facilitates deeper learning to take place. It is important for instructors to allow for confusion and a space where students can address it (Persellin and Daniels, 2014). Some online instructors use social media groups like Facebook, Twitter, or LinkedIn in their courses to encourage social interactions between students. Making sure to provide students with a policy on netiquette that gives them the guidance needed for correct and acceptable ways of communicating in an online setting, assuring students that the course is set in a safe environment.

Teaching students can only come after instructors have first created an environment in which they can learn. Creating a safe environment for a learning community online allows students to take risks and collaborate in an authentic manner (Bonk and Cunningham, 1998). Wegerif (1998) contends that it is essential for students to feel that they are members of a community in order to collaborate and learn, and that computer-mediated communication can provide support for the development of feelings of community

## **3. Encourage Usage of Emotions:**

Emotion has always had the power to get our attention, therefore it is no surprise that the link between learning and emotion is very powerful. Emotion is the on/off switch for learning: the emotional brain, the limbic system, has the power to open or close access to learning, memory and the ability to make connections (Priscilla Vail, 2010). Students and instructors are encouraged to use expressions of emotions.

Using an exclamation point or a smiley face, for example, can increase social presence. As instructors, we should cultivate emotion because it has a positive impact on student learning in online courses. Nilson (2010) invites educators to strive to be “dramatic, humorous, surprising, and maddening” and encourages them to allow students to reflect on and write down their responses to the material. “Any emotion will aid learning by inducing more enduring changes—that is, the generation of new, lasting synapses—in the brain”.

## **4. Give Students Empowerment:**

Another way to make courses emotionally meaningful is to give students opportunities to connect course material to the world around them. This gives them a sense of empowerment. Surveying student interests is critical. When assigning papers, giving students the freedom to choose their own topic and pathway helps them to feel more engaged, giving them a sense of ownership in a course. Students need to be given more responsibility when it comes to their own learning. One way to do this is have them provide meaningful feedback to other students. Being part of the peer review process increases social presence. When students are given power and authority to do a task, the process alone helps them to become stronger and more confident, especially in controlling their own learning.

## **5. Feedback:**

Instructors do not always realize that if students do not receive on-going feedback during the learning process, they do not make learning gains (Friesen, 2015). Giving feedback to students helps foster an environment where it is safe to learn from one’s errors, which increases opportunities for student success. Feedback should always be respectful, positive, encouraging, timely. As instructors, we must always start our feedback with positive comments on what was done well. This means that we need to put student needs first and they need feedback regularly on what is going well and what can be improved in their work. In turn, this helps learners to develop social presence and caring behaviors. This advances mutual respect and fruitful interactions with peers, learners, and instructors.

The reason why feedback needs to be timely and frequent is because we all want to feel important and that our work is given priority. More importantly, students need timely feedback in order to make important adjustments as the course progresses. Providing positive comments about learner contributions through their participation creates a sense of community and belonging, enhancing social presence (Weaver, 2006).

Throughout any course, feedback is a vital tool in creating improved social presence. Again, with all the technology available these days, why not provide video feedback where the student can not only see and hear you speak with emotions, talking in a conversational way, but also this increases the sense of closeness

with students (Narter, 2018). Offering virtual office hours, in addition to in person office hours, is another effective way in establishing social presence in online learning. Students are able to ask questions in real time during virtual office hours, creating a better learner-instructor interaction.

### **6. Discussion Boards:**

Meaningful discussion throughout the course is important through impactful discussion board prompts that asks students to link their own personal and professional experiences to the course content. It is important to encourage learners to incorporate their feelings, experiences, examples, and ideas in works completion. By promoting learners to bring their own personal experiences and share it with the class, students open up more and feel a heightened sense of belonging. It is also important for the instructor to be present on the discussion board. This can be done during the discussion, to give students the first opportunity and chance to participate. Alternatively, this can be done at the end of the discussion, by summarizing main themes.

