CHAPTER 8

I am still here: Lessons learned from incorporating social presence in remote teaching

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Abstract

This chapter shares the reflections of a group of teachers who taught on an enrichment programme for secondary school learners run by a research-intensive higher education institution in South Africa. The aim of the programme is to increase eligibility and access to higher education, through providing meaningful educational inputs to help prepare learners for the university environment (SETMU 2020: 5). The continuation of lockdown learning in 2021 affected the mode of delivery of the enrichment programme, resulting in the programme being presented remotely, using both synchronous and asynchronous inputs. Remote teaching and learning have stripped away many aspects, such

as ease of connection, central to 'brick-and-mortar' teaching that helped both learners and teachers successfully complete their respective activities pre-Covid-19. This has resulted in a sense of disconnection between teachers and learners, as well as among learners. To remedy these feelings of disconnection, the teachers incorporated elements of the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 1999) in their remote teaching practices. This framework highlights the importance of three presences in developing successful online classes, namely social, cognitive, and teaching presences. This reflection focusses on how creating a stronger social presence can enable the development of dynamic and strong remote learning environments (Darby and Lang 2019: 112), which provide students with the opportunity to construct and confirm meaning. Based on a qualitative textual analysis of personal reflections written by the teachers, three important aspects were identified to facilitate learner interaction: (1) Familiarity (creating spaces where learners feel seen and heard); (2) Being present ('showing up' in the asynchronous space as well as the synchronous); and (3) Online identity (teachers incorporating their unique personalities into the online sessions). Thus, going forward it illustrates the importance of explicitly creating a social presence in remote classes to improve learning.

Keywords: online learning, Community of Inquiry, social presence, teacher reflections

The background

The gap between the schooling system and higher education has been well documented (Van Wyk and Yeld 2013; Van Wyk 2017; Kirby and Dempster 2018). As one avenue to address this gap, the Targeting Talent

Programme (TTP) – an enrichment programme for grade 10 - 12 learners at a research-intensive university in South Africa was established in 2007. The aim of this pre-university programme is to provide equitable and equal access to learners from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, and it focusses on helping learners attain the social, psychological, and academic skills necessary for admission to South African higher education institutions (SETMU 2020). To achieve these goals, the TTP has a residential component where learners stay at the university for two weeks in June/July. During this period, the grade 10 group is exposed to 15 courses, while the grade 11 learners are exposed to 14 courses and the grade 12 group to 10 courses. These courses are grouped into three broad clusters: Science and Engineering (Mathematics, Computer Science, Forensic Science, Engineering), Social and Liberal Sciences (Language, Philosophy, Critical Diversity, Social Research) and physical activity courses (dance, music, yoga).

In March 2020, the pandemic necessitated a move to online learning, as the South African President called on higher education institutions to continue their teaching in online spaces (DHET 2020), affecting the enrichment programme. As with the rest of the country, the TTP had to address the digital divide of the learners as their socio-economic circumstances (van Deursen and van Dijk 2019) played a crucial role in their ability to access to devices and data. The programme addressed this issue by sending tablets and data to each learner; subsequently the material was uploaded onto the Learning Management System (LMS), and the 2020 delivery was completed over an extended period. The learners had access to asynchronous lesson material during the week, which included material to watch and read as well as activities that learners needed to complete individually. Thereafter, each group

would have a 30-minute synchronous contact session with their teacher on either Big Blue Button (BBB) or Microsoft Teams.

The opportunity

One of the language teachers involved in the 2020 online delivery kept a reflective journal of her experiences and observations of the process. Rereading her reflections, she found that in the rush to get everything online, there was a sense of disconnection between the teachers and their learners, as well as among learners in the asynchronous component of the course, while the synchronous spaces were too teacher-centered. Teaching and learning is inherently a social activity (Bibeau 2001). Furthermore, the temporal and spatial isolation of remote learning, in the case of the 2020 delivery, led to a lack of connection for both learners and teachers (Sung and Mayer 2012: 1738). Thus, for the 2021 online delivery it was necessary to rethink, rework, and reimagine both the asynchronous and synchronous modes to counteract isolation in the online learning environment, and build a stronger learning community. This also created an opportunity for us as the 2021 group of Language teachers to engage in critical reflection with the purpose of considering the impact of strategies used here for our own professional learning.

