

# **Real-Life Distance Education Case Studies in Practice**

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## CHAPTER 3

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# THE POWER OF PRESENCE

## Our Quest for the Right Mix of Social Presence in Online Courses

Joanna C. Dunlap and Patrick R. Lowenthal

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### ABSTRACT

Social presence theory explains how people present themselves as “real” through a communication medium and is a popular construct used to describe how people socially interact in online courses. Because of its intuitive appeal, educators—including ourselves—have experimented with different ways to establish social presence in their online courses. Over the years we’ve tried many strategies—from rich threaded discussions to personal one-on-one e-mails to digital stories to using social networking tools like Twitter. Over time, we began questioning how students perceive all of the strategies we use (in other words, what strategies were leading to the most bang for our buck). This case study shares the story of our quest for the social presence grail—from the strategies we use in our courses, to our research on students’ perceptions of the effectiveness of these strategies.

## INTRODUCTION

For years, we have collected students' stories about their "best" learning experiences. The results of analyzing these stories has been consistent in terms of what students see as important characteristics of engaging, memorable, and impactful learning experiences (Dunlap & Lowenthal, in press). At the heart of those experiences are relationships—the connections students have with their teacher and with each other. This isn't surprising. Chickering and Gamson (1987) found that students' relationships with faculty had a direct and significant effect on their level of scholarly engagement; this finding is reflected in subsequent research (for example Kuh, 2002, 2009; Kuh, Cruce, Shoup, Kinzie, & Gonyea, 2008).

Online students, though, often complain about feeling like their professor is absent from the course (Smith & Taveras, 2005). For instance, several years ago, Joni set out to design and deliver the "perfect" online course with lots of rich resources, relevant activities, and authentic/real projects only to receive an e-mail from a student midway through the course complimenting her on the course but asking her, "Where are you?"

Bottom line, social connection—also referred to as social presence—is an important aspect of a successful learning experience. Knowing this, we work hard to make sure we attend to social presence needs in the courses we teach. However, we have found it challenging to establish a consistent and adequate level of social presence in our online courses.

To our consternation, we are never fully satisfied with our social-presence accomplishments. In the following case, we describe our quest for the social presence grail and share the results of our obsession to create engaging, memorable, and impactful learning experiences in our online courses by enhancing social presence. We share several of our strategies, and the results of those strategies based on our research efforts. By the end of this case study, you should be able to

- describe the role of social presence as it relates to student engagement in online courses,
- select strategies to establish and maintain social presence in online courses, and
- analyze the perceived effectiveness of both low-technology and high-technology approaches to establishing and maintaining social presence.

## CASE STUDY

Social presence theory dates back to the work of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). Short et al. defined social presence as the quality or state of being

between two communicators using a communication medium. While they originally conceptualized social presence primarily as a quality of a communication medium, later researchers (e.g., Gunawardena, 1995; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001) began to re-conceptualize social presence by focusing more on how people used and adapted to a communication medium than solely on the qualities of a communication medium itself. Then in the late 1990s, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000), building on past research, developed the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework. They posited that a deep and meaningful educational experience actually consists of three types of presence—teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). More specifically, they argued that educators use teaching presence (e.g., instructional design, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction) to develop social presence and ultimately cognitive presence in communities of inquiry (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

In the CoI framework, the three presences are interconnected, and in service to each other to create online experiences that lead to student learning; because of its balanced emphasis on teaching, social, and cognitive presence, the CoI framework well reflects the social constructivist view that learning occurs in a social context. This does not mean that social presence cannot naturally occur. Walther (1992) argued 20 years ago that people are social creatures and that given enough time people will find ways to use any communication medium for social purposes. Rather, the CoI framework focuses on deliberate strategies educators use (which it refers to as “teaching presence”) to establish social presence in support of and service to cognitive presence and overall student learning.

The CoI framework, though, does not provide much guidance on how to design courses, facilitate discourse, and provide direct instruction to facilitate the development of social presence in support of student learning (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). For instance, how many threaded discussions should there be in a course? Should the threaded discussions be full-class or small-group discussions? Should students have specific instructional tasks to accomplish during discussions? Should video be used or not? Educators can make some inferences from the indicators of teaching presence developed by Anderson et al. (2001), but even these indicators lack sufficient detail. So despite its intuitive appeal and overall popularity, online educators continue to experiment with different ways to establish social presence (through “teaching presence”) in the courses they teach. For instance, over the years we have experimented with a number of different strategies to establish social presence in our courses ranging from rich and personal threaded discussions to personal one-on-one e-mails to digital stories to recently using social networking tools like Twitter (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009a, 2009b, 2010b; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010). Now a central concept in online learning, researchers have shown—to varying degrees—a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena,

1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; So & Brush, 2008), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Richardson & Swan, 2003). However, research to date (whether grounded in the CoI or not) has not identified which strategies are generally better than others for establishing social presence.

## **Our Quest Began With Our Teaching**

After the “Where are you?” experience, we frequently discussed the challenges of establishing and maintaining social presence in service to student learning in our online courses. It was clear to us that it mattered to students and to us. The absence of social presence abraded the overall aesthetic learning experience and undermined student learning. Therefore, because of the potential payoff in terms of student engagement and learning in online courses, we invested substantial time and energy considering and studying social presence. You could say we became obsessed. We read everything we could find on social presence (whether it was grounded in the CoI or not), we participated in conference presentations and other professional development activities, and we experimented.

We then started trying out different things in our courses. The following pages outline some of the things we have done to establish and maintain social presence in our courses (for those grounded in the CoI framework, these can be thought of as teaching presence strategies).

## **Introductions**

We believe there is a connection between students’ comfort and sense of trust and their willingness to share and build the level of personal connection and community needed to establish strong social presence (i.e., sense of being “there” and being “real”) in an online course. Therefore, we have spent a lot of time thinking about the best way to conduct introductions—that is, “getting-to-know-you” activities—in our courses. Below are a few examples of the types of strategies we use at the start of our courses.