Natasha Kenny (2010) found that students prefer actively solving relevant problems, exploring current case studies, and discussing local and newsworthy events through peer interaction, debate and dialogue. Kenny also found that students find relevance by bringing theory to life, providing the motivation necessary to inspire deep and sustained learning in higher education. Effective online discussion forums that asks a student to draw on and share from personal and professional experiences, peer-review activities, collaborative work, and video conferencing are all opportunities to increase social presence. It is important to add in opportunities for students to share their knowledge and experiences.

It is important to keep discussion boards exciting so that students remain engaged and socially present throughout the semester. Rather than posting simply to complete the task, it is our responsibility to engage students. There are five ways to get students to be more socially present while posting on discussion boards.

A dry discussion board can come to life when students are asked to take on roles by role playing or having students debate a particular topic from a different perspective than their own. A second way to keep students socially engaged on discussion boards is by having them post images of examples with explanations that relate to course concepts. Third, through group problem solving students engage in a sequential group problem-solving exercise on the discussion board, the instructor begins the thread and students build toward a solution by making improvements on previous posts. Forth, using a hypothetical situation in which students are given a hypothetical situation to analyze and evaluate. Then the student responds based upon the information. Lastly, the bad design technique asks students to create something that is intentionally bad so other students can find the problems and identify the reason the posted design is incorrect.

If the course size is too large, designers and educators of online learning can strategically modify group size to promote social presence in asynchronous online discussions (Akcaoglu and Lee, 2016). Rovai (2002) argued that small group work promotes a sense of community, as a result of the increased interaction time devoted to each member. His research shared results that indicated that when placed in small permanent discussion groups, the students perceived the online learning context to (a) be more sociable, (b) have a more positive atmosphere, and (c) afford group cohesion more easily. Students also noted that in smaller groups they felt closer to each other. Students also noted that during whole class discussions it was hard for them to keep track of all the posts and develop impressions of their classmates. This finding is confirmed in research by Hamann, Pollock & Wilson (2012). These results point to the positive aspects of small group work in online classrooms, showing the importance of how design of online learning spaces, like group size, have significant impacts on students' perceptions of social presence (Swan & Shih, 2005).

### **7. Collaborative Group Work:**

Group work is also known as collaborative learning, cooperative learning and peer instruction. Hundreds of studies have found that students who are engaged in group work displayed deeper learning, higher academic achievement with difficult assignments,

And increased student responsibility than students who work alone (Johnson, Johnson, & Smith, 1991, p. 98; Millis, 2010; Nilson, 2010, p. 156; Prince, 2004; Wenzel, 2000). These studies made sure to include participants from different socioeconomic classes, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds as well as using different methodologies. These studies all indicated that students who learned in small groups "exhibited better reasoning and critical thinking skills, proposed more new ideas and solutions when presented with problems, and transferred more of what they learned in prior situations to new problems. Johnson et. al and Wenzel also found that engaged learning in group work successfully motivates female and minority students to become involved in math and science. Online classroom dynamics improve with more social

interactions (Hillyard, Gillespie & Littig, 2010). This helps online courses become more active. Therefore, it is important to create this type of learning environment in our own online classrooms. Many proponents of collaborative learning throughout the literature highlight that group work improves learning, social skills, deepens learning and improves test scores and retention.

This paper looks at implementing all seven techniques in online courses to increase social presence. This will then lead to increased student satisfaction with the course. Table 1 summarizes all seven methods to increase social presence in online classes found throughout the literature. Examples of how to implement each of these seven methods are provided in Table 1.

TABLE 1: Summary of Seven Methods to Increase Social Presence in Online Classes and Examples

