

The Centrality of Social Presence in Online Teaching and Learning in Social Work

Kia J. Bentley, Mary C. Secret, and Cory R. Cummings

Social presence is the extent to which persons are perceived to be real and are able to be authentically known and connected to others in mediated communication. A full appreciation of the concept offers social work educators an antidote to skepticism of online learning and provides an avenue for modeling the development and maintenance—indeed, the transformation—of collaborative helping relationships essential to practice. This article opens with a discussion of the place of social presence in its larger conceptual, theoretical, and empirical context and presents identified components along with concrete examples for effectively building social presence into online teaching. We conclude with a discussion of real-world challenges and tensions and pose a series of questions for future research.

Social presence refers to the extent to which persons are perceived to be real and are able to be authentically known and truly connected to others in mediated communication. For online teaching and learning environments, scholars agree that social presence is a particularly powerful concept because of its seemingly central influence on teaching and learning success. Specifically, social presence has been both conceptually and empirically linked to the quality of online learning, including levels of student participation, satisfaction, and student engagement (Cobb, 2009; Cui, Lockee, & Meng, 2013; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).

Social presence in online learning has particular relevance for social work education. The exponential and projected growth in online teaching and learning in social work (Coe Regan & Youn, 2008; Raymond, 2005; Robbins, 2013; Vernon, Vakalahi, Pierce, Pittman-Munke, & Adkins, 2009), coupled with accumulating evidence of the effectiveness of distance education (Frederickson, Reed, & Clifford, 2005; Means, Toyama, Murphy, Bakia, & Jones, 2009; Woehle & Quinn, 2009; York, 2008), means that we can conclude that online teaching and learning is here to stay. However, despite the increasing prominence of distance education in social work programs, many faculty members remain skeptical of the online environment as a platform (Allen & Seaman, 2011) to transmit social work practice knowledge, skills, and values (Coe Regan, 2005). Much of this skepticism generates from faculty members' struggle to reconcile how teaching "use of self" and relationship development, commonly recognized as the core of

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social work education, can be accomplished successfully when student and instructor are miles apart, connected only through inanimate objects such as a computer and the Internet (Coe Regan, 2005; Robbins, 2013; Raymond, 2005; Vernon et al., 2009). However, familiarity with the concept of social presence—and gaining the requisite knowledge and skills to intentionally enhance it in online environments—may assure educators that there is not only the means to teach and model the development and maintenance of both collaborative and helping relationships essential to social work practice but also the potential to enhance, reconstruct, and even transform these relational foundations of social work education and practice.

This article opens with a discussion of the place of social presence in its larger conceptual and theoretical context, namely, constructivism and the community of inquiry model, which are both linked to technological applications through the computer supported collaborative learning model (CSCL). Then the article briefly explores the evolution of definitions of social presence and discusses identified components of and cues in emotional expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Finally, concrete ideas and examples for building social presence into online teaching and learning experiences in social work education are presented. The article closes with a discussion of real-world challenges, tensions, and dilemmas that arise when attempting to balance the nurturing of online communities with high academic rigor and the goals of social work education.

CONCEPTUAL AND THEORETICAL CONTEXT

Perhaps the place to start is with an acknowledgment that the concept of *social presence* is deeply rooted in the experiential and the subjective and thus may be inherently amorphous. It derives from more general notions of human presence, human connection, and immediacy, which are “necessarily relational” and convey a “relationship of caring and responsibility” (LaMendola, 2010, p. 109). Important for contrast, we will note here that the opposite of presence is absence, meaning distant, not attentive, preoccupied, or missing. With social presence as an online phenomenon, we will see that awareness of “the other” and perceived proximal closeness, whether physical, emotional, or philosophical, will still be key.

Constructivism

Kehrwald (2008, p. 90) argued that online learning provides an “excellent venue for teaching and learning approaches derived from constructivist epistemology,” which says that learning is a combination of the mental processes of an individual as well as more “social activities.” The bottom line is that we construct knowledge and meaning through activity and experience. He noted that the importance of “connectivity” and “interpersonal interaction” between and among participants in online learning logically sets up ripe opportunities for “mutual modification of attitudes, skills, beliefs” (p. 90). It is this modification of attitudes, skills, and beliefs that is recognized as transformative learning.

Learning, approached from a constructivist perspective, then becomes dependent on environment. Not a static, fixed understanding of environment, but environment that is dynamic, interactional, and dependent on subjective exchanges. Knowledge building requires active participation in these environments. Specific to our topic here, it is important to consider how

these environments are fostered in online formats and how space is created for the expression of subjective and affective experiences in the learning process.