### ***Teacher Bios***

Since we ask our students to share information about themselves, we share a lot of information about ourselves. Besides helping students to have insight into our values, passions, interests, credibility and so on, our sharing models

the type and level of sharing we want them to engage in, to set the appropriate tone for social presence and establishing a personal, supporting online learning environment. To this end, we share pertinent resources, such as our teaching philosophies, links to articles we've written, presentations we've delivered, our blogs, and so on (see Figures 3.1 and 3.2).

### *Student Bios*

We approach student bios in a variety of ways. Sometimes we use what we call *the Superhero Powers* strategy (which is described later on in this chapter). Other times we use strategies such as *Aladdin's Lamp*, *One Extra Hour*, *Digital Storytelling*, or even a *Photo Roster*. For instance, for *Aladdin's Lamp*, we ask students to respond to the following prompt (or a variation of this prompt, depending on the audience) in VoiceThread (see Figure 3.3):

**My Story and Resulting Teaching Philosophy**

I have had nine educational experiences in my life (and I'm sure many more) that have shaped me as an educator:

1. When I was in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade, we constantly sang songs and played dodge ball. This made the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade a lot of fun, personally meaningful, and engaging.
2. When I was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, we spent a lot of time preparing for and participating in spelling bees. For me, these activities instilled pride and enhanced my self-efficacy about being a successful student.
3. When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, we turned our classroom into a Revolutionary War-era village, made our own money, grew our own beans, and reenacted the Boston Tea Party. These activities were authentic, but at the time I was more interested in being a pop star (or a veterinarian) so the experience was not personally relevant.
4. When I was in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, our algebra teacher called us "turkeys" if we got an answer wrong or asked a "stupid" question. This made the experience challenging, encouraged me to study hard, but made me anxious about attending class and negatively impacted my efficacy regarding mathematics.
5. When I was in 8<sup>th</sup> grade, our geometry teacher spoke very softly and very fast, and wrote his notes and formulas on the chalkboard in the tiniest print. I didn't understand anything in class and never quite understood what was expected from me, but it left plenty of time to daydream about being a pop star (or record producer).
6. When I was in 10<sup>th</sup> grade, our calculus teacher believed that every student should work at her or his own pace. This experience encouraged intentional learning, autonomy, and self-direction, but no accountability or incentive to challenge ourselves. So, I worked on the same chapter all semester long.
7. When I was in 11<sup>th</sup> grade, our history teacher was a retired colonel who had served in World War II and the Korean War. His lectures were presented as a series of historical accounts and stories. He took us on fieldtrips to monuments and graveyards. He had high expectations, and we had to take a lot of tests and write a lot of essays. Being with him was an engaging and challenging experience, but the assessment methods lacked authenticity and relevance.
8. When I was a freshman at university, we had a literature professor who taught a course on the influential literature of the 1960s. The books we read were engaging, relevant, and sometimes challenging. One day he told a story about a trip he had taken to Dallas in which he went to the grassy knoll across from the schoolbook repository in order to experience that space. He described how he lined himself up on the knoll until he was in the spot he thought the President's car was when the first shot was fired. With tears streaming down his face he said, "When I finally looked down at my feet to see where I was, I saw that the grass was worn away. I then realized that hundreds, maybe even thousands, of people pilgrimaged to this same spot and did exactly what I did because they were drawn...because they needed to be there." This professor connected with us, inspired us, and made us want to impress him. We were never sure how we were being graded, but we all received an A.
9. When I was an MBA student in graduate school, I had a course with Professor Brown (see my digital story about this experience).

Because of my experience in Professor Brown's course (experience #9), I started to understand how a learning experience that enhances learners' educational opportunities and outcomes needs to have elements from all of the experiences shared above.

**Figure 3.1** Joni's story and philosophy.

**INTE 6710 ~ Creative Designs for Instructional Materials**  
**Getting to Know Joni**

Below are a few items that, if viewed/read, you will get to know me a bit better. I think you will find it helpful -- it will give you more insight on me as an educator. Enjoy, and let me know if you have questions or thoughts based on what you see or read.

**Joni's most recent article with Patrick Lowenthal, *Defeating the Kobayashi Maru: Supporting Student Retention by Balancing the Needs of the Many and the One***

Overview: In this article, Patrick and I share strategies for establishing personal, one-on-one relationships between online students and faculty, to attend to identity, individualization, and interpersonal interaction in support of student engagement and retention. Rather than focus on high-tech solutions, we focus on low-tech solutions — the telephone and e-mail — that all faculty and students have at their disposal. These strategies address the needs of the individual within a learning community by striving for balance between group and individual interactions — between the needs of the many and the one. <http://www.educause.edu/EDUCAUSEQuarterly/EDUCAUSEQuarterlyMagazineVolum/DefeatingtheKobayashiMaruSuppo/219103>

**Joni's presentation, *And now for something completely different***

Overview: I delivered this presentation in May 2010 at the CU Online Symposium (you will need to scroll down the page to locate it). I am sharing it here because I talk about online teaching, and my thoughts about how to enhance engagement -- it might provide some insight into my approach in this course. It also gives you a chance to see me in action in a setting that we will not experience together -- the classroom or lecture hall.

**EdTechTalk Live**

Every Friday (unless I have faculty development commitments to the university), I co-host an EdTechTalk Live show called *Instructional Design Live*. I'm not always the one talking, but it is another way to interact with me. The show is Fridays, from 10-10:30am (MST) -- <http://edtechtalk.com/live>

**Joni's blog, *Thoughts on Teaching***

For the last few years, I've been sharing my thoughts and ideas about teaching in postsecondary settings in my blog, Thoughts on Teaching. It is important for us all to get to know each other, and for you to get to know me well. This is not always easy to do online. Looking at my blog will give you much insight on my thinking about the teaching-learning exchange that we are engaged in via this course. It will hopefully give you a good sense of what my teaching philosophy is, what I value. Check it out, see what you think, post comments if you are so inclined. [Note: Of late I have been lax in posting to this blog, focusing more on publishing my thoughts in various journals.]

Figure 3.2 Additional information Joni shares with students.

