

Establishing Rapport and Faculty Presence

Students can easily feel isolated in a face-to-face classroom despite being surrounded by 20+ students at a time, so you can only imagine how this could be heightened in an online environment. Thus, establishing a strong online presence for both instructor and peers is important. Your goal is to create a virtual space where students feel as though the instructor and classmates are with them, guiding them in a safe environment where they can freely share their thoughts and learn from each other without being judged or criticized in a negative way. This can be tricky for faculty because our inclination is to "jump in" if we feel not enough interaction is occurring, or because we know the "right" answer. If the instructor is too present, however, the course can feel stifling to students and they may be less willing to share their thoughts and ideas and construct knowledge on their own.

Implementing the following techniques can improve a sense of presence for your students:

- Let your students get to know you and incorporate your own personality where appropriate. You might record a video for the first week of the course introducing yourself, your teaching style, student expectations and goals for the course, or start off each week with a personalized announcement detailing your learning objectives and what assignments or tasks need to be done for the week.
- You also want to show your presence by checking in to your LMS as often as possible and leave timely "evidence" that you have been there such as posting new announcements or discussion board postings. If you only post every other week, the students may feel that the course is on autopilot. Being silent is the equivalent to being invisible for both faculty and students.
- Rapport and faculty presence can be further established through the Discussion Board. You don't have to respond to every student or every post, but you can, for example, summarize the discussion postings every week, while adding your analysis and connection to the learning goals of the class. Model how you would want students to respond to you and each other. And, yes, it can be enjoyable to use a quick video now and again to liven up the discussion from time to time.

It is important to set expectations at the beginning of the course for your students of how often you will be checking in and your response time. You may even create a space on the discussion board where students can share information and announcements on things outside of class and allow them to develop a rapport among themselves.



Ultimately, studies consistently show that the most common indicator for student satisfaction and perceived learning was instructor presence which helps raise student learning especially with regards to individualized corrective feedback and support for problem solving (Swan, 2004). The most important thing your students may ever remember about you is your presence in their learning.

Swan, K. (2004). Learning online: current research on issues of interface, teaching presence and learner characteristics. In J. Bourne & J. C. Moore (Eds.) *Elements of Quality Online Education, Into the Mainstream* (pp. 63-79). Needham, MA: Sloan Center for Online Education.