Community of Inquiry Model

Building from the previous discussion of environments and social exchanges, the community of inquiry (COI) model provides us with a framework for conceptualizing the interaction of different dimensions of our subjective selves as we participate in a learning environment—or, more consistent with this model, learning community. This model suggests that three elements interact in complex ways to create the online community learning experience for students (Garrison, 2007). The first of these elements is social presence, as defined earlier and the subject of this article. The second is the notion of teaching presence, which refers to the structure and processes for learning, including creation of a plan for learning, direct teaching of content, and basic facilitation of group discussion. Cognitive presence refers to the more nuanced ways that students are led to deeper or higher levels of learning through strategies that help students explore, integrate, critically reflect on, clarify, analyze, and come to resolution about new knowledge (Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011). Although beyond the scope of this article, current research is attempting to clarify the intricate relationships among these three forces—acknowledged to overlap (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012)—for optimum balance. For example, what is the influence of teaching presence on social and cognitive presence, or is social presence a “necessary precursor” to cognitive presence? Within this COI model, emphasis is placed on “fostering a connection with other learners and the instructor” (Tolu & Evans, 2013, p. 46) in support of shared learning experiences. In negotiating this connection, it is important for online educators to reflexively consider the role of social presence, both in course design and virtual interaction.

Computer Supported Collaborative Learning (CSCL)

Consistent with the emphasis that constructivism and the community of inquiry model places on interaction and learning, CSCL provides us with a model of application that joins pedagogic theory and technological advances in support of shared learning experiences. It is specifically concerned with the practicality and logistics of how social learning is translated into the virtual environment. This model explores the dynamics of shared learning environments that are created and sustained using the medium of computers and advancing technologies. As Stahl, Koschmann, and Suthers (2014) identified, “The goal for design in CSCL is to create artifacts, activities and environments that enhance the practices of group meaning making” (p. 489). CSCL challenges us to consider how we can translate group processes that are vital to traditional classroom learning to virtual classroom environments. For example, Graham and Misanchuk (2004) proposed three stages that need to be considered in establishing successful computer-mediated learning groups: creating groups, structuring learning activities, and facilitating group interactions. The CSCL framework shifts our attention to the technological medium as a focal point through which shared learning interactions transpire (Remesal & Colomina, 2013). This

entails purposeful and strategic choices surrounding synchronous and asynchronous tools for course and project design and conscientious attention to social presence through different user interfaces.

DEFINITIONAL EVOLUTION

As we have noted, social presence in online or other mediated environments refers to an individual's ability to demonstrate her or his state of being in a virtual space and, as Kehrwald (2008) put it, to signal to others her or his "availability" for interpersonal transactions. Because communication exchanges in online environments are essentially mediated by technology of some kind, social presence may represent the degree to which experiences seem unmediated. In the early literature on social presence, social psychologists used the phrase "degree of salience" (or significance) of the other person in mediated communication as a definitional starting point, and they stressed the capacity of the medium to transmit or convey nonverbal information (e.g., Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). Later scholars have noted the increasing focus on relational aspects of social presence—for example, the perceived "tangibility" and "proximity" of others. Now, more and more, a focus on social presence is used in relation to the affective connections and feelings of community that exist in mediated communication (Kehrwald, 2008; Lowenthal, 2009). Very recently, Sung and Mayer (2012) offered an empirically derived five-facet dimensional definition of social presence that includes social respect, social sharing, open-mindedness, social identity, and intimacy. These refinements are one way in which clearer distinctions are being made between social presence and the related concepts of cognitive presence and teaching presence in the COA model.

Definitions are also suggested by looking at measures of social presence. Reviews of several of these measures (Cobb, 2009; Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & van Buuren, 2011) suggest social presence relates to comfort levels with respect to communication, perceptions of the sense of community, the acknowledgment of others' points of view, and the absence of impersonal discussions—all of which are critical aspects of social work education. Consistent across these emerging definitions is that social presence in online environments is said to be performative. That is, it is conveyed by visible activities such as posting, commenting, responding, and participation in group and community activities, as we will see below. These are tangible, emotive, and community-building activities that social work educators can embed in their online classes to ensure quality interactions in cyberspace.