To create a space for successful learning, we drew on the Community of Inquiry framework (CoI) (Garrison *et al.* 1999) which highlights the importance of three different types of presences to create an educational experience; namely cognitive, social, and teaching presence (see Figure 1). Garrison *et al.* (1999: 92) points out that online learning, or asynchronous computer-mediated communication, has the potential to create collaborative learning environments where effective teaching can take place. Additionally, this asynchronous computer-mediated

environment, a 'digital classroom' in the current age of the Covid-19 pandemic, is potentially an effective way to address issues of isolation and create an engaging platform in which critical thinking can take root.

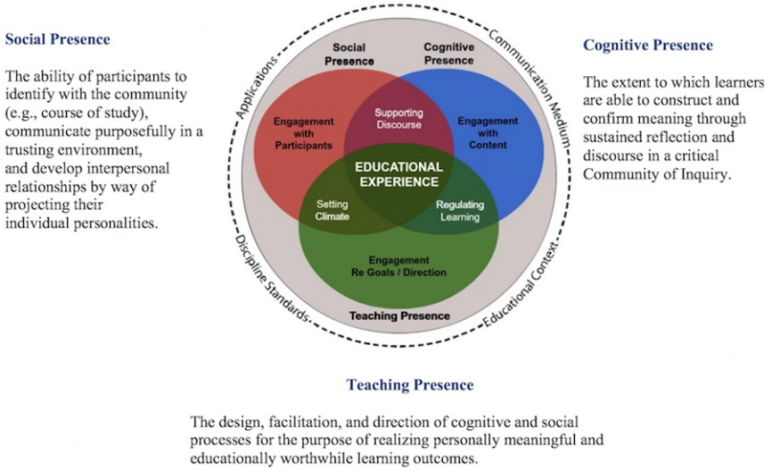

Figure 1: Elements of an educational experience (Cleveland-Innes, Gauvreau, Richardson, Mishra and Ostashewski 2019)

To create this online platform, it is necessary to draw on all three presences. According to this framework, cognitive presence refers to "the extent to which [learners] are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (Garrison *et al.* 1999: 89). To construct meaning, learners need to engage with and reflect on the content, drawing connections between different aspects of the content and connect ideas with their own lived experiences, thus engaging with new ideas and ways of thinking. The social presence consists of "the ability [of learners] to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop

interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison 2009: 352). This can be achieved through creating a platform for learners to express themselves openly. Lastly, teaching presence works together with the other two presences to realise the educational outcomes; both the design and facilitation of content falls into this presence (Garrison *et al.* 1999). Even though all three presences are important to create a meaningful educational experience, social presence plays a crucial role in transforming an online learning space from an information repository to a collaborative community (Eyler 2018; Darby and Lang 2019). Social presence can also be seen as the 'mediating variable' that links teaching and cognitive presence (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes and Fung 2010) and is therefore just as important as the other presences. Since social presence can easily be neglected in online spaces, as was the experience in the 2020 TTP delivery, we chose to reflect specifically on this aspect for 2021.

The methodology

To investigate the success of our attempts to address the detachment often experienced through virtual learning spaces, we wrote individual reflections after facilitating our online TTP contact sessions. Three of us taught grade 10 learners, one taught the grade 11 and the remaining teachers taught grade 12. We were responsible for two groups of learners ranging between 25 to 30 learners per group. Our reflections were based on the incorporation of the CoI framework as proposed by Garrison *et al.* (1999: 87), with a specific focus on the social presence created during the four 30-minute synchronous sessions, and in the creation of the asynchronous material and activities. These reflections were combined as a collaborative autoethnographic inquiry, and a qualitative thematic analysis of the texts was conducted.

Autoethnographic inquiry was utilised since this research method can benefit education if its pragmatic value is evident (Starr 2010: 02). Moreover, through this qualitative research method, data about us as teachers, as well as our perspectives and circumstances, are used to understand the 'connectivity between' us and 'others' (Ngunjiri, Hernandez, and Chang 2010: 01). Similarly, qualitative approaches, such as thematic analysis, aim to recognise and comprehend certain singularities evident in the perceptions of the sample group (Vaismoradi, Turunen, and Bondas 2013: 398). Thus, the conducting of such research can produce profound and valuable results (Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules 2017: 01) which resonates with the objectives of this study.

