

# Instructor presence in online teaching: challenges and opportunities

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**Abstract.** The coronavirus pandemic has affected higher education on a global scale. During the first days of the COVID-19 pandemic, university professors experienced deficiencies to convert their current full-time disciplines into a remote format ensuring learning outcomes. Technology-based communication, which was prevalent in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated the issues associated with social presence. Social presence represents a crucial component of interactions that take place between instructors and students online remotely. This study reviews the social presence, with a focus on the research regarding the online teaching practices that demonstrate their effectiveness and relevance before and during COVID-19. The article begins by exploring the concept of social presence, distinguishing its correlations and interdependencies with other related concepts (empathy, student emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement, learning outcomes, and motivation). The article offers a review of separate findings that investigate the teaching practices ensuring instructor presence and establishing stable contacts with learners. The data analysis reveals the main features vital for feelings of social presence from the online instructor. They include connectedness as the state of having timely communication with students, instructor responsiveness as the quality of having a quick or positive reaction from the instructor, online learning techniques, ensuring community building and empathy facilitation. Finally, the paper discusses the implications of social presence and the recommendations are given through three engagement strategies: management, connectedness and choice.

**Keywords:** social presence, empathy, online education, covid-19, remote education.

## 1 Introduction

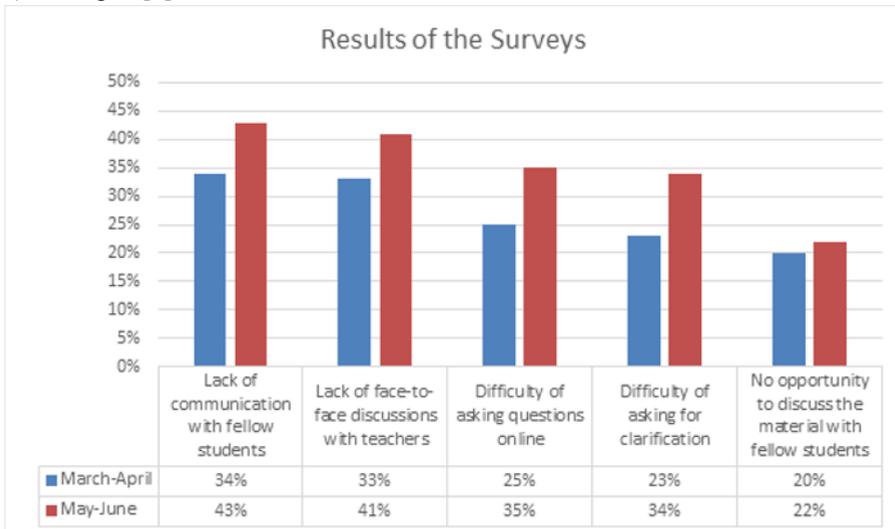
The coronavirus pandemic has affected higher education on a global scale. During the first days of the COVID-19 pandemic, university professors experienced deficiencies in time, capacity, and often knowledge and skills to convert their current full-time disciplines into a

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remote format ensuring effective learning outcomes. Frequently the conversion represented contacts between instructors and students and not creating well-designed and balanced online courses. Technology-based communication, which was prevalent in online education during the COVID-19 pandemic, exacerbated the issues associated with social presence.

Through an ongoing survey on digitally enhanced learning and teaching, the European University association found that in April and May, 2020, almost 90% of institutions had gone online, for all or most subjects [1]. Russian researchers also conducted surveys dedicated to different aspects of distance learning during the pandemic. The surveys detected that one of the challenges most frequently mentioned by students had been the lack of live communication. Over 6 thousand students from 153 universities in Russia took part in a survey managed by the rating agency RAEX-Analitika, which revealed that 70% of the surveyed had lacked face-to-face communication with their fellow students and professors. 44,7% of the respondents referred to a significant reduction in communication intensity due to the shift towards distance education [2]. Higher School of Economics and Tomsk State University surveyed 10893 students of Russian universities during the first wave of the pandemic (March-April, 2020) and 24428 students during the second wave (May-June, 2020), see fig. 1 [3].



**Fig. 1.** Results of the Surveys of students from Russian universities on the conditions of distance learning.

Lack of live communication was detected in the pre-pandemic times. In the surveys, students ranked chat first with 74% and e-mailing (68%) second as the most efficient distance learning tools [4].

Thus, the surveys result in making relevant the problem of social presence in distant education.

## 2 Methods

The research uses theoretical methods, representing analysis, generalization and systematization of scientific works on the problem of the study before and during COVID-19. The theoretical pillars are the psychological and philosophical ideas of Rogers to establish relationships maintaining and facilitating instructional interactions and social

presence in online education [5, 6], on the role of empathy [7] and its relation to engagement, connectedness [8, 9], motivation and their practices in online teaching [7, 10-13]. The reviewed data from applied research, describing the ways to develop community [14, 15], assessment online [16, 17], course design [18], provide the material for comparative and systematic analysis of the teaching practices ensuring instructor presence and establishing stable contacts with learners.

### **3 Results**

There are a number of studies discussing the role of the instructor, forms of social presence and interdependencies between social presence and other meaningful components in online and remote education.

