

Get Present Build Community and Connectedness Online

North Carolina Virtual Public School teachers show you how to engage students and become socially present in your online learning environments.

The relationships you build with your students are key to their academic success. Despite their likes, dislikes, or academic achievements, students yearn to feel a sense of belonging, a connection to someone or something within schools and classrooms. Whether a learning environment is face to face or online, students want to feel present. But with the challenges of online learning and socialization, support, and other activities that contribute to a sense of belonging, a virtual teacher has to work harder to provide students with a cohesive environment and the social connections that foster academic success.

Learning from NCVPS

The North Carolina Virtual Public School (NCVPS) offers traditional, early calendar, and occupational courses; test preparation; career exploration; and credit recovery. The NCVPS targets students in grades 9–12 but also maintains a limited number of courses for students in middle school.

All NCVPS courses are online and use the Blackboard learning management system. Most student–teacher or student–student interaction is asynchronous because students can access courses 24/7. Course structure provides a variety of learning experiences, including individual assignments and collaborative projects.

With course enrollment numbers showing consistent growth in online learning for the state of North Carolina, USA, we wondered if NCVPS teachers, many of whom teach both face to face and online, feel compelled to create a sense of community and connectedness in their virtual classes. When asked, teachers responded with a resounding “Yes!” and provided a plethora of strategies to create a community of learners invested in their own and their peers’ learning. Comments and strategies in this article came out of an online survey of NCVPS teachers that we conducted in spring 2011. Of the approximately 400 NCVPS teachers, more than half responded to our survey.

Social Presence Model

So how can you build connections in an online course community? We introduced NCVPS teachers to the Social Presence Model.

The Social Presence Model provides a framework to establish increased social presence, or connectedness, among teachers and students for a more enriching educational experience. We define social presence as an integration of five key elements that motivate participants to take active roles in their own and their peers’ online learning experiences:

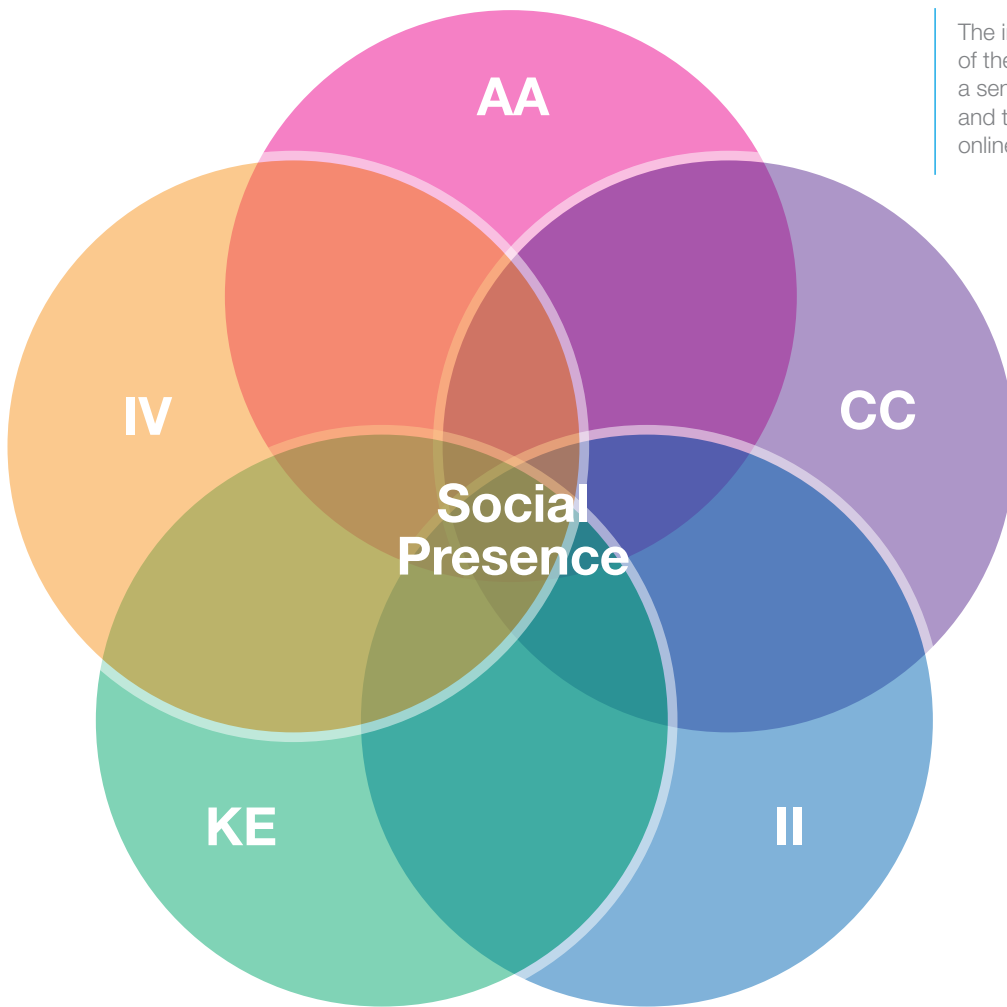
1. **Affective Association (AA)**
2. **Community Cohesion (CC)**
3. **Interaction Intensity (II)**
4. **Knowledge and Experience (KE)**
5. **Instructor Involvement (IV)**