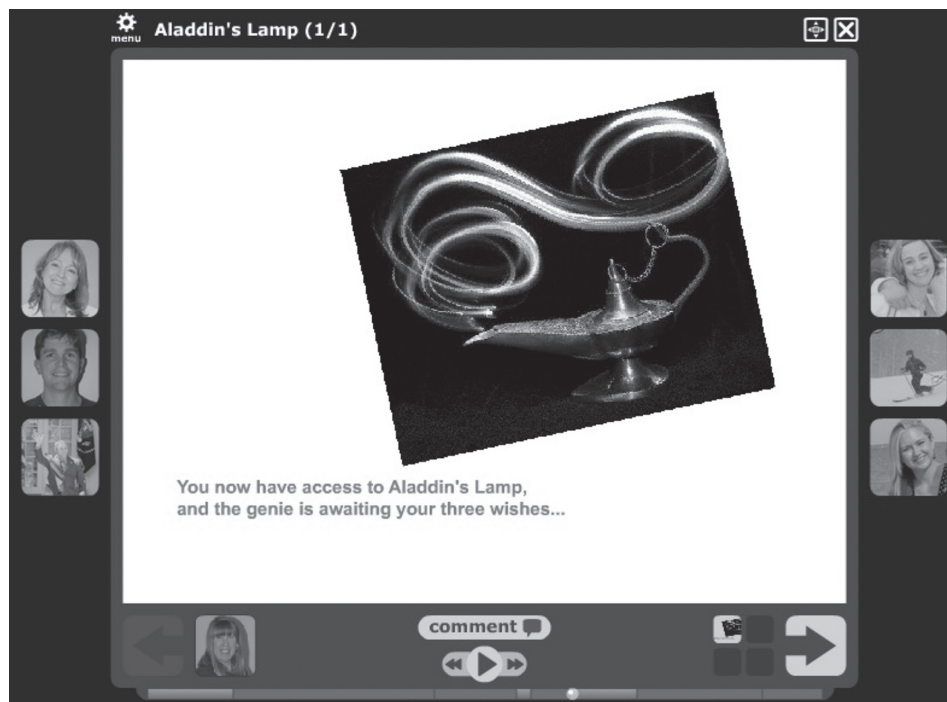


Figure 3.3 Aladdin's Lamp getting-to-know-you activity.

The myth of Aladdin and the Lamp is well-known. It is hard not to imagine what you would do with three wishes, and how best to craft the wishes to make sure you achieve the desired outcome . . . indeed, that's the rub! Most of you know each other from previous courses, but I don't know you yet. So, instead of asking you to rehash what you already know about each other for my benefit, let's try something different . . . and hopefully you will learn something new about each other in the process. You now have access to Aladdin's Lamp, and the genie is awaiting your three wishes. Our collective wishes have to be different, so as you consider your three, be sure to check to see what others have shared as their three wishes—no duplication allowed! :-)

The *One Extra Hour* activity is similar. We ask students to consider what they would do if they had an extra hour in the day, and why. Through this sharing (and, we participate too), students learn a lot about the priorities and values of their peers (and us) while also learning about their families and work situations. We use tools like VoiceThread for these strategies because students can share a photo and respond to the prompt using their microphones or webcams. We have found that hearing and seeing each other in this context helps all of us feel more connected.

We also have our students create *Digital Stories* about themselves. We tend to simply ask them to share something about themselves (e.g., What did you do over Winter break?) using an application of their choice (e.g., Microsoft PhotoStory, iMovie, Animoto, VoiceThread). Learning little things about each other through sharing digital stories helps establish social presence in a traditionally text heavy medium (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2010).

One last strategy we use for student bios is the creation of a *Photo Roster* (see Figure 3.4). While students can attach an image in a threaded discussion or create a “home page” or profile in certain learning management systems (LMS), this results in a disjointed final product. We instead prefer to create one document that has pictures and bio information about each student. By creating a Google Doc and making it editable by anyone, students can quickly login and fill in predetermined information as well as include a photo.

### ***5-Minute Conversations***

During the first few weeks of our courses, we also invite students to participate in a 5-minute phone conversation with us (see Figure 3.5). We do this so our students might feel more connected and less distant from us. We have found that these early phone conversations lead to subsequent phone conversations with students for purposes of project brainstorming, content clarification, and formative feedback—and in a much more efficient and personal way than if we had participated in the same exchanges via a threaded discussion.

## Bios

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Directions: Please find your name below and complete your bio. If you are comfortable with it, please add a picture as well. If your name isn't listed below, just add a column below and add your information. [Note: I (Patrick) simply took the class list which isn't always correct]

Fill in the template as best you can and only include information if you are comfortable sharing it with the class. If an item doesn't apply to you, simply delete it.


	<p><b>Lowenthal, Patrick</b> website: <a href="http://www.patricklowenthal.com">www.patricklowenthal.com</a> email: <a href="mailto:patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu">patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu</a> instant message: <a href="mailto:patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu">patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu</a> (Windows Live) twitter: plowenthal google docs acct: <a href="mailto:patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu">patrick.lowenthal@ucdenver.edu</a> city / state: Westminster, CO</p> <p>background: Patrick Lowenthal is an Academic Technology Coordinator at CU Online at the University of Colorado Denver. He worked at Regis University in Teacher Education for six years before coming to UCD in 2008. He is a doctoral student studying instructional design and technology at UCD. His research interests focus on instructional communication, with a specific focus on social and teaching processes in online and face-to-face</p>
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Figure 3.4 Patrick's photo roster.

Hello everyone, and welcome to INTE 6710! As a starting place, please click on Wk 1 (8/23-29) to see this week's agenda. This week's activities are focused on getting oriented to the course and each other. Please let me know if you have any questions as you move forward with the activities.

Over the next few weeks, I'd like to have a 5-minute phone conversation with each of you. I like to do this at the start of a course so that we might feel more connected, less distant from each other. The agenda -- to hear each other laugh! But, also, to address any questions you may have about the course. If this works for you too, please send me an email with a phone number and some times of day when I might reach you at that number. My email address is [joni.dunlap@ucdenver.edu](mailto:joni.dunlap@ucdenver.edu).

I am pleased to be working with you this semester, and am looking forward to our time together.