Summary of Seven Methods to Increase Social Presence in Online Classes	Examples of Implementation of these Seven Methods	Literature Review Studies Establishing the Importance of this Method
Use video	Video introduction welcoming students to the course by the instructor with an overview of their credentials, the course layout and course expectations Video introductions of students introducing themselves to their classmates Video lectures of course material/content	Borup et. al (2012), Mayer (2005), Richardson et. al (2003)
Create a safe space for students and instructor	Create a course café/student lounge area where students can discuss issues with each other Use social media groups (ex: Facebook page) Provide and go over netiquette course policy The instructor is highly accessible through email and virtual office hours	Garcia-O'Neill (2016), Krislov (2019), Ladysheswky et. al (2013), Walther (1992), Wegerif (1998)
Encourage usage of emotions	Students and instructors are encouraged to use expressions of emotions, for example, using an exclamation point, a smiley face, use first names	Alvermann et. al (2005), Thompson (2019), Vail (2010)
Give students empowerment	Give students freedom to choose their own topic for a paper Give students responsibility of grading others, participating in the peer review process	Aragon (2003), Sung et. al (2012), Picciano (2002), Prince (2004)
Give students fruitful feedback	Feedback needs to be timely, frequent, detailed with what went well and what can be improved Video feedback provided to students	Knowles et. al (2010), Vacca et. al (2011), Persellin (2014)
High quality discussion boards	Students encouraged to draw on and share from personal and professional experiences Instructor summarize each discussion board and participates actively	Akcaoglu et. al (2016), Deumert (2014), Hamann et. al (2012), Swan et. al (2005)
Collaborative group work opportunities	Collaborative and cooperative learning opportunities, ex: a group project	Abedin et. al (2005), Bonk (1998), Hillyard et. al (2010), Wenzel (2000)

### **3. Methodology: How To Increase Social Presence**

There are four online courses examined. Two of the online course are undergraduate level courses that are fifteen weeks in length: Principles of Macroeconomics and Financial Institutions & Markets.

Two of the online courses are graduate level courses taught in the online MBA program at the [INSTITUTION]. They are International Finance and Foundations in Statistics & Economics and are both seven weeks in length. It is important to note that the researcher is also the instructor in this study.

[INSTITUTION], established in 1968, has 4,325 students enrolled and is one of thirteen four-year institutions within the [STATE] system. It is known as the most diverse of the thirteen four-year institutions in the state of [STATE] and the student to faculty ratio is 19-1. A student-centric approach is used with small class sizes, one-on-one faculty attention, students are never taught by assistants, and they get to work side-by-side with faculty dedicated to their success.

The control groups in this study are those course sections that were taught with a “low” amount of social presence, as can be seen in Table 2, to establish a minimal amount of social presence in the class. The Institutional Review Board was contacted and this project was given the green light as it uses end of the semester evaluation data. Using end of the semester evaluations, the control group sections of the courses with a “low” amount of social presence are compared to the sections of the same courses that implemented a “high” amount of social presence. For the control groups, as listed in Table 2, these methodologies are the minimum adopted components that should be implemented for any online course (Nilson, 2010).

The course sections with a “high” amount of social presence incorporated the list of over twenty methodologies in the far right column of Table 2. Multiple avenues for engagement and interaction were employed in order to promote community and increase social presence in the online courses in this study. This was done by incorporating all seven methods in Table 1 and Table 2 to increase social presence. We now examine how each of the seven methodologies were applied to the low versus high social presence sections of the courses.

### **1. Use video:**

Audio recorded PowerPoint slideshows for all chapters are provided in all of the “high” social presence online sections since there is no in person lecture meetings. This is a close substitute to an actual lecture because students are provided with my voice for each slideshow, along with plenty of additional information and examples. To further simulate an in person lecture, chalk talks are provided for the students with their instructor presenting more challenging types of graphs, equations and concepts by video.

This contrasts with the “low” social presence sections. Here, students are only given instructions for which chapters to read in the book and to read PowerPoint slides, without any kind of audio recordings or video. Included in the “high” social presence courses is an in depth welcome video by the instructor introducing who they are and their qualifications. This welcome video outlines what the course is all about, the course layout and expectations of students. A document posted with a personalized teacher profile introduction with photo and a document outlining expectations of students is also provided for students. This is obviously in addition to the course syllabus. The “low” social presence sections only provide students with a document of the instructor’s profile with photo. In terms of what the course is about, the course layout and expectations of students, students are instructed to go over the syllabus on their own.