BUILDING AND MAINTAINING SOCIAL PRESENCE

Course Design

Aragon (2003) offered a plethora of excellent suggestions for enhancing social presence from a course design perspective. He encouraged, for example, several strategies that have been successfully employed by the authors, including the development of video welcome and lesson overview messages, and he encouraged students to offer up personal profiles with pictures. We note that course management systems, often used in online course delivery such as Blackboard, have moved toward

discussion-board platforms that allow threaded conversations to look more Facebook-like—that is, each student comment is immediately physically juxtaposed to a headshot of that student, and all comments are easily viewed in chronological order. Aragon also encouraged the use of collaborative learning activities, including group projects or other assignments that get students to search for content, share it, and then solicit reactions to it. Indeed, this type of activity is central to our online courses where “search, summarize, and share” assignments or weekly collaborative learning groups are regularly used. In the search, summarize, and share assignments, students go to the Internet and find compelling articles or websites on a certain theme or question and post them (with a brief introduction) for their peers to view and offer their own emotional and intellectual reactions to it. They also create group wiki pages on one course topic and then cross-view and critique each other’s work. In the collaborative learning groups, students work in small groups (3–5 students) to respond, on a weekly basis, to a series of discussion questions generated from the assigned readings. Social presence is heightened by the nature of the questions, especially ones that call for case study analysis and the sharing of related personal or professional experiences. There is the clear expectation (indeed, requirement) that students interact with one another around these postings. Here are several examples:

- Take an inventory of your assumptions about what it is like to be 85 and older. What are your biggest fears? What do you think would be the best part of reaching that age? Choose one of the cases (Margaret Davis, Bina Patel, or Pete Mullin) at the beginning of chapter 10 and discuss how religion, spirituality, philosophy of life, culture, personality traits, plus your own assumptions about what it is like to be 85 or older, would influence how you would work with that individual at this life stage.
- As we move from the focus on individuals to the focus on families, review the three film clips on Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson and reflect back on the cognitive, moral, and psychosocial stages of development. Share with your group members the following:
 - ✓ There has been much criticism about the Eurocentric nature of these three perspectives of development. What is the basis of such criticism? Provide an informed opinion (i.e., use support from the literature) as to whether or not, and to what degree, you think these developmental perspectives can advance economic and social justice and help us understand the forms and mechanisms of oppression and discrimination.
 - ✓ Which of these stages has been the most helpful to you in understanding yourself? Why? What in particular about these stages of development will be most helpful to you in your practice as a social worker? Why?
- Post here your good argument for or against prescription-writing privileges for social workers. Feel free to cite the literature (use textbook and database searches for support) and, if possible, draw from your experiences. Be sure not to denigrate other professions. After you have posted your argument, let your colleagues argue the other side of the coin. Be kind, and think critically.
- Describe a situation, real or hypothetical, where you might feel justified in supporting involuntary medication of a client. Can you also describe a challenging scenario in which you would not support a coercive medication strategy? Reflect on any personal or professional values at play, or maybe even in conflict. Reflect on any connection between your situation and the experiences that Dr. Kogut shared in his podcast.

TABLE 1
Design Elements and Examples

<i>Course Design Elements (Aragon, 2003)</i>	<i>Examples From Authors' Course</i>
Welcome video and overview messages: Encourage students to offer personal profiles with pictures and thoughtful participation throughout the semester	"Be sure to introduce yourselves by posting a brief intro and response to the 'Ice Breaker' on the appropriate discussion board. Upload a picture, or a brief audio or video, if you like, by attaching a file."
Collaborative learning activities and group projects	<p>"Search, summarize and share": "Find a link and visit at least three links from your colleagues..."</p> <p>Create group wiki pages: "Your respective task is to work together using the 'Groups' features in Blackboard to create an attractive, approachable wiki page at the course's wiki site."</p> <p>Group contract: Provide a rubric to help students anticipate and work through issues encountered in group work.</p> <p>Course synthesis: "I will post a synthesis of the course... and I will ask you to edit it... I would love for you to make the course syllabus that I am writing real...when you are all done with it, I will send it to you all so you have a record of your course."</p>
Thoughtful and frequent contributions to discussion boards: Setting the tone, sharing personal stories and experiences, giving context	<p>"Discussion via Blackboard will be a key avenue for learning and sharing."</p> <p>"I'm interested... this is my area...my dissertation was..."</p> <p>"I'm just coming back from my trip... where I was at the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education conference..."</p> <p>"...which happens to be my birthday."</p>

Instructors, according to Aragon (2003), should themselves contribute to discussion boards frequently and thoughtfully, including sharing personal stories and experiences. One instructor varies her posting patterns across the semester in an attempt to find balance between over-involvement and underinvolvement, and another establishes an all-class discussion board for ongoing instructor–student interaction (see Table 1).