During the thematic analysis, the main steps proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) were followed. This was done in order to identify, analyse "and report patterns (themes) within data" (Braun and Clarke 2006: 79). The close reading of our own reflections enabled us to familiarise ourselves with the data, and various initial codes were used in the combined reflections. The ensuing analysis of these text chunks facilitated the identification of two main themes relevant to the scope of the study: asynchronous participation and synchronous participation. After cataloguing these themes, each theme was subdivided into 'How the teacher encouraged social presence' and 'How the learners responded.' Thereafter, the sections of the reflective texts that related to the subthemes were tabulated. Finally, a qualitative analysis of the tabulated themes enabled us to extract observations related to teacher social presence and learner participation, and reciprocation of social presence. This led to the identification of three overall areas of focus discussed in the next section, which we could

then link to aspects of professional learning to take forward in our praxis.

The findings

Based on the thematic analysis of our reflections, it became clear that the more the effort from our side to create social presence, both asynchronously and synchronously, the more the learners responded in kind. Overall, we experienced an overwhelmingly positive response and a high rate of participation from large parts of the learner cohort. Throughout the reflections and analysis, three themes or focus areas kept coming to the forefront. We identified these as our most important aspects to keep in mind to facilitate social presence in online learning.

Firstly, there must be some form of familiarity between teachers and learners, even more so during projects with a short lifespan such as the enrichment period of the TTP. As Adams, Roch and Ayman (2005) indicate, it is easier for members of a group to work together and communicate if they know each other, which links to the first theme we identified (familiarity). Secondly, online presence can and should manifest in different ways in order to establish a learning environment that is conducive to learners' academic and personal growth. Since "teaching is often characterized as a humanistic profession" (Sequeira and Dacey 2020: 7), we must find new ways of humanising ourselves online. Also connecting to the aforementioned is the last element, namely, online identity. In revealing certain aspects of our identities to our learners, we can establish "care and care-based practices as the focus, regardless of the learning format" (Sequeira and Dacey 2020).

1 – Familiarity

In each of our narratives, we touched on the importance of ensuring that there is a platform for our learners to interact with us and with

each other, to create a space where learners feel seen and heard. Some of the activities that learners needed to complete were to share a childhood memory linked to reading/storytelling, reflecting on whether their lives are similar to/different from the characters in the texts/films they were introduced to, and constructing personal writing metaphors. The teachers started these conversations in the asynchronous space through their own answers, showing their learners a bit more of who they are, and the learners responded in kind. The teachers would then respond to each comment, with anything from an acknowledging emoji to encouragement to answering a question posed. One teacher commented that these informal forums:

> *[...] helped to create a sense of community and connection between the learners because they could see each other's responses and ideas, but also between the teachers and the learners. Since the teachers were present in the asynchronous space, they [the learners] could see that they were not left alone in those spaces. (Teacher 3)*

Furthermore, through these postings the teachers had the opportunity to get to know the learners:

> *By reading their posts, I gained a sense of their person-hood, and since our course asked them to engage with their memories and encouraged them to share their opinions on social matters and history, I could really develop a notion of who they were and how they saw the world. (Teacher 5)*

In the synchronous space, students rarely unmuted themselves to answer questions verbally; however, teachers rose to the challenge by making use of various functions (annotation tools, polls, and the chat box). The chat box, especially, was constantly abuzz with comments and

questions from the learners. Teachers encouraged and engaged with this in various ways: replying verbally to ideas, awarding each idea with an emoji, and acknowledging each contribution.