Students in the “low” social presence sections post in the first week to the “Personal Introductions” discussion board, but it is not worth any points because some instructors feel this is not related to the actual discipline or course material and content. In the “high” social presence sections, students post in the first week “Personal Introductions” discussion board and it is worth points. Students are highly encouraged to use video and photos in this introduction. If a student is not comfortable with either of those options, they are encouraged to post a picture that explains who they are or what they identify with so that a sense of community is established. Knowles et al (2010) find that in “low” social presence courses, where students post a paragraph introducing themselves to the class without video, that students do not feel as connected with their peers. This is clearly not a good way to get any semester started because establishing a sense of community is important from the very start in an online course (Wegerif, 1998).

### **2. Create a safe space for students to interact with each other and the instructor:**

Establishing a safe space for students to communicate with each other openly with any questions or concerns they have in a Cyber Course Café is vital. Therefore, a Cyber Lounge was created for the “high” social presence courses that students were encouraged to use freely. Students often asked one another questions about their homework, if others came up with the same answers and solutions that they did, and if someone could lead them in the right direction to answering it.

Other students used the lounge to ask if classmates would like to get together to study or work together, either in person or through virtual meetings. This safe space was used regularly throughout the semester by students. This safe space was not made available for the students in the “low” social presence sections. Students were encouraged to email the instructor with questions, but no course café or course lounge was made available. This is a missed opportunity for more student-to-student communication and these interactions are vital in an online course (Aragon, 2003).

Next, as the instructor, it is very important to promptly answer student emails as this establishes that the instructor is highly accessible, should a student need guidance. In all “high” presence sections in

this study, student emails were answered within a few hours, including week-ends. This contrasts with the “low” social presence sections in this study where the syllabus stated that emails will be answered within 24-48 hours, not including week-ends.

Furthermore, the instructor in the “high” social presence sections is in touch regularly with weekly course announcements. This informs students what is due, the main objectives, and what materials are being studied that particular week. This contrasts with the “low” social presence sections where the instructor is not in personal contact with students, rather the instructor relies on the learning management system to remind students with upcoming due dates. An additional way to create a safe space for students to interact with their instructor is by offering virtual office hours (Thompson, 2019).

Virtual office hours were offered weekly, in addition to in person office hours for the “high” social presence sections. The “low” social presence sections only offered traditional in person office hours. Student evaluation comments from the “high” social presence sections expressed how they really appreciated having the instructor being readily available and always accessible.

### **3. Encourage usage of emotions:**

In low social presence courses, students were not encouraged to use expressions of emotion. Also, the instructor did not use exclamation marks, did not express emotion and did not address students by name. In high social presence sections of courses, students and the instructor were encouraged and frequently used expressions of emotion (i.e. emojis, smiley faces, exclamation marks) throughout their work and their discussion board posts. This truly humanizes people.

Addressing students by name throughout the high social presence sections of courses made students feel valued, seen and heard. We want to make students feel that they are an important part of the community of learners in the class (Ladyshevsky, 2013). Students commented that by using names and emotions, they felt the community of learners felt more comfortable with one another. They found that there were fewer formalities, allowing them to be their authentic selves.

### **4. Give students empowerment:**

The sharing of personal stories and professional experiences is highly encouraged of the students in high social presence courses. For example, in the “low” social presence sections, students were prompted in one of the discussion boards to explain what opportunity cost means. The responses became very repetitive and were not engaging because students were simply providing a definition. In the “high” social presence course, this was corrected by asking them to explain a recent example where they encountered opportunity cost personally. This made the discussion board so much more interesting for students to participate in because they were not seeing the same definition repeated many times over, but instead they were reading so many different examples of opportunity cost being applied to their own lives. Students were assigned paper topics in all of the courses. In the low social presence courses, students were not given a sense of empowerment as they were assigned a topic. In high social presence sections, students were given empowerment as they were asked to pick their own topic. By allowing this kind of freedom, student select a topic that they are interested in, feeling more motivated and in control of their learning. High social presence sections incorporate reflective activities, which made students feel empowered to delve into reflecting on what they were learning in that unit and how it applied to their own personal consumption and investment decisions. Low social presence sections did not incorporate reflective activities. This made, for example, the discussion boards non-engaging, which will be discussed shortly. The sharing of personal stories and professional experiences is highly encouraged of the students. Students appreciate this form of empowerment when it comes to their own learning (Krislov, 2019).