Components and Their Cues

Social presence has been behaviorally described as relating to a "constellation of cues" in the three general categories bulleted below (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976, p. 157). Here they are, along with ways that students and instructors can build, convey, or detect these dimensions of social presence in an online environment. Mediums may include discussion boards, announcements, e-mails, and, where relevant, in content and lessons themselves. Our approach to posting across these domains reflects an intentional effort to boost these cues of social presence, as detailed by Lowenthal (2009) and others.

- Affective responses such as the expression of emotion, humor, and self-disclosure as seen in the use of "paralanguage" such as emoticons, exaggerated punctuations, unique

spellings; the explicit use of feeling words such as love, furious, anxious, perplexed; the expression of values, beliefs, and attitudes; teasing, cajoling, or understatement; or any expression of vulnerability or risk taking.

This is good advice beyond the course! LOL!

Thank you, thank you, thank you for your work on the wikis! WOW! I am making my way through all the links and videos and texts and learning a lot. Wonderful positive view of aging. Hope you don't mind if I share it with some of my friends since all of us are aging!!

- Open and interactive communication, such as asking probing questions; expressing agreement or disagreement with others; giving affirmations or praise or encouragement; offering advice on specific situations; directly referring to others' comments or quoting others' posts; or offering self-reflections,

Can you actually see yourself developing and presenting psychoeducational content to clients? Can you see yourself doing this in collaboration with other providers? With clients and families themselves? What in the text readings or in the interview with Joe encourages you to do it and what reservations do you have? Do you have any relevant personal or professional experiences to share?

Claire, great follow-up with your group member Ashley. And great sharing of personal experiences with rural school systems to bring perspective and insight to the education discussion.

Margaret, excellent response to Tierra. You captured the essence of the assignment when you asked her to dig a little deeper re her uncle's death and the issue around "breakage" in such strong families.

Keep up the great work on the discussion boards... Feel free to affirm your classmate's work as well as to (lovingly) pose questions (rhetorical or otherwise) that will push them (and all of us) to think critically.

- Cohesive responses, which are responses that contribute to connecting and sustaining relationships such as referring to others by name; offering personal greetings; referring to group as "us," "we," or "us"; explicitly inviting feedback; or sharing interesting tangential information or experiences.

Lauren, watching your video I was reminded of experiences and reflections that I have had over the span of this course. Unfortunately, I have also worked with a case where there was misuse of medication by another family member. However, in my case it was my client that was suspected of taking the pain medications of a dying family member. It is really difficult to see and to respond to as the case manager! I liked your suggestion of educating the whole family about the client's medications and what they help treat for her and the intense pain that she experiences (student comment).

I want to thank you for your hard work... thank you for your commitment to the online learning process... to rely so heavily on your colleagues for discussion. (Instructor comment)

Yes, important reflections. I think we all just need to watch our (sometimes over) generalizations sometimes. Be aware of the assumptions that they reflect and be able to identify how we came to believe what we do. This is the essence of critical thinking. (Instructor comment)

We need to be effective collaborators...we need to be an effective resource for clients...
(Instructor comment)

Thanks to all of you for this important thread. It tells me you all are indeed putting on the multiple lens of “partnership perspective” and “social work perspective” and “critical perspective” and “social justice perspective” and trying to figure out what you see when you look at populations other than adults with serious mental illness through those lens, like kids who struggle with emotional and behavioral problems, people with intellectual disabilities, and court-mandated clients. How do we embrace those principles with different kinds of clients? This is good. This is what we are supposed to do.:-)

Seaba and Kekwaletswe (2012) stressed the importance of considering how to foster student participation with social presence online as vital to “forming social connections in the learning context” (p. 129). Considering all of these components and cues can provide a framework for the instructor to engage in strategic “use of self” in role-modeling skills to support online social presence in the learning environment.