-Joni




Figure 3.5 Invitation for a 5-minute phone conversation.

## Orientations

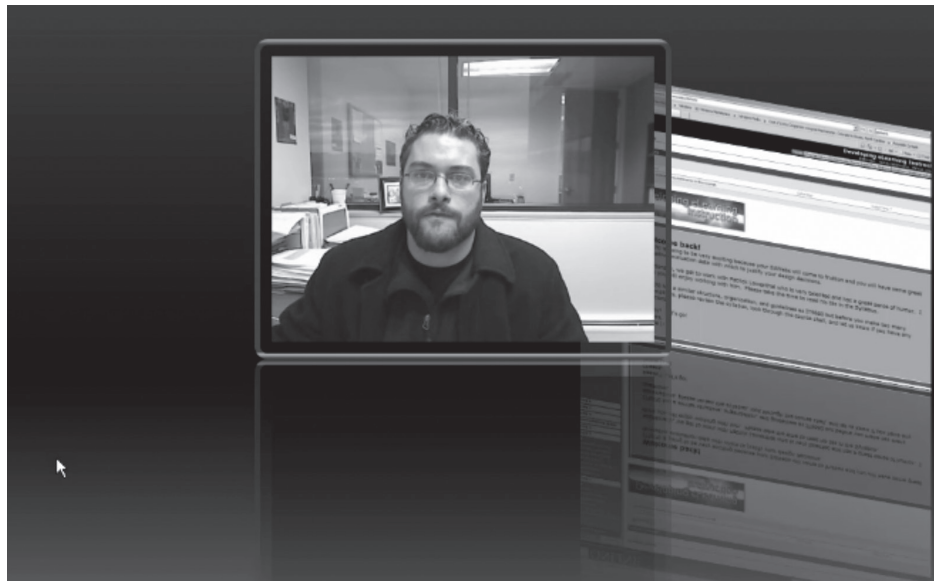
We also focus on orienting students to our courses much like we do in a face-to-face course. The following are a few “finding-your-way-around” activities we use to help students with course orientation, during the first week and throughout the term.

### *Orientation Videos*

We present short orientation videos, with each video walking students through different aspects of the course shell, learning activities, and projects (see Figure 3.6). Using tools like Jing, we create screencasts showing students all around the course shell. We interject our sense of humor where possible, tell stories, and provide explanations for our design decisions. These videos not only orient students to the course, but to us as well (see this example of a video Patrick used to orient his students to the first unit in his course: <http://www.screencast.com/t/MmM3MjM5MjUt>).

### *Course & Syllabus Scavenger Hunt*

Videos, though, aren't the only way to orient students to a course. We also use the quiz feature in our LMS to create a course and syllabus scavenger hunt that students submit by the end of the first week. To complete the scavenger hunt, students have to read the syllabus, locate materials, and watch the orientation videos. The results of the scavenger hunt reassure us that students are locating and tracking important course information, and alert us to any misconceptions or confusions that individual students have



**Figure 3.6** Example of video orientation.

about the materials so we can immediately reach out to them and provide additional support and guidance.

### *Weekly Announcements*

At the start of each week, we post a new announcement orienting students to the activities of the week, and also send the announcement to students via e-mail (see Figure 3.7). Even though this information exists elsewhere in the course, we like to reach out to students (as opposed to making them log into the course shell) with an enthusiastic and more personal announcement about the week (whether in text format or video). In each announcement, we provide a reminder about how they should focus their time and energy during the week. We also include personal information (e.g., like what we did the week before) and well wishes for a successful up-coming week.

### *Weekly Agendas*

Finally, for each week in the course, we provide students with a weekly agenda checklist that they can print out to help them track what they should be working on during the week (see Figure 3.8). Again, although

Can you believe that it is October? And, we are almost halfway through the semester? I can't...

I really enjoyed reviewing your *Project 1: Presentation Makeover Magic* projects this last week. You each received detailed notes from me – things for you to consider, for revisions and future projects. You may have noticed that although I provided a lot of comments about various aspects of the presentation and design document, I rarely took many points off unless there was a significant issue. I did try to provide clear directions for any revision recommendations, but please let me know if you have any questions. Vague comments from me can be maddening, I know, so be sure to connect with me for clarification, if need be; related, connecting over the phone is always an option if that is helpful. Again, thank you for sharing your work with me, and I look forward to seeing what you do next!

This week, I will send you each a brief email regarding your drafts of Sections 1-6 of the design document for *Project 2: Job Aid Makeover Spectacular* -- a "looks like you are on the right track" note, addressing any issues in the draft that may be helpful to address. As before, please feel free to continue your work on the project while you are waiting for my email -- I'm sure you are all on track, my email will just make it "official". :-)


This week, while you are continuing your work on Project 2, I ask you to participate in two asynchronous discussion activities related to our readings last week. (We will do something similar next week about this week's readings.)

There will be no synchronous Connect session this week. Please see the Week 7 agenda for more information about the next session so you can plan.

Finally, a quick debrief on the Week 6 activities. First, I love the results of the Virtual Paper Bag, Part 2 activity -- so creative, and dare I say fun. :-) I learned a bit more about each of you through this activity, and I hope you learned a bit more about each other too. Also, I hope it helped to play with the idea of comics and graphic novels via this activity, as well as test out a tool or two that may be useful for Project 2.

Regarding the Debriefing David Thomas' Session activity, thank you for your contributions both during the live session with David and in the asynchronous discussion afterward. David always challenges me to think differently about my work, and fun is one of my favorite things to hear him talk about...fun is a big part of what I consider when I design courses and activities (can you see my efforts in this course? ;-) ). It is challenging to think about what fun is, and how to incorporate it well -- purposefully in service of the learning objectives -- in stand-alone instructional materials like those we are creating in this course...but it is a good challenge, and I hope all of you are considering as you move on in the course.

Have a great week! See you online!



