

Nurturing Social Presence in a Blended Learning Environment

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Abstract: The ambition of this development study is to explore the opportunity to put the knowledge gained during the COVID-19 pandemic into practice in a blended, post-COVID, learning environment. The focus is to explore how a combination of digital and face-to-face activities may allow for fostering social presence among undergraduate students. The Social Presence model and the five elements of Affective Association, Community of Cohesion, Instructor Investment, Interaction Intensity, and Knowledge and Experience, encompass the theoretical framework of the study. The contextual setting is the first course of The Marketing Programme at Linnaeus University in Sweden, a bachelor program with a 50% Swedish intake and 50% international intake. Given the diverse background of the students in this course, challenges are typically encountered in relation to community building. Empirical data was collected during the fall of 2022 among the enrolled students using an online questionnaire. While the results from this study should be seen as preliminary, they offer an inspiring glimpse of how to nurture social presence in a blended learning environment.

1 INTRODUCTION

After two years with COVID -19, with mostly digital teaching, the students are back in the classroom. During these years it should be safe to claim that the digital literacy among university teachers has increased enormously. For the reason of necessity, but also curiosity, many colleagues, have taken different courses in digital teacher and learning. In one of the digital courses taken by the author of this study, emphasis was placed on the intriguing concept of Social Presence. Social Presence is described by Garrison et al. (2000, p.89) as *“The ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as “real people”*. That is, it addresses the importance of having individuals within learning community to become “real” and to give the participants a feeling of someone “being there” (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). The social presence becomes especially important when talking about On-line learning where no physical interaction is possible, but it has become an important part of Blended Learning research (Whiteside, 2015), where face-to-face teaching is aligned with digital teaching.

The interesting thing with the concept is that it derives from computer-mediated communication rather from the learning science (Lowenthal, 2010). “Classic” learning science on the other hand, describes the importance of social interaction in a learning environment (e.g. see Elmgren & Henriksson, 2015 or Laurillard, 2012), Turner & Paris (1995) points out several reasons for why social interaction is motivational; observation of classmates progress can increase an individual’s confidence, it can spark students’ curiosity and interest, and working with others promotes student engagement. Social interaction and active collaboration between students do not only affect the individual student, but it can also have an effect on the success of fellow students in their studies (Elmgren & Henriksson, 2015). Research also shows that the mere belief that someone has a social interaction with another human being, improves learning and understanding (Okita et al., 2007).

COVID-19 has changed the way we give education in a classic “face-to-face” environment, where digital tools are integrated to a higher extent. Even if the teaching we do on The Marketing Programme cannot be defined as pure Blended Learning, it is slowly moving in that direction. This

argues for using Social Presence as a theoretical framework to develop also courses in a face-to-face setting.

This development project is focusing on the first course of The Marketing Program (Linnaeus University in Sweden), a bachelor program with international intake. The course is the 7,5 credit course Fundamentals in Marketing, which serve as an introduction to the topic and the program itself. Half of the class comes from a national (Sweden) intake and half comes from an international intake. Being the first course of the program, it is offered in the period September to October. The number of students varies between 65-45, with 44 active students in the fall of 2022.

The fact that the class consists of students from all over the world creates different challenges:

- Many students are studying at a university for the first time, which makes it important during the course to not only teach the subject but also help them to get into academic studies.
- Students from all over the world means that we have students used to different studying cultures. This calls for the need to help international students to emerge into Swedish studying culture, how it works and what we expect from them.
- This is the first course of a three-year program where social interaction and networking between students become an important part of the education. Even if this works quite well on the program in general, we do see that some nationalities have a hard time to integrate with the group then others.

This paper will address the challenges above and provide a scaffold for the first course of the program, with the aim of increasing the Social Interaction in the group from day one on The Marketing Program. The paper is based on a previous development work by the main author, conducted on an online course back in 2021 (Magnusson, 2021). The theoretical framework has the same scaffold but has been developed and refined for this paper. Some of the activities presented in previous paper has also been incorporated in this paper and adjusted to fit the blended learning environment that is the context of this paper.

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

For this paper, the Social Presence Model developed by Whiteside (2015) will be used as the scaffold for the development of the course.

2.1 Social Presence Model

The Social Presence Model covers five important components that builds social presence in an online setting (Whiteside, 2015). The model can be seen as guidance to social presence for instructors and for students. Or as Whiteside puts it; “*Social presence affects learning only to the extent that instructors and students are willing to integrate the five elements of social presence.*” (Whiteside, 2015, p.14). The model is illustrated (see in *Figure 1*) and explained below.