### **5. Give students fruitful feedback:**

The “high” social presence sections provide frequent and useful feedback. Even if a student earns full points, simply stating “great job” is not fruitful or useful feedback. In addition to numerical scores as feedback, written and video feedback are given with both what went well and areas to improve upon. As Abedinet. al (2012)found, the students commented on how appreciative they were for all types of feedback that were given. With the “low” social presence sections, the instructor provides numerical scores and only minimal feedback if points are deducted. When a student receives full points, they are not given any feedback. This is in no way helpful for student learning.

The “high” social presence sections of these courses provides students with progress reports on participation and quality of their work. This is done by keeping the gradebook accurate regularly. Student feedback expressed, in the written comments section of the end of the course evaluation, how appreciative they were to have an instructor who posts a grade and feedback shortly after a submission so that students aren’t waiting too long.

**6. High quality discussion boards:**

Discussion boards require one substantive prompt and at least two responses to peers, all due at the end of the week in “low” social presence sections. The main problem that arises with this is that students flood the discussion board all at once on the due date only, leading to low social presence during the majority of the week. To avoid this problem of low regular and consistent participation, the “high” social presence sections address this by having a mid-week due date for all students to address the discussion board prompt and then an end of the week due date to respond to two peers. This encourages students to frequently monitor the discussion that week and to regularly participate.

High social presence courses included well-developed open-ended, critical thinking discussion board prompts so that the participation is beneficial and fruitful. Students were provided with due dates for initial postings that promote mid-week engagement as opposed to participation by the majority of students flooding the discussion board on the due date only and a different due date exists for responses to several peers. Again, the sharing of personal stories and professional experiences is highly encouraged of the students. For example, in the “low” social presence section, students were prompted in one of the discussion boards to explain what opportunity cost means.

The responses became very repetitive and were not engaging at all because students were simply providing a definition. In the “high” social presence course, this was corrected by asking them to explain a recent example where they encountered opportunity cost personally. This made the discussion board so much more interesting for students to participate in because they were not seeing the same definition repeated many times over, but instead they were reading so many different examples of opportunity cost being applied to their own lives. The instructor posted and participated in the discussion boards regularly and provided a summary once it closes. Students really appreciate this type of active engagement on the part of the instructor.

**7. Collaborative group work opportunities:**

Collaborative learning activities were used often throughout the semester in the high social presence sections. Group work strategies were incorporated often as the students were given group projects and a chance to work on peer review. These interactive opportunities were spaced evenly throughout the course in the high social presence sections. In the low presence sections, students submitted everything individually and there was no group work assigned at all. Therefore, in the low social presence sections there is a complete lack of group work and no collaborative learning takes place.

**TABLE 2 Low Social Presence Online Courses versus High Social Presence Online Courses**

Seven Methods to Increase Social Presence	Online Courses with <i>LOW</i> Social Presence	Online Courses with <i>HIGH</i> Social Presence
<b>Video usage</b>	PowerPoint slideshows for all chapters are posted without any audio Video lecture are not provided Post personalized teacher profile document with photo only, no video  Students post in the first week to “Personal Introductions” discussion board ( <i>not</i> worth any points) and <i>arenot</i> encouraged to use pictures and videos	PowerPoint slideshows with audio recording for each chapter are posted Video lectures are also provided Personalized teacher profile/welcome introduction video posted that also goes over the course layout and expectations in addition to posting a personalized teacher profile document with photo Students post in the first week to “Personal Introductions” discussion board (worth points) and are encouraged to use pictures and videos Post introduction video for each module or unit: objectives of that unit, the purpose of why we are studying it