> *I [...] constantly narrated comments from the chat box, working these comments into my explanations to make everyone feel like a part of the class. I also made a point of saying everyone's name when I read their comments. (Teacher 1)*

This was done to make the synchronous sessions as interactive as possible, creating a space that reflected a strong social presence while also providing cognitive and teaching presence. The online classrooms also allowed learners the opportunity to connect, however briefly, with other learners who shared similar pandemic schooling experiences, reminding them that they were not alone in their experiences and providing a sense of familiarity. Perhaps one of the strongest indications of the familiarity created by the teachers' social presence in the synchronous classes were the rare but present moments when learners spontaneously interacted with each other and with the teachers in ways not directly related to the lessons. Two of the teachers mentioned in their reflections that at the end of a class, they were asked for book recommendations from the learners, with one learner even recommending her favourite author to the teacher. Learners would also get swept up in the moment during some of the activities; one teacher did a 'mark your location on a map of South Africa' activity as an icebreaker, and some of the learners eventually started joking around by scrawling over large areas or making marks in unlikely locations outside the country. In another activity, a teacher used her non-dominant hand to draw a childhood memory on screen:

> *Chaos ensued in the chatbox (in a good way) - there were emoji's flying around and guessing games as to what I was trying to draw - and a few students even switched on their mics to comment on my work. It was all great fun, and there was a lot of connection happening - students commenting on each other's comments - agreeing or disagreeing with guesses as to what I was up to. (Teacher 3)*

The concept of establishing familiarity through interaction was also captured in Teacher 5's interactions with learners during a poetry session:

> *A few felt confident enough to use the microphone and speak 'in front' of the class or read their poems to us. I could almost feel the energy change when the learners read or spoke, because it suddenly started to feel like 'home.'*

Finally, one teacher reflected on joking with the learners about giving them sweets for answering questions, and a learner was quick to reply to the joke in the chat box by suggesting that the teacher mail them the sweets. Keeping in mind that the classes consisted of only four 30-minute sessions, it is remarkable that the learners participated so freely and familiarly, and it is not too implausible to assume that the teachers' conscious effort at establishing social presence contributed to this. Our conclusion in this regard corresponds with Janssen, Erkens, Kirschner and Kanselaar's (2009: 168) case studies that familiarity "may increase the likelihood that students will engage in critical and exploratory discussions".

2 – Being present

Another lesson taken from the experience was that as teachers we "had

to show up and be there in more than one way" (Teacher 5); we had to be present in the online environment. West's (2021) reflection makes mention of a particular student who felt disconnected in the online environment and could not remember any classmates or most of the professors; however, the student could explicitly remember one professor, the one who was present and reached out in the online space. This reflection echoes what we found in our own narratives with regard to the importance of 'being there' and engaging with learners in the asynchronous space. Two of us reflected on how we made sure that we responded to learners' questions, opinions, and personal stories shared in the asynchronous threads.

The synchronous contact sessions were quite short and did not provide a lot of space for exploring ideas and making sure that learners understand the content and apply it for their final assessment. As a group, we overcame this obstacle in different ways. One teacher encouraged learners to revert to the asynchronous material and post questions that they still had after the synchronous contact sessions in the video threads. She monitored these asynchronous components throughout and responded to each learners' post. Another teacher asked learners to indicate at the end of each lesson whether they needed further help with what was discussed in the synchronous session; she noted all learners' names who indicated that they wanted extra input, and then sent each of them an email to follow up. An important lesson for us, linked to being present, emerged from Teacher 4's narrative:

> *I realised the importance of 'being there.' While a video could be paused, and is perhaps more entertaining than attending a class, the learners still needed someone to rephrase what was said in the*

video, or provide extra examples, or to listen to what they think they have learnt. And this was the greatest turning point for me.

Based on the learners' responses in the synchronous and asynchronous sessions, it seems that they trusted their teachers to be present and to respond to any queries timeously and positively. This contributed to the participants in the programme becoming a learning community and not just a group of individuals logging in to an online space. Because "learning is inherently social" (Culatta cited in West 2021), we need to keep in mind that the online class should serve as a tool to assist us in creating spaces where we can help learners connect to and learn not only from the study material, but also from each other. Therefore, a holistic approach to our online presence is at the heart of creating the social atmosphere that learners need to prosper.

3 – Online identity

The final lesson that we took from our experience during the enrichment programme is how important it is to convey our own identity in the online space. In their reflection on teaching during Covid-19, Sequeira and Dacey (2020: 3) wrote about the importance of identity: "(it's) never neutral but rather negotiated, it affects ways of thinking, influences perceptions of self and others, motivates and predicts behavior and learning outcomes". We, as the teachers, incorporated our unique personalities and approaches into the sessions: Teacher 1 reflected, "I felt comfortable being myself and letting my personality shine through, especially since I got to create my own slides". Another teacher used memes to gauge learners' understanding, which in her opinion created a more relaxed and open atmosphere in the synchronous classroom, allowing students to be unsure and ask for help without 'losing face.'

