

## ***Rider University Online E-coaching Tips***

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### **Teaching Online Tip #2: The importance of Presence: Social, Teaching and Cognitive**

For effective and satisfying online learning experiences the single most important faculty action is to **Be Present at the Course Site**. This is the first and most important of the best practices for teaching online. Learners value contact with the faculty because for them, the faculty member represents the institution that they have usually selected with great care!

Research on the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison, Anderson, Archer 2000) suggests that your presence and engagement with your learners is the most significant variable in teaching and learning effectiveness and satisfaction! What is presence? The simplest description is “being there.”

The Community of Inquiry research provides guidance on the actions and behaviors that are implicit in that simple and straightforward practice. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer proposed three dimensions of presence: social, teaching and cognitive. This tip discusses these three types of presence and then provides tools and behaviors that support these three types of presence.

Note: While *cognitive* presence is the presence that most directly addresses the desired learning outcomes of higher education learning experiences, it is usually wise to launch courses with an emphasis on social presence to build a feeling of trust and community.

#### **Social Presence**

One of the best ways for launching an online course well is to plan for social presence. Social presence is achieved by faculty and students “projecting their personal characteristics into the discussion so they become ‘real people.’” (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Sharing personal characteristics supports the trust-building process at the social level, laying the groundwork for cognitive trust needed for open and substantive content discussions. Initial getting acquainted postings and accompanying observations about common or similar experiences such as families, backgrounds, work experiences, pets, and favorite drinks, food, and music builds the connections for community. Getting to know one another socially through shared expression of feelings and perspectives helps learners move quickly to cognitive community and bonding. Something as simple as a sharing a picture of your favorite place (My favorite place in the whole world is St. George Island on the Gulf of Mexico.) or whether you stop at Starbucks every morning builds connections to you and your students.



St. George Island – Pink sunrise Feb 2009

Faculty often forget to share their personal “stories” in addition to their professional background, work experiences, and past and current research. Learners want to get to know their instructors as people in addition to their roles as mentors and content experts. Books are disembodied experts; learners enjoy and value getting to know faculty who are people with interesting stories, experiences, and challenging ideas.

### **Possible Tools for Achieving Social Presence**

- Getting acquainted postings and responses the first week or pre-week of a term
- A special discussion thread or forum for informal exchanges — that may have started with the getting acquainted posts
- Announcements – personalized with voice — that map current experiences with content

### **Possible Behaviors for Achieving Social Presence**

- Sharing photos and personal and career goals
- A willingness to think aloud and probe into oneself about why one thinks what one thinks
- Showing respect and care for others and making connections
- Integrating the Rider University community values to build a learning community based on respect for human knowledge and spirit

For a community of learners to develop, you also want to encourage your learners to become real to each other. A strong social presence builds a climate of trust and environment of comfort and safe risk-taking. This foundation makes the learners ready for your teaching presence and cognitive presence.

### **Teaching Presence**

What is a good definition of teaching presence? Simply put, teaching presence is the work of teaching that is done before and during the course term. Teaching presence in an online course consists of two major categories of teaching direction. It includes:

1. All the course materials that are prepared before the course begins, such as the syllabus, concept introductions, choices of readings and discussions, assignments, assessment plans, and bibliography of required and recommended resources
2. All the monitoring, mentoring, questioning and shaping of the growing knowledge of particular learners in a course.

In summary, teaching presence is manifested in the course materials and design. And teaching presence is manifested in everything the faculty member does to guide, support and shape the learners' experiences. Behaviors that support effective teaching presence includes setting clear expectations and providing supportive guidance, always with the aim of achieving established course goals.

The first category of teaching presence — the set of materials developed in advance of the course term — is developed based on assumptions of what your expected students *probably* know and understand; the second category of teaching direction is *customized* to the particular set of students, and their particular zones of proximal development.

The work by Garrison and others on the Community of Inquiry model offer this formal definition of teaching presence: Teaching presence is the “design, facilitation, and

direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes.” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001).