<b>Create a safe space for students &amp; instructor presence</b>	No course café or course lounge available, students are encouraged to email the instructor with questions Answer email within 24-48 hours  Learning management system posts due date reminders Did <i>not</i> address students by name Face to face office hours were <i>only</i> offered	Cyber Course Café created  Promptly answer e-mail within 1-12 hours Weekly course announcements from the instructor are sent out to students Address students by name Offer virtual office hours weekly in addition to face to face office hours
<b>Encourage usage of emotions</b>	Students were <i>not</i> encouraged to use expressions of emotions Instructor did <i>not</i> use exclamation marks and did not express emotions	Students are encouraged to use expressions of emotions Instructor uses expressions of emotions, e.g. smile
<b>Give students empowerment</b>	Sharing of personal stories or professional experiences was <i>not</i> brought up Reflective activities were <i>not</i> incorporated and there were either correct/incorrect answers without any reflection	The sharing of personal stories and professional experiences was highly encouraged of the students Incorporate reflective activities so that students can reflect on what they learned in a particular unit and how it applied to their own life
<b>Give students fruitful feedback</b>	Provide numerical scores and only minimal feedback should a student be deducted points	Provide frequent feedback to all numerical scores with both what went well and areas to improve upon Video feedback is provided to students Progress reports on participation and quality of postings sent to students
<b>High quality discussion boards</b>	Discussion boards require 1 substantive prompt and 0-2 responses to peers, all due at the end of the week <i>Problem:</i> Students flood the discussion board all at once on the due date only <i>Problem:</i> It is vital to have students reply to peers rather than just posting once to be done with it	Provide due dates for initial postings and different due date for responses to peers. This promotes mid-week engagement as opposed to participation by the majority of students flooding the discussion board on one due date only Develop open-ended, critical thinking discussion questions for the discussion boards so that students are not reading the same answer over and over again Instructor posts/participates in the discussion boards regularly and provides a summary once it closes
<b>Collaborative group work opportunities</b>	Group work strategies not used No collaborative learning activities	Utilize group work strategies Structure collaborative learning activities

#### 4. Data And Results

The end of course evaluations are standard at this institution for all online courses. The scale of students' evaluation is a 5.0 scale. Let us first look at the two undergraduate economics courses. When comparing the low social presence section of the Principles of Macroeconomics online course, which had 25 students enrolled, to the high social presence section, which had 26 students enrolled, we see major improvements in the scores of all nine questions of the semester course evaluations.

This is also the case with the undergraduate Financial Institutions and Markets course, where there were 12 students enrolled in the low social presence section and 25 enrolled in the high social presence section. This is also true for the graduate level MBA course International Finance. For that course, the low social presence section had 15 students enrolled while the high social presence section had 11 students enrolled. Lastly, the three sections of MBA 512 Foundations in Statistics and Economics taught with low social presence scored lower on all nine questions compared to the two sections taught with high social presence.

The results confirm several important patterns and trends from the literature. The numerical scores were higher and improved when comparing low social presence sections to high social presence sections.

Students believed the course activities contributed more to their learning, that the course actively engaged them more, that they asked more questions and participated more in the online course activities in the high social presence sections. This confirms the findings of Akcaogluet. al (2016). Students expressed that by feeling like the class was a welcoming learning community, they participated more with other students and engaged more with the content and assignments.

Students felt that the instructor presented course content more effectively because of audio recordings and videos used to present lecture material. This supports Mayer (2005) and how personalization and voice really helps students learn better. Students found the instructor to be highly accessible through virtual office hours, email and that the Course Café all encouraged more questions and comments, supporting findings by Lowenthalet. al (2017). Students found that the instructor was more present, providing more feedback that was more helpful and more frequent to student learning. Students found that the instructor stimulated more student involvement in the course in the high social presence version of the course as compared to the low social presence section of that same course. In the end, we can see from these results that this contributed to higher levels of overall student satisfaction with the course.

### 1. Economics 121 Principles of Macroeconomics Online

	Low Social Presence	High Social Presence
<b>End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question</b>	<b>Macro Spring 2019</b>	<b>Macro Summer 2019</b>
Course activities contributed to learning	4.37	4.50
Course actively engaged me	3.95	4.50
I asked questions	1.26	4.50
I participated in online activities	3.68	4.50
Instructor presented course content effectively	4.21	4.33
Instructor encouraged questions/comments	4.11	4.67
Instructor's presence was evident throughout	4.26	4.67
Instructor provided feedback throughout	4.26	4.83
Instructor's feedback helpful to my learning	4.00	4.33
Responded/total students enrolled	19/25	16/26