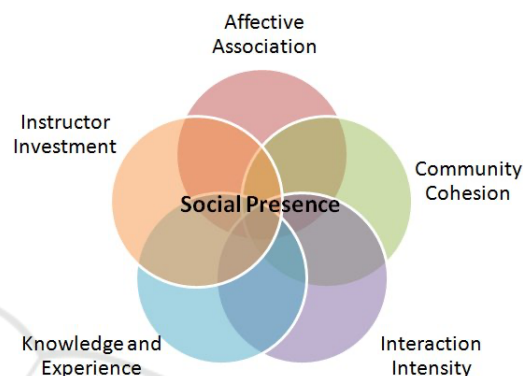


Figure 1: The Social Presence Model (Whiteside, 2015, p. 11).

Affective Association – this component describes the emotional connection between individuals within a course. It addresses emotions, humour and self-disclosure related to personal emotions. If students do not feel the emotional bond between themselves and instructors, they will not invest emotionally in the course thus performing less. The important part within Affective Association is to get people to trust and respect each other, both fellow students and the instructors. (Whiteside, 2015).

The importance of incorporating emotions in education is nothing new and it is dealt with in numerous types of discussions regarding Social Presence (e.g., see Garrison et al. 2000 and Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018) as an important element to get the students engaged and immersed in a course. It is also covered in academic teaching literature and described as an important component to engage for an improved learning experience (e.g. see Elmgren & Henriksson, 2015 or Laurillard, 2012). The importance of emotions has its foundation in psychology where researchers like Russel and Pratt (1980) early stressed the importance of having a person in the right mood to be able to act.

Community of Cohesion – this component relates to the course community. In a course community additional resources and information are shared with

the class. It should also include possibilities for the class to share resources and information with each other. It is also important to get the students to see the group as a cohesive whole. (Whiteside, 2015).

A review of published studies about learning communities by Andrade (2007), identified four primary outcomes of learning communities: persistence among members its members, academic achievement, involvement and satisfaction. She concludes that learning communities do attain positive outcomes, even if it is difficult to determine which characteristics of learning communities account for the success.

Instructor Involvement – this component addresses the importance of involvement of the instructors of the course. The instructors are responsible for the creation of the community and to build trust in that community. Whiteside’s study shows that “*instructors’ initial community building “activities” were essential to them [students, ed. note] in establishing relationships and making social connections.*” (Whiteside, 2015, p. 12). Also, it’s important for instructors to nurture and encourage students to engage in critical analysis and higher order thinking in the online environment. (Whiteside, 2015). Garrison et al. (2000) supports this view and stresses the importance of clarifying the intended educational outcomes from the course.

Above discussion has support in academic teaching literature, where Elmgren & Henriksson (2015) stress the importance of the teachers’ influence on students in their learning experience. Even if the student and what the student does is the most important factor for successful learning, a good and inspiring teacher are a prerequisite for effective learning. According to Laurillard, students are “*more likely to engage in learning activities that lead to higher-level outcomes if the teaching they experience demands activities such as collaboration, critical thinking, and practical application*” (Laurillard, 2012. p. 42)

Interaction Intensity – this component describes the interaction between participants and involves agreement, disagreement, compliments, and questions. It simply describes the importance of acknowledgement between other participants of the course to increase the social presences of the participants. (Whiteside, 2015).

Laurillard (2012) discuss the importance of peer communication in a learning situation and that learning, and development, is built upon peer discussions. This has an important effect on the cognitive development of an individual.

Knowledge and Experience – this component describes the effect prior knowledge and experiences have on the possibility to build social presence. Group’s collective knowledge level and experience can have a positive impact on social presence. (Whiteside, 2015). Educational researcher Gordon Wells, claims that: “*although no member has expertise beyond his or her peers, the groups as a whole, by working at the problem together, is able to construct a solution that none could have achieved alone*” (Wells, 2000, cited in Whiteside 2015 p. 9)

Laurillard (2012) discusses the importance of the informal learning environment in education, as it is a powerful and effective force for learning. From this informal learning environment, the students bring their conceptions of it, skills and motivation into the more formal learning environment, which strengthen the learning process. Entwistle (2009) also touches upon the importance of previous experience for outside education, in a learning situation. Social and cultural influences are formed early in a persons’ life and will continue to influence learning in higher education.