This weekend, the girls built a couple of Estes rockets with their dad, and then met up with friends to fire them off. What a blast! :-)

**Figure 3.7** Weekly announcement.

**What's fun got to do with it?**

Interesting registry website for real-life superheroes -- World Superhero Registry

And, check out this "Make Your Own Superhero" opportunity -- <http://www.ugo.com/games/superhero-generator-heromachine-2-5>

And, some Hipster Superhero humor -- <http://www.collegehumor.com/video:1945611>

**What's fun got to do with it?**

Sir Ken Robinson has certainly delivered many great presentations, including for TED. I am sharing this one because I love the way the visuals unfold to support his narration. This graphic recording technique, often referred to as graphic facilitation, is growing in popularity...it is really quite compelling to watch (see YouTube for a lot of great examples). :-)

What do you think? Please feel free to use the Course Questions forum if you want to share your thoughts.




**What's fun got to do with it?**

A few things to share this time around.

**First...** This brief 2010 New York Times article presents another view of PowerPoint (and, really, what they are talking about are presentation slideshow tools in general), and the issues we have to be aware of. Specifically, the idea of a PowerPoint presentation giving the illusion of understanding and control. I find that angle -- what the underlying perceptual message is -- to be interesting.

**Second...** You may have already seen this, but because in this project we are considering the power of visuals to help us deliver our instructional messages, and because we are using Flickr for the Virtual Paper Bag, Part 1 activity...I wanted to share a great collaborative project that has been going on in Flickr for quite awhile now -- Tell a story in 5 frames. In this Flickr group (that anyone can join), folks are trying their hand at telling a story with just five visuals. Honestly, some of them leave me scratching my head, "Whaaaaat???" The one titled Full Circle worked for me, and there are a lot of other great ones in the archive. Anyway, it is a good exercise, trying to convey a coherent message with five images only and no narration. If you have any thoughts about this project, please share them in the Virtual Paper Bag, Part 1 forum.

**Finally...** The power of a concise message, and a strong visual!



**Figure 3.8** Examples of the “What’s Fun Got to Do With It?” part of the weekly agendas.

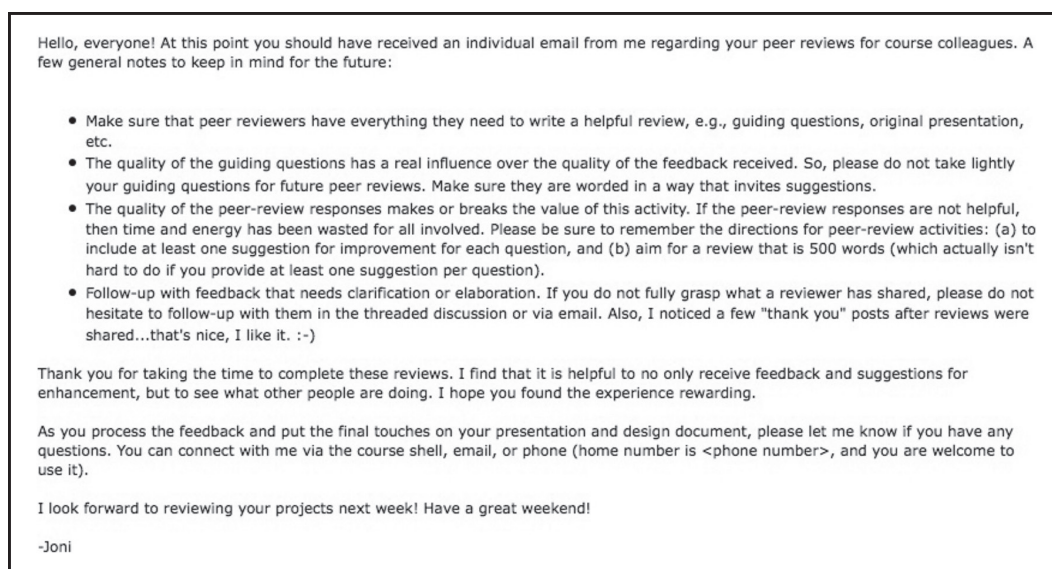
this information exists in the course’s master calendar, it helps to have the week’s activities laid out in a checklist format. We also use the agendas as another way to help students connect with us by adding personal touches. For instance, Joni includes inspirational artwork and music at the top of each agenda and a “What’s *fun* got to do with it?” section at the bottom, where she shares fun and interesting items that are related to the activities of the week.

## Personalized and Detailed Feedback

Assessment and evaluation (and the feedback it entails) are difficult aspects of teaching. Whenever possible we strive to provide personalized and detailed feedback to our students to not only improve the learning process but also to maintain our social presence and connection with each student throughout the semester. The following are a few ways that we do this:

### *One-on-One and Group E-mails*

As low tech as it might appear and while it goes against the school of thought that all communication should be kept within the LMS, we are strong believers in the power of one-on-one e-mails (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010c). While we use one-on-one and group e-mails in a variety of ways throughout the semester, we primarily use it as a way to provide personalized detailed feedback with our students (see Figure 3.9).



**Figure 3.9** Detailed feedback via a group e-mail.

### *Video Feedback*

Sometimes though, we find the need to provide feedback in a different—high tech—format. For instance, Patrick uses screen recording tools like Jing to provide video feedback to his students on certain assignments in which it is hard to provide feedback in text alone. While cumbersome in that you have to get all set up with your microphone and the software and so forth, students have commented on how valuable it is to hear both the positive and the negative feedback in the tone of our voices.

### **Reconnecting**

In our experience, it is not realistic to get to know people in an online course with one getting-to-know-you activity during the first week of class. Establishing social presence and building relationships and community requires multiple opportunities to share and connect. So, for reconnection purposes, we use activities like the following to reengage students every few weeks.

### *Superhero Powers*

For this activity, we ask students to respond to the following prompt: *What are your superhero powers? What is your superhero moniker? And, how do your superhero powers help you in life?* Using VoiceThread, students share a photo and record their response. Their creative responses are so much fun . . . and help us learn about the assets each student sees as her or his strengths (see Figure 3.10).



**Figure 3.10** Superhero Powers reconnecting activity.

### *Virtual Paper Bag*

For this activity, students pick five items that represent who they are and what is important to them. They pull together visual representations of their five items for a virtual paper bag that they share using a tool like Flickr. Once everyone has posted their virtual paper bag, students review each other's, and discuss the meaning of the items. Students learn about each other's passions, values, families, and the like; learn about differences and similarities; and learn each other's stories. This activity helps students feel more connected because of the personal content of the photos and emotion involved in telling their stories.