### 2. Economics 367 Financial Institutions and Markets Online

	Low Social Presence	High Social Presence
<b>End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question</b>	<b>Econ 367 Online Summer 2018</b>	<b>Econ 367 Online Spring 2019</b>
Course activities contributed to learning	3.94	4.43
Course actively engaged me	4.06	4.14
I asked questions	2.18	2.71
I participated in online activities	4.41	4.57
Instructor presented course content effectively	4.12	4.29
Instructor encouraged questions/comments	4.29	4.41
Instructor's presence was evident throughout	4.29	4.47
Instructor provided feedback throughout	4.57	4.63
Instructor's feedback helpful to my learning	4.14	4.29
Responded/total students enrolled	7/12	17/25

As can be seen with both of these undergraduate economics courses above, the high social presence section of the course resulted in higher evaluation results compared to the low social presence section of the course. The high social presence versions of the two courses above shows that students found the course activities contributed more to their learning as compared to the low social presence section of the course. This demonstrates that the course activities contributed more to student learning because they were more involved, present and engaged throughout the course.

The course activities in the high social presence version required video presentations of current events, peer reviews of papers, more engaging discussion board prompts to avoid repetition, and more replies

to peers on the discussion boards. The course activities in the low social presence version of the courses did not have any video presentation posted by students, and no peer review activities. This confirms the findings of Alvermann et. al (2005) and Borup et. al (2012) that using video really does increase social presence in online learning. In the low social presence sections, all work was done individually and no group or collaborative work was assigned.

The low social presence courses required only one substantive post to the discussion board prompt, without any requirement to engage with other students by posting to peer responses. Therefore, students in the high social presence section of the courses felt that the course actively engaged them rather than in the low social presence sections. This resulted in students asking more questions and participating more in online activities because of the increased sense of community with other students. This further confirms the findings of Hamann et. al (2012) and Akcaoglu et. al (2016) on how to increase social presence in online learning through small and large group discussions.

In the high social presence section of the courses, because the instructor was far more socially present in the course through video and audio, students found that the instructor presented course content more effectively than in the low social presence section of the courses. Students found that the instructor encouraged more questions, comments and interaction in the high social presence section of the courses as compared to the low social presence section.

Students believed that the instructor’s feedback was more helpful and seen throughout the course in the high social presence section of the courses as compared to the low social presence section of the courses. This is because the instructor is far more involved in the discussion boards, providing comments and summary points rather than having only students participate. The instructor is providing more regular feedback and video feedback rather than just written feedback to students.

These findings align with those of R.K. Ladyshevsky (2013) and Krislov (2019), which found that instructor presence in online courses directly impacts student satisfaction. Instructor Presence in Online Courses and Student Satisfaction The instructor is addressing students by their first name every time and encouraging students to use emotion. These findings support Vail (2010) who had also found how important the role of emotion played in learning.

**3. MBA 735 International Finance**

	<b>Low Social Presence</b>	<b>High Social Presence</b>
<b>End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question</b>	<b>MBA 735 Online Spring 2017</b>	<b>MBA 735 Online Summer 2019</b>
Instructor respects rights of students to express their own ideas	4.50	4.80
Instructor stimulates involvement	4.33	4.40
Instructor provides timely feedback on student performance	4.80	5.00
Quality of assessments/course activities	4.67	4.80
Overall satisfaction	4.50	4.80
Responded/total students enrolled	13/15	7/11

**4. MBA 512 Foundations in Statistics and Economics**

	<b>Low Social Presence</b>	<b>Low Social Presence</b>	<b>Low Social Presence</b>	<b>Low Social Presence</b>	<b>High Social Presence</b>	<b>High Social Presence</b>
<b>End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question</b>	<b>MBA 512 Fall 2018 1<sup>st</sup> term</b>	<b>MBA 512 Fall 2018 2<sup>nd</sup> term</b>	<b>MBA 512 Spr 2019 1<sup>st</sup> term</b>	<b>MBA 512 Spr 2019 2<sup>nd</sup> term</b>	<b>MBA 512 Summer 2019 1<sup>st</sup> term</b>	<b>MBA 512 Summer 2019 2<sup>nd</sup> term</b>
Instructor respects rights of students to express their own ideas	4.50	3.33	3.50	4.50	5.00	5.00
Instructor stimulates involvement	4.50	3.67	3.50	5.00	5.00	5.00
Instructor provides	5.00	3.00	4.50	5.00	5.00	5.00

timely feedback on student performance						
Quality of assessments/course activities	4.50	2.67	2.50	4.25	5.00	5.00
Overall satisfaction	4.50	2.67	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Responded/total students enrolled	4/18	3/10	2/11	4/18	7/8	7/15