### **Possible Tools for Achieving Teaching Presence**

- Announcement tools or a faculty blog to ensure students are aware of course flow, expectations and any changes
- Feedback and commenting tools in discussion forums, blogs or wikis to acknowledge, guide and challenge student’s thinking growth
- Email, phone, IM or other tools for private one-on-one correspondence and gentle or firm guidance as might be needed

### **Possible Behaviors for Achieving Teaching Presence**

- Sets clear expectations for students; is specific about how learners are to be “present” such as three times a week
- Is visibly present in the course site every day if possible; is substantively present at least four times a week
- Coaches and guides learners to keep pace and think deeply about what they know and why they know it
- Encourages questions regarding activities, assignments, etc.
- Restates assignments, pacing on assignments
- Helps students not to be surprised by course requirements and events

### **Cognitive presence**

What is Cognitive presence? Cognitive presence can be defined as the “extent to which the professor and the students are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained discourse (discussion) in a community of inquiry.” (Garrison, Anderson, Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Another way of defining cognitive presence is akin to social presence, but rather than connecting via personal characteristics, you want your learners to connect via their ideas, their thoughts and beliefs and cultural influences. Your mind becomes “real” to your learners and you get to know the inside workings and knowledge structure of your learner’s minds.

One effective way of launching cognitive presence is to ask your learners to identify their learning goal(s) for the course. This assists the broadening of social connections to embrace the course content, desired learning outcomes and personal learning goals. A question about goals helps an instructor gain insights into the state of the learners' knowledge, confidence and experience with the content. For Vygotsky fans, it is a way of gaining insight into learner's individual zones of proximal development. Cognitive presence is cultivated by students expressing their understanding of ideas and by connecting ideas and noting relationships. Getting a sense of what students know and how they know it lays the foundation for customizing the learning experiences for these particular learners.

Cognitive presence requires a focus on meaning and not on covering content, so occasionally this may mean that depth and problem solving is favored over simple concept awareness. Tending to cognitive presence requires time, listening, reflecting and careful responding to encourage sustained conversation.

This type of presence requires attention and effort and commitment from both the faculty and the learners. What is achieved with cognitive presence is an understanding on both the intellectual and affective level that the learning activities involve and tap into real meaning structures.

#### **Sample Strategies for Achieving Cognitive Presence (Some overlap with Teaching Presence)**

- Using a getting acquainted cognitively forum for learners to share personal learning and career goals related to the course and to launch learning community
- Using feedback and commenting tools in discussion forums, blogs or wikis to acknowledge, guide and challenge student's thinking growth
- Using discussion week summary wraps to focus on core concepts and learning outcomes

#### **Sample Behaviors for Achieving Cognitive Presence (Some overlap with Teaching Presence)**

- Coaching and guiding learners to keep pace and think deeply about what they know and why they know it

- Examining student responses and using probing, challenging questions that , encourage thought and analysis of ideas and content
- Faculty and students strive to ensure that project outcomes are long-lasting and meaningful.
- Learners participate thoughtfully in the discussions, responding to content and thoughts and questions from other learners so that a “sustained communication occurs.

## Conclusion

I hope you have enjoyed thinking about these three kinds of presence in your course. Another view of these three presences, *A Garden of Three Presences — Social Presence, Teaching Presence and Cognitive Presence* — is online at <http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip51.html>. Call or write with ideas, questions, or comments.

## References

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*Note: These Online Teaching tips are for faculty who are teaching online in Rider University's College of Continuing Studies [CCS]. These tips are part of an ecoaching service from Judith V. Boettcher at [ecoach@designingforlearning.org](mailto:ecoach@designingforlearning.org). More tips are at <http://www.designingforlearning.info/>. Contact Judith with questions, requests to review your courses, and any other requests focused on providing the best teaching and learning experiences possible for Rider faculty and students.*