### *Soundtrack of Your Life*

Another reconnecting activity (and one of our personal favorites) involves having our students create a playlist of six songs: two that represent their past, two that represent their present, and two that represent their planned/hoped for future. Students share their playlists (using a digital jukebox like Grooveshark). They then ask questions about the songs to figure out why certain songs were selected. You can learn a lot about someone from the music they select (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010b).

## **Threaded Discussions**

Threaded discussions have been described as the bread and butter of online courses because they are often the primary tool used for student-instructor and student-student communication and interaction (Dunlap, 2009a). They are a great way for students to test their new knowledge, represent their conceptual understanding, and find their professional voices. However, we have found over the years—and the literature supports our experience—that threaded discussions in and of themselves are not inherently good or bad. Rather, their worth typically depends on how they are set up and used in any given course. Therefore, we tend to think a lot about how, when, and why we use threaded discussions to ensure they consistently benefit and support student learning and social presence. The following are a couple of ways we use threaded discussions for social presence purposes:

### *Non-Threatening Discussions*

We don't assume our students know how to effectively use online threaded discussions. For purposes of practicing online discussion (using the tools, protocols, etiquette, etc.), we provide our students with ample opportunities to discuss non-threatening, low-judgmental topics as well as non-course related topics (see Dunlap, 2009a, under Further Readings). For example: We have students visit the Picassohead website ([www.picassohead.com](http://www.picassohead.com)).

com) and create a self-portrait, then submit a link to a threaded discussion forum. Once posted, we encourage students to comment on each other's artwork. We also post entertaining photos (not directly related to the course content) and ask students to share their captions. Student captions for the following image have included:

- Wait please! I do have good news . . . I just saved tons of money on my car insurance by switching to Geico.
- I can take the giant brain, I can take the claws for hands, but why must you insist on wearing blue leather pants every time we go out?
- Listen, you're a nice guy and have a great personality, but my mother simply won't accept a son-in-law whose brain is on the outside.

Activities like this can help introduce humor into threaded discussions which can be difficult to do—but also can help with social presence (see Figure 3.11).

### *Discussion Protocols*

The same-old-same-old threaded discussion forum format (i.e., instructor posts a question, and each student is required to post an original response and comment on posts from two peers) can be detrimental to social presence and student engagement. Therefore, we use different discussion protocols to ensure the continuing benefit of online discussions while minimizing the potential boredom that comes from threaded-discussion misuse



**Figure 3.11** Image used for nonthreatening discussion.

and overuse, and maximizing social presence through student responsibility and engagement (see Dunlap, 2009b, under Further Readings). Discussion protocols also serve to balance student voices, ensuring that everyone in the class has the same opportunity to contribute to the discussion. Finally, discussion protocols provide students with specific roles and directions for how to engage in a productive discussion. An example of a discussion protocol we use is *The Final Post*. Adapted for online discussion from McDonald et al.'s (2003) *The Final Word* protocol, the steps are:

1. Working in a small group of 4–5 students, each student identifies one of the most significant ideas from the reading, illustrated by a quote or excerpt. (Each student should have a backup quote/excerpt in case another student has already posted the same quote/excerpt.)
2. Each student starts a new thread by posting the quote/excerpt from the text that particularly struck her or him. The student points out where the quote is in the text. In approximately 250 words, the student describes why that quote/excerpt struck her or him. (Specify a deadline for the original posts.)
3. Each student responds to that quote/excerpt and what the original student wrote, using approximately 150 words. The purpose of the response is to expand on the original student's thinking about the topic, to provide a different perspective on the topic, to clarify thinking about the topic, and to question the original student's assumptions about the topic. (Specify a deadline for these posts.)
4. After each student in the group has responded to the original post, the first student has the “final word.” In approximately 150 words, the original student responds to what has been shared by the rest of the group, offering what she or he is now thinking about the topic, and her or his reaction to what the other students have posted. (Specify a deadline for the “final word” post.)
5. This process continues until everyone has had the opportunity to have the “final word.” This means that 4–5 discussions are happening simultaneously within a particular timeframe (e.g., 1 week), or that they are happening one at a time (each discussion over 1–2 days).

## Small Groups

Through small-group work and collaboration, students experience and develop an appreciation for multiple perspectives; refine their knowledge through argumentation, structured controversy, and the sharing of ideas and perspectives; learn to use colleagues as resources; and are more willing

to take on the risk required to tackle complex, ill-structured problems (Dunlap & Grabinger, 2003). Because of the potential value of small-group work and collaboration on student learning and engagement, and because it is a clear way of involving students in student–student interactions that enhance social presence, we use various small-group and collaboration strategies and activities in our online courses (see Dunlap, 2009c, under Further Readings). Below we describe a few of our activities.

### *Peer Review*

A good way to establish and maintain social presence among students in an online course is through peer review activities. Peer review, while a very authentic activity, is one we find many students struggle with. Therefore, we use a “no penalty” approach to peer reviews:

The peer review teams are posted in the forum where you will post your drafts of this project. In terms of process, as a starting place, I suggest that you review the project description and assessment tool (not that you already aren’t quite familiar) as a reminder of what everyone is aiming for. Please provide your peers with honest constructive feedback on the design of their instructional presentations, answering the five questions they provided to guide your review; **you must provide at least one suggestion for improvement for each question.** Your job as a peer reviewer is to help your peers create the best possible product, so you do them no service if you are not honest and open with your feedback. Be constructive and professional. Please provide 500 words of feedback in response to the five questions each peer asks you to consider. Thank you! [Final note: If when you sit down to do the peer reviews you find that one of your peers has not posted a draft by the due date, then you are not held responsible. The peer who did not post by the due date will lose out on valuable feedback (and points), and you will receive credit for the review regardless.]