3 PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

Even before this development project was initiated, various activities have been designed into the course to nurture social interaction. These activities are kept but complemented with new activities to pinpoint and increase the Social Presence in the class. Below are the different activities presented, where the new once for the fall of 2022 are marked as new.

Program Introduction

The program introduction starts with a rollcall where each student shortly presents themselves and where they come from. After the introduction, a formal presentation of the program and the Linnaeus university will follow.

Aim: To right from the start engage the students and stimulate Affective Association so that everybody knows who the other students in the class are and where they come from. This can also be a first step toward Community of Cohesion.

Scheduling (New)

The course consists of 12 lectures of two to three hours. They are given during Monday to Wednesday the first three weeks of the course. To the extent possible, two lectures are given per day. These lectures are scheduled with an hour break in between them for lunch.

Aim: To increase the Community of Cohesion in the class by hopefully having the students to socialize during the one-hour break, creating a sense of community in the group. It also addresses Affective Association as students get a chance to emotionally bond in a more informal situation.

Q&A and Availability (New)

The first three weeks of the course end with a Question and Answer session (Q&A). All teachers on the course are invited to join. This will be an opportunity for the students to ask questions and we will make a short recap of what has been dealt with during the week. The Q&A will be held at a restaurant on the university campus, to get a more informal environment for the session. The teacher hosting the Q&A is available afterwards for individual questions.

Aim: To nurture Interactive Intensity of the group, having students asking questions and driving the discussion. It also touches upon Instructor Involvement as it shows that the teachers within the course care about the students and take their time to answer their concerns.

Study Guidance (New)

A written study guide is provided for the students. It describes the structure of the course and gives reading instructions. It also describes academic studies in Sweden and how it works. The library at LNU has good introduction films about academic studies in general and academic studies in Sweden. Links to these films are provided directly in the document and on the digital classroom MyMoodle. The study guide will also describe the different exams on the course and what we expect from the students. Also, The Academic Support Centre at LNU is booked for a two-hour introduction lecture to talk about their service and academic studies in general. This lecture is offered as a digital lecture.

Aim: To help the students getting into their studies and understand what is expected of them, which is Instructor Involvement.

Student Forum (New)

A forum is available at the course site MyMoodle where the students can discuss among themselves.

Aim: To nurture Interaction Intensity among the students and have them interacting between each other without instructor involvement. The forum also aims to create Community of Cohesion in the group where students can share their thoughts and ideas with other students.

Group Exam

There is an examination on the course that is conducted in groups of four students. The course

responsible creates the groups beforehand to make sure that there is an equal distribution between genders and that there is more than one nationality represented in the group (in most cases, at least three nationalities). The task is designed so that the students need each other's experience from consumption in their home country. As a support for the students, we will have two lectures and one seminar on Intercultural Competence, to give the students tools to use when dealing with the dynamic in the group.

Aim: The design of the exam means that Knowledge and Experience comes into play when the students are to solve the task. The exam also activates Interactive Intensity since the group needs to work together and discuss with other groups on the seminars. It also addresses and hopefully strengthens the sense of Community of Cohesion in the group. The lectures in Intercultural Competence can be seen as Instructor Involvement where we help the students to understand how they can interact in their group.

Supplemental Instruction, Peer-assisted study sessions (new)

Supplemental Instructions (SI) is a pedagogic method that builds on learning together with others. The work is led by older students on the program, where they meet first year students on a regular basis in smaller study groups, where they discuss the course, compare notes, develop study skills, and help the students prepare for their exam.

Aim: This activity combines Knowledge and Experience from both older students and the first-year students, as well as nurture the Community of Cohesion in the group. It can also help the Interaction Intensity in the group.

For an overview see *Table 1*.

4 EVALUATION

The project was evaluated with a survey in two parts. In the first part questions aimed at understanding the students view of the Social Presence in the class where asked. The second part asked questions about two specific activities on the course Q&A and SI sessions. Control questions about age, gender and citizenship were also asked. A total of 42 out of 44 active students filled in the evaluation.

Part 1

In the first part, the five components of Social Presence were operationalized into 11 questions which are presented below (see *Table 2*):

Table 1: The seven activities mapped against the five components of the Social Presence Model. * Indicate a digital activity.

