



# The Impact of social presence during COVID-19 and the implications for learning design

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Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused numerous economic, health and wellbeing issues and significantly disrupted the education sector. In response to the pandemic, universities scrambled to transition from face-to-face teaching to fully online teaching practices. With many institutions being unprepared for such a transition (Jung et al., 2021; Metcalfe, 2021), educators and students faced a variety of challenges, barriers, and opportunities (Garnett, 2021). Critically, one of the opportunities provided by the pandemic was for educators to re-evaluate and re-envision learning and teaching practices (Singh et al., 2022).

One area ripe for re-evaluation is the nature of teacher-student relationships. While the teaching profession has long been associated with emotions and connection (Tackie, 2022), the shared experience of the pandemic saw students and their teachers finding themselves in the same virtual lifeboat with the pandemic becoming a universal factor for students and educators, making the processes of learning and teaching even more challenging (Mitchell et al, 2021). Additionally, educators - often called on to act as counsellors and therapists (Tackie, 2022) - found themselves during the pandemic having to manage both their own and their students' well-being.

This Pecha Kucha provides preliminary results and associated reflections of a study undertaken at the University of New England (UNE) while learning, teaching and assessment were being transitioned to fully online delivery. Despite, having a large proportion of classes being delivered online prior to the pandemic, challenges were still faced by UNE staff as they managed both their own and their students' well-being. Here, technology played a critical role in brokering the shared experiences between students and staff with evidence suggesting that social presence was a critical factor in fostering a greater sense of connection amongst members of the university learning community.

In learning design, the importance of connections, interactions, and the socio-emotional aspects of learning (i.e., elements that characterize social presence) are often overlooked and underrated (Ensmann et al., 2021). Consequently, the focus tends to fall on subject matter content coverage (i.e., teaching presence and cognitive presence) at the expense of interpersonal relations (i.e., social presence) (Patel, 2021). Our results suggest a re-evaluation of the importance of interpersonal relationships fostered through social presence is necessary to help ensure positive and well-balanced online learning experiences. At UNE, the interpersonal relationships that emerged during the pandemic - although largely unplanned and unintended - were nevertheless effective in supporting and maintaining student and staff well-being. Due to the critical role interpersonal relationships were shown to play, they should not be left to chance. Accordingly, the building of interpersonal relationships and the fostering of social presence should be intentional outcomes of every learning design.

Keywords: social presence, learning design, interpersonal relationships.

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