### *“No Jeopardy” Group Work*

While many faculty often avoid using group work online to avoid any potential headaches (Wray, Lowenthal, Bates, & Stevens, 2008), we are strong believers in the importance of collaborating with others as well as learning how to effectively work with a group online—not to mention the inherent social presence opportunities when working closely with one’s peers. We use “no jeopardy” approaches to collaborative work that allow for a submitted product to be complete without a missing member’s contribution. Examples include: each student completes an allocated task that contributes to the final team product and gets the marks for that task; each student writes and submits an individual report based on the team’s work on the task/project; each student takes an exam, with exam questions that specifically target the team project, and can only be answered by students who

have been thoroughly involved in the project; each student's contribution is assessed via individually-produced evidence such as status reports, journals, time logs, and direct observation; each student produces an individual paper based on the team project.

### *Document Co-Creation*

Finally, we often use Google Docs and Spreadsheets in our online courses to support students' document co-creation activities and enhance social presence. One example of this use is students' co-creation of a *Top-100 List of Design Guidelines* (also called the *What We Know List*), used to support their instructional design work (see Figure 3.12). Developed in Google Docs over the course of the semester, students contribute new design guidelines with supporting citations based on the coursework and readings. By the end of the semester, students walk away with a robust set of design guidelines summarizing the readings that can be used as they continue their design work outside of the course. Google Docs makes it possible for our online students to collectively develop a unique document, each sharing expertise, reviewing each others' contributions for appropriate modifications and redundancy reductions, summarizing and synthesizing what they have learned from the course readings, and reflecting on the value of their individual contributions and the value of the collection of guidelines in general.

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**INTE 6710 ~ Creative Designs for Instructional Materials (Spring 2011)**  
**What We Know List of Design Recommendations**

Recommended format for contributions --  
 Know your audience: Consider the different learning styles and personalities of your audience, what works for you may not work for others. Try to appeal to all learners' styles (Abela, 2008, p. 19-27). [Carol Parenteau 10-17-2010]

Define clear objectives: Think about what kind of change (attitudinal, thinking; and behavioral, doing) you want to elicit in the learner (Abela, 2008, p. 29-34). [Carol Parenteau 10-17-2010]

**Planning and Design Considerations:**

Prioritize: Determine the critical goals and make these the core message that you emphasize from the beginning of your presentation (Heath & Heath, 2008, p. 34-40). [Deb Harding 1-24-2011]

Using your audience's schema will help them connect to new concepts quickly. (Heath & Heath, 2008, p.54) [Alyson Reynolds 1-24-11]

"We must explain our ideas in terms of human actions and sensory information. Naturally sticky ideas are full of concrete images... because our brains are wired to remember concrete data" (Heath & Heath, 2008, p. 17) [Muge Sen-Gucuk 1-25-2011]

"The messages that do grab your attention are connected to memory, interest, and awareness (Medina, 2008, p. 75). [Muge Sen-Gucuk 1-25-2011]

Tie new concepts to ones your audience already knows by using "schemas". It will help increase "both comprehension and memory" (Heath & Heath, 2008, p. 34-40). [Deb Harding 1-24-2011]

**Figure 3.12** Document cocreation activity.

## Free-Flowing, Organic Interactions

Last but not least, one of our most recent attempts at establishing and maintaining social presence in our courses involves social networking tools—specifically, Twitter. We began using Twitter (and inviting our students to follow us) because we wanted to have an informal, playful way for our online students to connect with us and each other throughout the day.

On our quest for the social presence grail—as effective as we thought many of the strategies we have previously discussed were—we felt confined within the structure of the LMS. This was exacerbated by the fact that we have been missing the informal, playful banter and chit-chat that is possible when everyone is physically located in the same geographic space. This banter helps students connect with us, and experience our personalities. And, it helps them connect with each other in a more emotional way. Twitter seemed to have potential to further support our social-presence efforts.

### *Twitter*

We invite our students to follow us on Twitter and to follow each other. In addition, we provide a list of people outside of the course who tweet about course-relevant topics to follow as well as a number of publications and professional organizations.

Our decision to use Twitter to enhance social presence in our online courses was reinforced by students' experiences (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009a, 2009b) as well as the plain fact that our communications via Twitter seemed much more natural than logging into our LMS, getting into the course shell, then getting into a discussion forum and posting a message . . . and then waiting for someone to respond later (after she or he has already moved on to other work, thoughts, issues). But unlike many of the other strategies, we found Twitter to be an extremely time consuming strategy so we were left wondering about its effectiveness.

## Our Quest Led Us to Dig Deeper

As is clear from the selection of strategies described above, we exert a lot of time and energy on establishing and maintaining social presence in support of student learning in our online courses, using a variety of both low-technology and high-technology strategies. Our sense was always that for the most part it was time well spent—we knew that we were benefiting from our efforts and it seemed that students were as well. For us, we really felt like we were getting to know our students better, and had a closer, more personal and supportive relationship with individual students as opposed to the group (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2010c, for more on our efforts

to build relationships with individual students in online courses). Even though we believed our efforts were effective, we couldn't help but wonder if maybe there was a social-presence formula for selecting the right strategies for an online course. We were doing so many things to support social presence, maybe we were doing too much? Maybe we didn't have to do all that we were doing (e.g., maybe all the effort we were putting into using Twitter wasn't worth it)? Maybe there was an ideal combination of strategies for achieving the right level of social presence in an online course, and that we were over the threshold and doing more than we needed to? Even though we worked hard to tie the strategies to learning objectives and relevant course content and activities, maybe we were turning students off with all of this social-presence stuff? These were the questions we kept asking ourselves, even though—through informal data collection—students seemed to approve of and value our efforts. Because of these questions, we decided to better track students' feedback, and conduct a more formal study on the perceived effectiveness of the various social-presence strategies we were using in our online courses.