Activities/ Social presence	Affective Association	Community of Cohesion	Instructor Involvement	Interaction intensity	Knowledge & Experience
Program intro:					
Individual introduction	X	X			
Scheduling					
lecture-lunch-lecture	X	X			
Q & A and availability					
informal setting outside schedule			X	X	
Study guidance *					
study guide*			X*		
academic support center*			X*		
Student forum *		X*	X*		
Group exam					
written paper in mixed groups		X		X	X
lectures intercultural competence			X		
Supplementary Instructions		X		X	X

Comments:

Affective Association: the class scored comfortableness and respected by others rather high, which indicates that the emotional connections between students in the class are quite high. On the other hand, the question regarding trusting classmates scored lower than the other two questions, but still, most of the answers point towards agreeing to this statement. One reason for this scoring lower, might be that the questionnaire was sent to the students only eight weeks after they begun the program.

Community of Cohesion: Two questions were asked, and both show a wider spread in the answers than most of the other questions. Especially the question about sense of community in the class scored lower than was wished for, since the feeling of a community is a strong part of Social Presence as a concept (Whiteside, 2015).

Instructor Involvement: The students seem to agree that the activities on the course to some extent have helped them to establish relationships with new people and to become a critical thinkers.

Interaction Intensity: The question about how the students interact with classmates to increase their own learning, is the only question in the survey where one can see an uneven distribution among the answers. Looking at the phrasing of the question in hindsight, the choice of using the word “frequently” might explain this since it is rather subjective what frequently means. This is of course a weakness in the question and based on that it is hard to draw any conclusions from the answers since they are uneven distribution. The second question here asking about if the student feels accepted in the class, points towards students agreeing which is positive.

Knowledge and Experience: It seems like previous experience from studying, influences the

student’s ability to interact with their classmates. The score for the second question which asks about their experience from work and how that has helped them to get into the class, scores lower. An explanation for this might be that many of the students are young and have little-to-no work experience when entering the program.

Conclusion:

It’s hard to draw any deeper conclusions on the result presented in Part 1, since there is no data to compare with. But on the other hand, the result gives indication on what is working and what can improve. One way to get a clearer picture of the effect, is to repeat this evaluation in the consecutive spring semester.

Part 2

The second part of the evaluation asked about participation in two of the new activities added to the course – the Q&A and SI-sessions – and if the students considered them to be valuable or not. The result is showed in below pie-charts.

Comment:

In total, only 38,1% (16 out of 42) of the students participate on at least one SI session whereof 16,7% (7 students) participated more than once (see *Figure 2*). This is a bit disappointing, and we had expected more students to attend at least once to see what it is all about. On the other hand, out of these 16, 14 students found the SI sessions valuable or really valuable (see *Figure 3*). This speaks for the sessions being of value to students and that it is worth continuing with them in the future. The question about the low attendance will be brought up on a program council meeting during spring in order to get deeper information about why so few chose to participate.

Table 2: Social Presence operationalization and results.

Concept	Question	Disagree					Agree
		1	2	3	4	5	
Affective Association	I feel comfortable among my classmates	-	2,4%	23,8%	23,8%	50%	
Affective Association	I feel respected by my classmates	-	4,8%	9,5%	28,6%	57,1%	
Affective Association	I trust my classmates	-	16,7%	38,1%	26,2%	19%	
Community of Cohesion	I fell that our class has a strong sense of community	11,9%	23,8%	33,3%	23,8%	7,1%	
Community of Cohesion	I feel comfortable in sharing resources and information with my class	2,4%	7,1%	16,7%	35,7%	28,1%	
Instructor Involvement	The activities (e.g. Lectures, seminars, group work etc.) in the course have helped me to establish relationships with new people	-	2,4%	23,8%	38,1%	35,7%	
Instructor Involvement	The activities (e.g. Lectures, seminars, group work etc.) have helped me to become a critical thinker	2,4%	9,5%	26,2%	28,6%	33,3%	
Interaction Intensity	I frequently interact with my classmates to increase my own learning	2,4%	21,4%	31%	11,9%	33,3%	
Interaction Intensity	I feel accepted by my classmates	-	9,5%	16,7%	33,3%	40,5%	
Knowledge Experience	My previous knowledge (from e.g. working, studying etc) has helped me to interact with my classmates	4,8%	-	14,3%	28,6%	52,4%	
Knowledge Experience	My previous experience (from e.g. working, studying etc) has helped me to get into the class	2,4%	9,5%	16,7%	38,1%	33,3%	

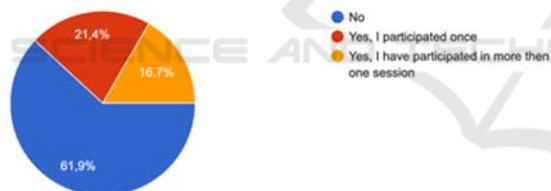


Figure 2: Answers related to the question “Did you take part in any of the SI sessions on the course?”. Number of respondents was 42.

