CETL's Weekly Teaching Tips presents

Social Presence and Interaction in the Online Classroom

The course is built, the students are busy working on assignments, now what do you do? Plan how to provide "presence" in your online course.

Which four labels fit your online activities?

For more instructor- and student-led activities based on these four interactions, see the full teaching tip at

oakland.edu/ teachingtips

Think of ways to design your course that supports these four types of interaction:

- **SS** student-to-student
- **ST** student-to-teacher
- **SC** student-to-content
- **SW** student-to-world

Class introductions in a Google Presentation

Collaborative Class Introductions
File Edit View Insert Slide Format

ss ST

Sharing a current article that relates to course content and asking for feedback

ss ST SC

Group projects that make connections from course content to their community
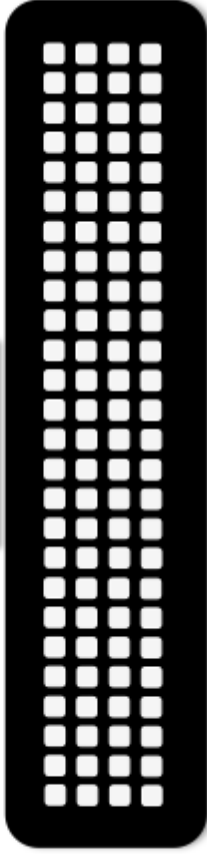
ss ST SC sw

Social Presence and Interaction in the Online Classroom

"*Social presence* is defined as the ability of participants in a community to project themselves, socially and emotionally, as real people through a medium of communication," (Garrison and Anderson, 2003).

In thinking about a community of learners, let us tie in one of the major themes of Lev Vgotsky's Social Development Theory. Vygotsky's theory asserts that "social interaction plays a fundamental role in the process of cognitive development." In essence, social presence is a critical element in the learning process.

Social Presence and Interaction – the Instructor

The course is all built, the students are busy working on assignments, now what do I do? As a new online instructor, or even one that has been teaching online for some time, there are many ways to provide "presence" in your online course.

Finding opportunities to communicate with your students in the online environment can seem challenging at first. Think about all the ways in which you connect to your students in the face-to-face environment and then begin to translate these ideas to online. You will find many opportunities to engage and be present. Your role as the instructor in the online environment is every bit as important (if not more!) as it is in the face-to-face classroom.

Be thinking of ways in which you can design your course that supports these four types of interaction:

1. student-to student (ss)
2. student-to-teacher/teacher-to-student (ts)
3. student-to-content (sc)
4. student-to-the-world (sw)

Opportunities may include: **sharing of personal stories and experiences, frequent feedback, and continuous conversation**.

Sharing of Personal Stories and Experiences

- **The icebreaker/creating classroom community**
  It is essential to set the climate from the start of class. In the online classroom, you can provide engaging opportunities for students to introduce themselves to you and their classmates.
  Examples:
  o A discussion forum where each student makes an introductory post and reply (ss) (ts)
  o A wiki where each student provides their name, major, hopes for the class, etc (ss) (ts)
  o A community bulletin board (try www.padlet.com) where each student posts their introduction on a class 'wall' (ss) (ts)

- A class metaphor (i.e.: food, running, diving, etc.) to engage students by asking them to post their favorite "food" or exercise activity, etc. (ss) (ts) (sw)
- A collaborative Google slide presentation where each student takes a slide to introduce themselves with text, images and/or video (ss) (ts)
- Ask students to submit introduction videos of themselves using their favorite mobile technology such as VoiceThread or Vine (ss) (ts) (sw)

- **Posting/Blogging** – if you are asking your student to make blog posts, use this method to communicate key concepts, reminders, and current events with your students. (ss) (ts)
- **Office hours** – encourage just as you would in face-to-face (you can even offer extra credit to encourage them to attend at least one). (ss) (ts)

Frequent Feedback

- **The weekly email –** emailing your students a weekly summary provides connections, summarizes the week, gives a preview of the next week, offers tips/suggestions, what went well, what could improve, point to exemplary student work, and encourage students to interact. (ts)
  Examples:
  - " After you post your YouTube URL to the Class Blog, don't forget to **also** paste the URL in the designated Moodle assignment area so you can receive a grade."
  - "The first quiz was a bit 'rocky', however, the technical issues have been fixed for the next quiz."
  - "Take a look at the Weekly Check-in Video on our class blog.

- **Office hours** – encourage each student to join you for office hours, just as you would in a face-to-face class.
  - Require each student to contact you at least once during the course. This can be via chat, video (Skype or GoogleHangout) or any other method that supports synchronous conversation. (ts)
  - Offer extra credit to encourage them to attend at least one session. (ts)

Continuous Conversation

- Ask a Trivia question related to a concept to get students engaged (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Post a link in the discussion forum to a current event/article that relates to course content and ask for feedback (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Provide opportunities for discussion, maybe a thought-provoking question to elicit student discussions. (ts) (ss) (sc)
- Including opportunities for collaboration, such as group projects and team discussions that ask students to explore the world around them (ss) (sc) (sw)
- Offer a poll where you ask students' opinions on something related to the course/topic (this can be really fun!). (ts) (ss) (sw)
- Mention the Student Corner ("commons area" for off-topic discussions) and offer some guidance on the purpose. (This engagement is extracurricular but it can help students build relationships that are advantageous inside the classroom. (ss)

As the instructor, it is important to provide space and encouragement for continuous 'conversation' that supports cognitive processes. Model what you are asking your students to do, so be sure to add/post/create just as they are doing. Then, reply to students' posts and welcome them individually to make that initial connection.

Social Presence – the Student

You are in the online course, working on assignments, now how do you 'meet' your classmates and get the sense that you are not alone? The online student is every bit as responsible for the social presence and interaction in the classroom as is the instructor; it is a two-way communication. Students will find that increasing their participation level also increases their motivation, which is likely to contribute to success in the course. Let's take a look at similar methods to engage: **sharing of personal stories and experiences, frequent feedback, and continuous conversation**.

Sharing of Personal Stories and Experiences

- Participate in the icebreaker activity and meet at least one other classmate that you can connect with throughout the course
- Use the course discussion forums and/or blogs to share your experience with classmates and instructor (ss) (ts)

Frequent Feedback

- Use the course discussion forums and/or blogs to communicate with classmates and instructor (ss) (ts)
- Use the instructor's office hours on a regular basis (ts)
- Read all course communication thoroughly so you don't miss out on important announcements/information. (ss) (ts)

Continuous Conversation

- Have a course-related question? Ask it in the course discussion forum. Know an answer to a classmates' question? Answer it! (ss) (ts)
- Want to find out if any of your classmates live in your area and know of any housing available? Ask in the Student Corner forum. (ss)
- Communicate regularly with your group members; they are your lifeline in the course. (ss)
- Respond to class polls and discuss thoughts with classmates/instructor (ss) (ts)

Resources:

Garrison, D. R., and T. Anderson. 2003. *E-learning in the 21st century: A framework for research and practice.* New York: Routledge Falmer.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1978). Mind and society: The development of higher mental processes. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Submitted by:

Kimberly Vincent-Layton, Humboldt State University, www.humboldt.edu