Rogers formulated three conditions which are vital for creating a stimulating environment in consulting and education: empathy, sincerity and an unconditional positive attitude [5]. The conditions are suggested to be essential for establishing relationships which maintain and facilitate educational interactions in online education [6].

Social presence as the ability of participants to project their own self onto the online community [19]. Studying aspects of social presence of the online instructor is closely connected with analyzing empathy, a multidimensional concept, which is defined as “the extent to which one person is aware of the direct and tangible presence of another person” [8].

Student engagement in an online course depends on the degree of empathy demonstrated by the teacher. It is assumed that empathy is an integral part of social presence of the instructor in remote teaching. Social presence in online and remote education plays a crucial role correlating with other meaningful components including empathy, student emotional, cognitive and behavioral engagement, learning outcomes, and motivation [6, 13, 18].

Limited opportunities of interaction with peers and teachers increase the sense of distancing and undermine the sense of connectedness among students in distance learning programs. In the light of the transition of higher education institutions to the online format instructors question how online courses ensure social presence if teachers and students are separated in space and time.

There are a number of elaborated directions how to instill social presence in online courses. These directions relate to instructor presence and to students' activities. It is supposed that attributes of social presence of the instructor go well beyond the practice of facilitation and include attributes of design [20]. Different types of online course assignments which require knowledge sharing between groupmates facilitate creation of social connections [21-23]. Blogs, Wikis and discussion boards have helped to increase collaboration and support in online classes [16]. There are recommendations to include reflexive assignments in small groups [17]. Discussion-based strategies in online courses reduce anxiety and increase students' engagement in group assignments. Even if some students prefer to work online independently, many indicate that collaborating with peers can increase students' sense of community [15]. It is emphasized that educators are the primary point of contact for online students as they play a critical role in how they develop a sense of community [19]. The research confirms significant links between Roger's models of respect and empathy with the concept “community of inquiry” [6]. Martin and Bolliger state that small group discussions when students could think deeply and share their ideas with each other increased the level of students' engagement in learning [24].

The forms of communication between the instructor and students matter. The instructor presence such as posting regularly to the discussion board and responding in a timely manner to emails and assignments simulates positive online communication and interaction [14].

Furthermore, quality control, recording mechanisms for assignments and verification of these assignments increase students' academic performance. It was found out that students rated highly the instructor's timely responses to questions and feedback on assignments [24]. The results support previous researchers' findings that students value timely feedback as it helps their learning process [25]. Exploring the ways of maintaining instructor presence as well as the teaching methods that educators have used to keep in touch with their students, researchers identified teaching practices that are considered to be online teaching best practices [9].

## **4 Discussion**

The instructor presence online largely depends on the e-learning format. So, in this article, some recommendations are offered in order to improve the management approach to e-learning as an e-teaching process. The recommendations are given through the following engagement strategies: management, connectedness and choice.

### **4.1 The management strategy**

One of the most important things in online teaching (synchronous or asynchronous) is the process of organizing and creating new routines and new habits for instructors as well as for students for online communication. Recommendations include making agreements on scheduling emails to students and getting responses from them. As far as learning in an online classroom can seem impersonal, students should have regular contact with their instructors. It is helpful to add regular announcements such as weekly summary emails and reviews. Organizing feedback is one of the most meaningful parts in an online course. This routine ensures instructors' presence so that students know that they are not just sending assignments and working into the void. The repertoire of giving feedback is rich and varies from chat rooms to student response tools. Students tend to learn through acquiring materialized and obvious micro learning goals which they should clearly understand and accept.

### **4.2 The connectedness strategy**

This approach is based on the idea to develop the community of online classes. The theory of Community of Inquiry [14, 19] relies on building strong communication among instructors and their students. The ways instructors facilitate the development of interaction between students shape the sense of connectedness. The connection, teacher-student communication and interaction are vital due to the sense of isolation in times of Coronavirus. The theory of Community of Inquiry consists of three main parts:

1. Instructors' presence (developing course materials and conducting the online lessons);
2. Social presence (interaction between course instructors and their students as a part of cooperation and communication);
3. Cognitive presence (teaching methods and techniques which are used to present the course material to students online in order to increase learning outcome).

### 4.3 The choice strategy

Students are given the choice in the format of homework assignments due to their individual preferences and creativity. Digital Media Design Student Choice Board [26] gives students a wide range of formats they may choose from. The use of the choice board helps instructors to differentiate students' learning with the help of presenting different learning perspectives and opportunities for self-expression. So, students do not only participate in the content, they also have a lot of multimedia materials that they encounter and use while working on their assignments. The feature of tracing instructor presence, e.g. assessments and feedback, is widely provided in the predominant majority of digital media.

## 5 Conclusion

Despite its development and settled models, social presence still remains a critical experience within online and remote education revealed by COVID-19. Increased instructor presence is perceived as leading to positive implications, multiple studies show that the vivid perceptions of another person often lead to greater empathy, motivation, emotional and social influence, better learning outcomes. Hence, it is vital to identify factors, techniques and strategies that increase indicators of social presence.

The results of the study indicate that the presence of instructors in online courses is expected to be systematic and expanded. Online instructors can leverage their presence in their courses by projecting empathy towards their students, develop community, improve course design, create new routines and habits and use engaging digital practices. The given recommendations follow engagement strategies: management, connectedness and choice that improve the approach to e-learning and e-teaching.

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