Affective Association

When we see our students face to face, we see facial expressions and body language. Teachers want to know how to “see” these aspects when teaching online. Thankfully, there are elements you can build into your online course to support this type of communication.

NCVPS teachers identified strategies, such as posting announcements, promoting discussion forums, using asynchronous and synchronous contact (instant messages, text messages, phone conversations, and email), and providing personalized feedback on assignments as strategies to promote positive affective association in an online classroom.

Most teachers cited praise, motivation, and recognition of their students as keys to building these emotional connections. One teacher created a space called “Scholar Holler,” where she posted a wide variety of motivational messages about her students’ successes in the course.



The integration of the five key elements of the Social Presence Model supports a sense of connection between teachers and their student communities within online classrooms.

Social Presence Model Definitions and Quick Tips

Here are definitions and quick tips for building social presence online using the five elements of the Social Presence Model.

Affective Association

AA addresses the emotional connections in the course and examines emotion, humor, sarcasm, paralanguage, and self-disclosure.

- Encourage use of bold, underline, and emoticons in appropriate ways.
- Use announcements to praise and motivate students.
- Build in audio and video where possible for students and instructors to hear and see each other.

Community Cohesion

CC represents the extent to which participants see the group as a community. This element is

expressed by greetings and salutations, referring to each other as a community, and referencing each other by name.

- Encourage positive social interaction through social spaces.
- Focus early on students and instructors getting to know each other.

Interaction Intensity

II refers to the level of interaction among participants, including direct quotes, paraphrasing, complimenting, and asking questions.

- Seek out websites, applications, blogs, and other online tools to support instruction.
- Find social tools that make it easier for you to communicate with your students.

Knowledge and Experience

KE involves the sharing of additional resources and experiences.

- Design assignments that ask students to make connections with other aspects of their lives.
- Model ways to engage with the content of the course through a variety of online tools.

Instructor Involvement

IV refers to the extent to which the instructor is an invested, active partner in the learning community.

- Create synthesis responses making explicit connections to student posts.
- Note common areas for improvement and tailor individual feedback based on these commonalities.

One teacher commented that making affective associations is perhaps the most challenging: “I try to use discussion boards, but getting traction here is hard. [It is] easier to develop this association on a teacher-to-student level with frequent communication.” Another teacher connected affective association with the way she set the tone of her class by referencing “our community” in all communications with students.