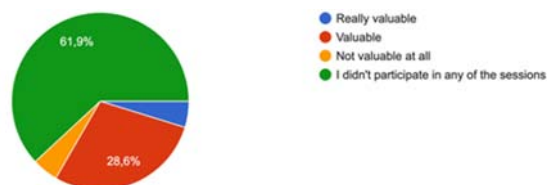


Figure 3: Answers related to the question “How valuable did you consider these sessions to be?”. Number of respondents was 42.

Comment:

Half of the class participated at least once at the Q&A, whereof 28,6% (12 students) participated more than once (see Figure 4). Everybody that participated, saw

the activity as valuable or really valuable (see Figure 5).

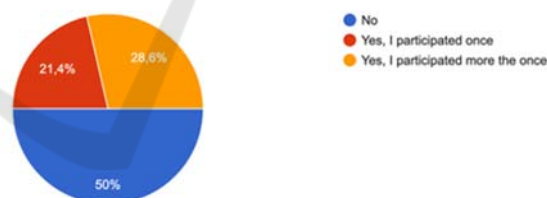


Figure 4: Answers related to the question “Did you take part in any of the Q&A:s (Questions & Answers) during the first week of the course?”. Number of respondents was 42.

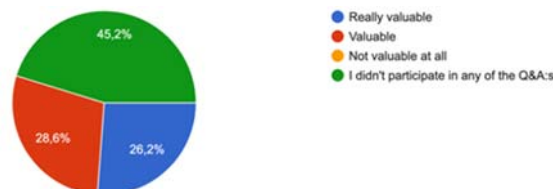


Figure 5: Answers related to the question “How valuable did you consider these Q&A:s to be?”. Number of respondents was 42.

Conclusion:

Both these activities will be used next year again but needs to be communicated better to increase the participation.

5 CONCLUSIONS & REFLECTIONS

The learning environment has changed during the pandemic, so that we have become more comfortable making use of digital tools to enhance education. This study explores how a variety of undergraduate course activities, both digital and face-to-face activities, may allow for fostering social presence among students in a blended learning environment. In total seven different activities were considered. Of these seven activities, two were digital while the remaining were face-to-face activities. Interestingly the digital and face-to-face activities, i.e., a blended learning environment, together appear promising in order to help create social presence as stipulated by the Social Presence model. The early results presented in this paper indicate that integrating the digital activities with the face-to-face activities is particularly promising with regards to strengthening the community of cohesion and instructor involvement. The results also indicate particular areas for strengthening the social presence. One such area refers to the incorporation of activities, digital as well as face-to-face, that help strengthening affective associations between students, as well as collective knowledge and experience.

The overall impression of the project is that most activities worked well. However we had hoped for higher attendance on the SI sessions and the Q&A:s, but the students who used it seems satisfied. By continuing these activities in the future, this will hopefully be a natural part of the course/program and therefore increase the participatory rate over time.

Worth noting is also that one activity was not used as anticipated. The forum that was available on MyMoodle for the students to discuss among themselves ended up not being used by the students and may consequently be discontinued. Other alternative ways of integrating forums, or chats and instant messaging apps, may however be interesting to explore. A critique towards forums is the lack of instant interactivity which can e.g. instant messages apps like WhatsApp and Telegram provides. These types of tools give students an opportunity for direct and instant communication with each other without having to log on to a separate platform. This calls for

exploring these types of tools on future courses instead of using a traditional forum.

From the experience of the teacher team, mixing students of different nationalities and gender into working groups often result in conflict. Such conflicts may originate from these differences in background and perspective and can have a detrimental effect on the collaborative process of the group. During the period of data collection, i.e., the fall of 2022, only one group openly brought up the issue of disagreement within the group. This is perceived as very positive. However, it is too early to draw any conclusion if this is due to stronger social presence within the student group, or due to chance. It will be exiting to learn what the conflict and split up rate of groups are in the coming couple of years. Perhaps this is a trend, and perhaps it can be attributed to the implementation of the digital and face-to-face activities creating social presence.

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