The above two courses are graduate-level courses taught in the online MBA program. Students in the high social presence sections of the courses found that the instructor respected the rights of students to express their own ideas more than the students enrolled in the low social presence sections. This is because the forth method, out of the seven, of giving students empowerment was heavily implemented. By encouraging students to give examples from their own professional and personal lives, students felt more socially present. Another way this was implemented was by having students pick their own topics for papers rather than being assigned a topic. Giving students empowerment did help to increase social presence, as found by Millis (2010) and Prince (2004).

In the high social presence courses, students found the instructor stimulated more involvement than in the low social presence course. This was demonstrated by having students evaluate their peer’s papers, participating in peer review processes, and having students watch their peer’s presentations online in order to give helpful feedback. The instructor provided more timely and expanded feedback on student performance in the high social presence courses and students took note of this, as can be seen in the results and the comments.

Students found the quality of the assessments and course activities to be better in the high social presence sections as compared to the low social presence sections. This, in turn, led to overall student satisfaction to be higher in the higher social presence courses, as compared to the low social presence courses.

Standards of excellence have been established by Quality Matters. For example, our MBA program requires all courses go through the process of a full Quality Matters review. If certain standards are not met, those revisions must be implemented before the course can go live. To achieve the delivery of quality online learning, everyone must agree on what the expectations are. QM provides trustworthy standards that foster objective feedback on course design. QM Rubrics and Standards were created to help course developers, teachers, faculty, entire organizations, and students. The General Standards and Specific Review Standards in each Rubric are intended to guide instructors through the development, evaluation, and improvement of their online courses. Meeting these quality expectations at or above the 85% level is key to certifying the quality of their courses. Before an online course can be taught, this study highlights support of the Quality Matters review system and calling for a need to have certain standards met.

**5. Conclusion**

The findings of this study indicate that there is a better way to develop, design and teach online courses. Online courses should not only present the information and materials to students, but also incorporate the social aspects of learning in both the design and instruction in order to increase social presence and a sense of community in an online setting. Establishing a sense of community is a given when courses meet in person, face-to-face. The seven different techniques introduced in this paper, from the literature, will help to adopt more pathways to increase social presence in all online course, regardless of field. These seven methods highlight the use of video, create a safe space for students and the instructor, encourage usage of emotions by all participants in the course, give students empowerment, give students fruitful video feedback, impactful discussion boards, and create opportunities for collaborative group work.

This paper empirically tests the usability of these methods to increase social presence in online courses. It is found that increasing social presence by incorporating these seven practices, based on prior research, increases overall student satisfaction with the course. It is critical to incorporate all of these avenues into online courses in order to promote social presence, which is proven to increase overall student satisfaction with the course.

The results of this study have important implications for educators teaching online courses. These findings have implications for all online courses, not just the economics, finance and statistics courses presented here. Information provided by this research study may be used to support pedagogy that increases

social presence since it plays such a critical role in student learning when it comes to being enrolled in an online course. The benefit provided to students who interact with faculty and each other in a learning community are clear, as Quality Matters asserts. Each learning community, then, has the opportunity to increase students' collaborative skills in future social environments. From a sociological perspective, this paper highlights the outcomes and causes of online communities (as had Brint, 2001) with computer-mediated interactions.

As more courses and degrees are offered entirely online, it clearly is important to establish standards for excellence in online education. The seven different techniques introduced in this paper will help to adopt more pathways to increase social presence in all online courses, regardless of field. One limitation is low student response rates for feedback, which can be addressed by giving students a small amount of extra credit for submitting the end of the semester online evaluation.

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