Community Cohesion

If you ask a face-to-face teacher how his students become a community, he may mention informal discussions that occur before and after class or during breaks, collaborative class activities, group assignments, or projects that require students to meet outside of class. Celebrating achievements and special moments as a group also contributes. NCVPS teachers identified all of these pedagogical and environmental techniques as ways they build community cohesion in their online courses. For example, teachers can replicate conversations before, during, and after class by providing common virtual areas for students to socialize. NCVPS teachers refer to these with a variety of terms, including social forum, social meeting blog, viewfinder, and student coffee shop.

Another strategy to build community cohesion is to create an introductory unit that allows for community building. One NCVPS teacher uses a unit that combines blogs, discussion forums, and the creation of an Animoto video to allow for personalized introductions. Many online instructors require their students to post bios, sometimes with pictures, in the first week of an online course. These bios can become profiles that allow for a deeper understanding of student motivations, desires, and concerns.

Interaction Intensity

Online teachers often feel that interaction intensity is primarily their responsibility. As one teacher said, “Between Facebook, Twitter, Google Voice, email, phone calls . . . I’d say that one cannot proactively or reactively have more interaction intensity than me!”

You can capitalize on social media and other tools to create multiple meaningful interactions that are not necessarily instructionally driven. Teachers mentioned discussion forums as places online where students frequently interacted.

As for ways to encourage students to interact with the content, one teacher explained his focus on using games:

No matter how old we get, we seem to enjoy games. Based on past experiences, I have found that students have a high level of interaction when a game is involved, so I would plan games periodically throughout the course.

Our teachers use games for review of concepts or skills practice. Some teachers create their own games using Microsoft PowerPoint, Excel, or Word. Others find websites dedicated to student learning games and direct students there. QuiaWeb (www.quia.web) and Classroom Games (www.uncw.edu/edgames) are two sites with templates teachers can use to create their own games. You can also download games created by others.

Knowledge and Experience

One of the many benefits of online learning is the variety of educational experiences that students bring to class. Teachers use many pedagogical techniques to gauge students’ prior knowledge, experiences, and influences on their learning. Online learning lends itself to the use of pre-assessments and student choice as well as discussion and voice boards that ask them to draw on their experiences. One NCVPS teacher gave students with strong online learning or technological experience a forum to share their tips and ideas. Students with strong writing skills modeled good writing for those who are struggling, and students with a variety of content knowledge shared this information.

Instructor Involvement

Students want to feel connected with their teachers. As online students, they need help with the content and want to know that you will be responsive to their needs. Teachers often talk about how the interaction they have with their students online takes a lot of time but is an integral piece of a meaningful connection that lasts beyond the course. Here is how one NCVPS teacher explained it:

I grade papers daily, and I leave clear and involved comments about their work. I email daily and try to encourage students to do their best. I also encourage students to [instant message] each other with questions if I am not available, although this is frowned upon during school . . . even in lab hours. I create announcements each day, call every student at least once a week, allow student contact anytime they see me online, and create community announcements.

This teacher details many ways you can show students you are invested in their learning in the online environment. Another teacher explained the importance of instructor involvement:

I think it is very important for students to recognize that the instructor is a real person that cares about their success in the course. They want to know that I am working as hard toward their success as they are.

The Power of Presence

The job of an online instructor is multilayered. Our data show that many NCVPS teachers see value in all aspects of the Social Presence Model. Survey responses reiterated that all of its components must be present for the environment to work. Nearly 97% of teachers identified instructor involvement more than any other aspect of the model as important or very important. Those instructors clearly see themselves as playing a vital role in the course community, and the impact does not stop at the online classroom. In fact, more than 95% of NCVPS teachers surveyed agreed that teaching in an online learning environment has affected their face-to-face practice, and in the vast majority of cases, for the better. As one NCVPS instructor put it, connectedness in her online course has directly affected her connectedness with her face-to-face students:

Since teaching online, I have come to understand the barriers that students believe exist between themselves and their teachers. I now distribute my cell phone number for text messages from face-to-face students and it is great. On snow days or when they are sick or just need a quick question asked, they can ping me . . .

As virtual schools gain popularity and utility, we must remember the power of presence and the importance of building connectedness online for increased student learning and engagement.



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