Assessing Success

Online instructors can informally assess the level of social presence in their courses by posing a series of questions to themselves or even to students. To what extent was communication characterized by the cues discussed above? To what extent did students offer hints to their identities beyond “student”? What were levels of sharing around their personal histories (their culture, education, experience)? How much did you get to know the unique personality of individual students (their attitudes, demeanor, and sense of humor)? How much sharing was there around their personal circumstances (location, family situation, professional contexts)? To what extent did students talk about what they were learning from each other? Did you as an instructor offer or create these opportunities for social presence to thrive? How much student appreciation for peer sharing was expressed? Instructor reflections on these questions—especially at midterm or at the end of semester—seem to quickly point to needed revisions for crafting course activities or discussion board questions for future classes toward the nurturance of social presence. Experience suggests that posting a summative question directly to students at the end of the semester explicitly eliciting thoughts and feelings about course content and peer exchanges can produce such a plethora of appreciative comments that may very well assuage any skepticism about the power of online environment to support interpersonal communications. Here is one such easily adaptable question used by the senior author to help cement the teaching and learning of a semester online:

Post here any reflections you have about the most important aspects of your learning for the semester. What really resonated for you? What do you think will be the most useful? What have you learned about the power of sharing stories, experiences and resources with your peers and what are the implications of that for your professional development? What will you do to continuing learning and growing in knowledge and skills related to social work and psychopharmacology? How can you maintain the values and philosophy around recovery and partnership that were integral to the course?

Challenges, Tensions, and Dilemmas

The most obvious challenge in building social presence in online education is appreciating the tension between the need to set high academic standards and yet maintain a milieu of a supportive, relaxed, and accepting community of learners. Expectations for participation in online activities and discussion boards are typically quite high, and students have to be held accountable for them, even though instructors may be trying to decrease distance and share power with them, as suggested by the contemporary learning theories discussed here. Issues of power and authority must be balanced with the values of community and co-construction. Although evaluation and grading is inevitable, grading rubrics developed as a class project, collaborative learning group reflection papers, and group member or self-assessments are tools that can both strengthen social presence and help balance the power differential.

The other challenge may be less obvious. Social presence is associated with the perception of distance—or lack thereof—between individuals in interaction; the reality is that no matter what, there is “space” between the participants. Space exists between participants in telephone and in face-to-face communications as well as in online environments; physical presence is no assurance that misinterpretations, miscommunications, or emotional distance will be absent. Because social presence is not exclusive to online environments but a condition of all human interaction, the concept also has relevance for more traditional classroom teaching and learning environments. In that space between participants, especially in social work, we understand that all exchanges are subject to cognitive and emotional interpretations and meaning-making by us humans, whose motivations and personal contexts are complicated and certainly not fully known or likely even knowable. We do the best we can to reject isolationism and egocentricity in online learning environments, and instead we embrace meaningful interaction and shared intellectual community.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

We have alluded to several avenues of future research on social presence throughout this article: There is continuing research on the relationship of social presence to other dimensions of teaching and learning, including cognitive presence and teaching presence; there is research related to defining the cues and expanding the components of social presence; there is research on the measurement of social presence. Future research might examine which are the most effective or powerful techniques available to build social presence. How much overlap is there between strategies that build social presence and those that enhance student engagement and quality online education in general? Here the efforts of the initiative called “Quality Matters” may be especially relevant. Quality Matters, a respected national consortium of organizations and educators concerned with defining and upholding quality in online education, has recently promulgated empirically derived standards of quality that they make available to their subscribers. Of note is that of their eight major categories, two relate explicitly to student engagement (Legon & Runyon, 2007; Quality Matters, 2013):

- Meaningful interaction between the instructor and students, among students, and between students and course materials is employed to motivate students and foster intellectual commitment and personal development.
- Course navigation and the technology employed in the course foster student engagement and ensure access to instructional materials and resources.

As these standards evolve throughout the years, we expect to see a more prominent place for social presence given the growing database, discussed earlier in the article, on the positive effects of social presence across several dimensions of learning.

However, we started the article with the argument that the concept of social presence was relevant for online social work education in particular because of its potential to truly transform learning in ways especially pertinent to the learning needs of our students and the professional demands of our discipline, which are centered in connective capabilities, interpersonal exchange, shared problem-solving, and collaboration with peers and other providers. Thus it is fair to conclude with suggestions for future research that speak to all that. For example, how does social presence influence perceptions of the importance of peer collaboration in decision making in everyday real-world practice, or on professional development in general? What effect does social presence have on the deep appreciation of diverse thought and experience? How does social presence relate to the meaning of “use of self” by students? How are the assets of social presence translated in to the development of practice skills or excellence in practice? These are both fair and vital questions to pose in this burgeoning area in the scholarship of teaching as we seek to more closely connect how we teach social work with what social workers actually do.

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