Teacher 4 used her considerable video editing skills as a starting point to both 'show up' for the learners as well as convey her identity to her learners in the asynchronous material – she aimed to "sound as approachable as possible, and chose themes, music, images, and snippets that I thought Grade 12 learners would find appealing". Her videos were a good representation of who she is as a teacher, and in this way her learners got to know her before they officially met her in the synchronous classroom. Thus, when she entered the synchronous space – using the same music she used in her videos – her learners immediately recognised her. "Upon welcoming them, one learner mentioned in the chat that my voice was so friendly and that they looked forward to my session." (Teacher 4)

At the beginning of the enrichment programme, each teacher wrote a short bio, containing information on who they were – including information on their hobbies and personal goals – accompanied by a photograph. Teacher 3 reflects that she feels that this "resonated with the learners and reminded them that there was a 'real life person' on the other side of the screen." Teacher 1 reflects that she provided a picture of herself again at the beginning of her first synchronous session with further information about herself and her hobbies. Two other teachers mentioned that they switched on their cameras at the beginning of lessons to greet students and remind the learners that there is a 'human' on the other side who cares about them.

We found that we can still show some parts of our authentic selves and in doing so, shorten the distance between us and our learners (West 2021) in order to stimulate the learning process. This conscious effort of allowing our identities and personalities through into an otherwise clinical academic space, encouraged the learners to reciprocate by

'being themselves' as well, leading to a strong social presence and, to a functional Community of Inquiry.

The way forward

Based on this reflective analysis, it can be surmised that an attempt at including all three presences of the CoI framework in online teaching spaces can evoke positive responses and enhanced participation from learners. Social presence, especially, is key in this, as it allows for "collaborative inquiry" (Garrison, Anderson and Archer 2010) that enables learning to take place. The aspects that contributed to our social presence included: creating a relatable online identity, generating and cultivating familiarity, and fostering a sense of being present. Various techniques and tools were used (see Figure 2), and as teachers we experienced high levels of engagement and enthusiasm from the learners.

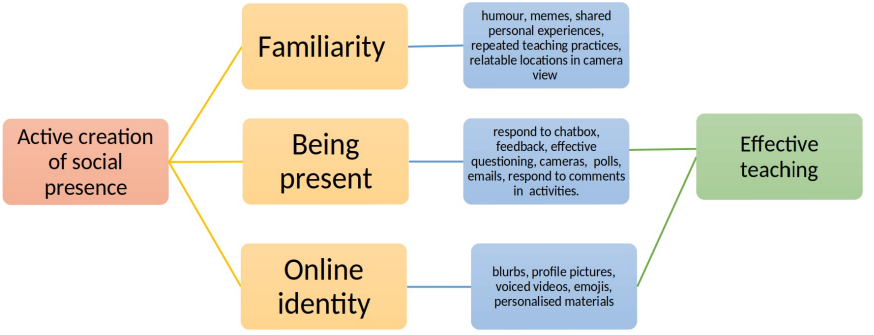

Figure 2: Effective teaching resulting from the teacher's active creation of social presence

We found that the combination of the three themes identified in our narratives, strongly contributed to a more successful delivery and a more effective teaching practice. The three themes – familiarity, being present, and online identity – are intertwined, and all three need to be

present to transform online teaching practice. By actively creating a platform of familiarity we noticed that the learners were more open to engage with us and ask questions. Whether these questions were asked in the synchronous or asynchronous space made no difference as we were present in both spaces on a continual basis; thus, no learner fell through the cracks or was left wondering if they did not understand. Our online identities, we feel, also contributed to this as we reminded learners of our 'humanness' and approachability. We feel that an awareness of the importance of actively cultivating social presence can be useful in the professional development of any individual involved in remote or online teaching. It is a welcome reminder that we should not neglect 'being human' and allow our students and learners to express their humanity and their individual personalities. This not only facilitates a sense of community, but ultimately aids in effective teaching and learning.

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