Our goal here is not to report all of the findings of our formal inquiry (see Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2011, for a report of our formal inquiry). However, we hope that presenting a few key findings from our inquiry will help you better understand our quest for the social presence grail. We first began collecting comments from students (e.g., via midterm and end-of-term surveys) about our use of specific strategies to enhance social presence. Our students' comments were consistently positive about many of the strategies described earlier in this chapter. The following are a few examples:

- In general, the discussions helped me feel connected to my course colleagues. The discussions also helped me feel connected to you (Joni). In addition, the feedback I received on my projects helped quite a bit as well.
- The structured discussions that we had always help me, sometimes I may miss a point that someone else may see, so I like that and the various points other students make. I also like the peer review on the projects, I think that helped me feel connected. I think you did a great job with interacting with the discussions and any email I sent you answered quickly, so I felt connected.
- The part of the course that made me feel connected to the other students was the peer reviews. The aspect of the course that helped me feel connected to the instructor was the feedback I received from the instructor and the follow-up email exchanges.
- I really liked being an integral part of reviewing. I felt (especially in certain assignment) that I really got some insight into how the other

students interpreted the assignments and put their own life (either work or other parts of their life) into the assignment.

- I really LOVE twittering with everyone. It really made me feel like we knew each other more and were actually in class together.
- The introductory music activity was absolutely awesome to help in getting to know people. Many of us have worked together the past few semesters, but this helped shed a lot of light of a more personal nature about their lives. I would also say reading and reviewing others assignments and postings also helped indirectly connect. . . .
- The Soundtrack of Your Life: It was a creative way to introduce ourselves to each other that communicated something about ourselves instead of using words. I thought the Google Doc activities were an excellent way to express ourselves freely for others to read freely about our expressions.
- In terms of relating to Joni, I felt your contributions to discussions and commentary were obviously the biggest way to get your thoughts on our work. I would periodically check your blogs to review your thoughts, and the artwork you chose to illustrate each week did give some ideas as to where you are coming from or whom you are.

After analyzing comments like these, we created and administered a survey to systematically investigate students' perceptions of our social-presence efforts. Part of the survey specifically asked students to rate the degree to which different instructional technologies and strategies helped them to connect with her or his instructor. We found that one-on-one e-mails as well as instructor bios were the two highest ranked activities across the courses, followed closely by individualized, detailed feedback; digital storytelling; and the 5-minute phone call. On the other hand, Twitter surprisingly was ranked the lowest.

We also asked students to rate the degree to which different instructional technologies and strategies helped them connect with their fellow students. Digital storytelling and one-on-one e-mails were ranked the highest, followed closely by peer reviews, the virtual paper bag activity, and the soundtrack of your life activity. Again, Twitter was ranked the lowest.

Now we could go on about some of the students' neutral and negative reactions to Twitter but in ways that would be missing our point and beyond the scope of this chapter. What's interesting about this to us is that while we were receiving overall good feedback about Twitter (see Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009a), when compared to all the other things we were doing, it couldn't compare. This doesn't mean it wasn't effective because overall only a handful of students explicitly stated it wasn't, but it does cause us to question the return-on-investment achieved given the level of time and effort it takes to use a tool like Twitter for social presence purposes.

Finally, we interviewed a small group of students who had high and low overall social presence scores (based on their answers on the survey) in an effort to dig deeper. Three important themes emerged from the interviews regarding what instructors should do to enhance social presence in support of student learning:

- Provide personal, individualized feedback
- Provide opportunities for students to build relationships through (positive) collaborative work and sharing
- Be accessible

Our students reported that it wasn't that our other strategies weren't of value, but that these specific strategies had the "biggest bang for the buck." Finally, all of our students (both those who had a high and those with a low social presence score) reported that they believed social presence was a critical aspect of the online course experience, contributing to their learning, achievement of course-specific learning objectives, and overall professional preparation.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR DISTANCE EDUCATION**

So where does this leave us on our quest for the social presence grail? Well, our own experiences coupled with our data collection suggest that many if not all of our social presence strategies are effective. Further, our more formal analysis leads us to wonder if low-technology solutions (e.g., personalized, detailed written feedback; one-on-one e-mails; phone conversations) are more impactful than high-technology solutions (e.g., Twitter) in the long run.

When trying to balance workload, which online faculty often have to do (see Dunlap, 2005), it may be more important to attend to these "low-tech" activities rather than others to enhance social presence in online courses. Although there seems to be some clear winners and losers in terms of enhancing social presence, our inquiry suggests that in any group there is a range of preferences, with one strategy not fulfilling the needs of all students. We also surmise that students' perception of social presence isn't enhanced by just one instructional strategy or tool, but instead by a carefully crafted set of instructional strategies and tools that reinforce social presence as a valued part of the teaching-learning experience.

We hope our description of the social-presence strategies we use and the results of our inquiry into how students perceive the effectiveness of social-presence strategies will inform your selection of instructional strategies and tools for enhancing social presence in online courses, and provide insight into why certain strategies and tools are more effective than others.

## CONCLUSION

Our personal quest is ongoing—to improve our own online teaching and our students’ learning experiences by better understanding where to invest time and energy to get the biggest social-presence bang for the buck. So far our experience coupled with our research suggest that on-going low-tech strategies like one-on-one e-mails and detailed feedback might be more effective than one-time high-tech strategies. We are not about to abandon all of our high-tech strategies nor are we going to ignore future technologies that might help establish and maintain social presence in support of student learning in online courses, but at the same time we think it is important to recognize the power of low-tech strategies and the various needs of learners. The bottom line is that we are obsessed with social presence (whether that be natural ways people adapt to a communication medium or behaviors that result from specific teaching presence strategies) in the courses we teach, and we hope you will become obsessed as well and join us on the journey for the social-presence grail.

## QUESTIONS FOR ANALYSIS/DISCUSSION

1. Considering your own experience as an online student or online instructor, how important do you think social presence is in online courses? Why?
2. Given the data results, why do you think students seem to prefer specific social-presence strategies over others? Why do you think students indicate preferring one-on-one e-mails over all other strategies? Why do you think some students indicate disliking Twitter as a social-presence strategy?
3. Given the experience described in this case study, how would you suggest online instructors address social presence needs in their courses? What specific strategies would you recommend they incorporate first, to get the biggest bang for their buck? Why those specific strategies?
4. After selecting specific social-presence strategies to incorporate into your online course, how would you specifically implement and go about assessing the effectiveness of those strategies? Describe your inquiry plan-of-action.
5. How would you approach investigating the role of social presence as it relates to student engagement in online courses?

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