# Social presence – connecting pre-service teachers as learners using a blended learning model

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## Abstract

*The national reform agenda for early childhood education and care across Australia has led to an increased demand for qualified early childhood teachers. In response, universities have developed innovative approaches in delivering early childhood teacher education courses designed to support existing diploma qualified educators to gain their teaching qualifications. One such course at a major Australian University incorporated a flexible multi-modal option of study which included community-based, on line e-learning and face-to-face intensive tutorials. This paper reports on a study examining the outcomes for students undertaking their studies using this course delivery mode. The study sought to examine the students' perceptions of the efficacy of the teaching and learning approach in meeting their learning needs, and the factors that were most influential in informing these perceptions. The findings indicated that it was the inclusion of contact and a social presence in the online learning environment which was most influential.*

## Introduction

Research into early childhood education and care (ECE&C) provision has highlighted the correlation between the quality care and education for young children and the level of staff qualification (Bretherton, 2010; Norris, 2010; Sims, 2007; Sumsion, 2007). Early childhood practitioners with higher-level qualifications are more likely to engage in appropriate interactions that are sensitive, responsive and engaged (Whitebook, 2003). Higher staff education has also been linked to greater child-initiated learning, more staff engagement in play and social interactions with children, and more complex social and cognitive play (McMullen & Alat, 2002).

These reforms have created a context where all ECE&C settings in Australia are now required to employ degree qualified early childhood teachers to work alongside diploma and certificate level educators (Australian Children's Education and Care Quality Authority, 2012). As a way of meeting the increased demand for qualified early childhood teachers, there are a number of tertiary settings across Australia which have developed pathway courses to support educators with diploma level qualifications in ECE&C to gain their teaching degree. In response to student and sector needs for these pre-service teachers to continue working in the sector while undertaking the qualification, innovative models which include both blended course delivery—a combination of both face to face (FTF) contact and internet based learning— and wholly online learning have been developed in many institutions. Research has shown that effective blended learning experiences do contribute to successful student engagement and success (Alayyar, Fisser & Voogt, 2012; Carvalho, Lustigova, & Lustig, 2009; Geer, 2009; Keppell, Souter, & Riddle, 2012; Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010; So & Brush, 2008; Stacey & Gerbic, 2009; Wiesenberg & Stacey, 2009). However, studies

have also highlighted a need for active engagement with peers, staff and content as a strong component of effective blended learning outcomes (Parker, Maor, & Herrington, 2013). Parker et al. also found success was increased when stakeholders were able to connect and reciprocate "construction and sharing of knowledge" (p. 6) in a variety of modes.

The notion of connection and reciprocity in blended learning has led to an examination of social presence as a contributor to successful learning outcomes. This paper reports on the findings from a small scale study of a teacher education course that employed a blended learning delivery mode at an Australian university. The study showed while the students found the blended learning approach supported flexibility and a balance between work-family-study, it was the inclusion of FTF contact and social presence with self-paced off campus learning which was identified as most influential.

## Defining Social Presence

Social presence theory has its origins in literature relating to the fields of the telecommunications industry and social psychology and is based on the work of Short, Williams and Christie in the mid-1970s (Cobb, 2009; Jusoff & Khodabandelou, 2009; Kehrweld, 2008). Much of the research since has focused on computer-mediated communication technologies in teaching and learning, however the notion of social presence has found its way into discussions surrounding online learning, particularly in higher education. Short et al. (as cited in Kehrweld, 2008) define social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal interaction" (p. 91) however Kehrweld goes on to define social presence as the means by which online participants inhabit virtual spaces and indicate not only their presence in the online environment but also their availability and willingness to engage in

the communicative exchanges. It is these communicative exchanges which constitute learning activity in these online learning environments. While the definition presented by Short et al. is now somewhat dated it still remains the basis for describing and defining social presence when examining online learning (Mayne & Wu, 2011) and there is much to draw upon when examining the engagement of learners in online teacher education courses.

Social presence is about relationships (Tu, as cited in Jusoff, & Khodabandelou, 2009), and the ability of participants in the online learning community to project their personal characteristics into the learning relationships they are creating, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as "real people" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 1999, p. 91). Social presence has been found to be crucial in establishing a critical community of learners (Fabro & Garrison as cited in Garrison et al., 1999). It marks the difference between simply downloading the information provided, and engaging in collaborative shared learning. Based on a notion of social constructivism, where individual learning is constructed through interactions between the participants, communities of learners engage in collaborative shared inquiry. In online learning communities, it is the extent to which participants engage in this community of inquiry that predicates the development of the group. The community of inquiry framework focuses on the intentional development of an online learning community "with an emphasis on the processes of instructional conversations that are likely to lead to epistemic engagement" (Shea & Bidjerano, 2009, p. 544). To understand the reason for this positive relationship between collaborative learning and social presence, it is important to note how the feeling of connection and closeness with other students affects individual motivation to engage in academic activities (So & Brush, 2008). A strong indicator of social presence is the expression of emotions. The use of humour,

sharing of feelings, attitudes, experiences, and interests are emotions that effectively contribute to social presence as their expression encourages others to be more forthcoming and to reciprocate, with the outcome being increased trust, support, and a sense of belonging" (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 100). So and Brush (2007) suggest that when students have difficulty creating the appropriate level of mutual closeness, trust, and interdependence, their participation in group projects is likely to be low. Effective open communication, underpinned by respectful and reciprocal exchanges and mutual awareness are also key components of social presence. The recognition and acknowledgement of each other's contributions aimed at complementing and encouraging are particularly important in an online learning environment. In such environments participants do not have the benefit of FTF interactions (i.e. smiles, eye contact), and other non-verbal means of establishing and maintaining social presence through recognition are not available.

## Asynchronous and synchronous learning experiences and a social presence in blended learning

Blended learning has been adopted by many educational institutions to offer flexible learning to students to accommodate diverse learning styles (Christensen & Evamy, 2011; Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010), students with multiple family, work and study responsibilities (Newbold, Mehta, & Forbus, 2010), and current early years practitioners seeking to upskill their qualifications (Dunworth, Fiocco, & Mulligan, 2012; Keppell et al., 2012). Higher education is no longer defined by the tangible boundaries of a "physical campus" but by the entire student experience, whether that involves attending FTF classes or navigating online information. (Keppell et al., p. 1). It is further suggested that teachers facilitating these "technology enriched

21st century learning spaces" need to ensure they are aware of the "affordances and constraints" different technologies can offer and how they can be used to positively include student learning (p. 1).

Borup, Graham and Velasquez (2011) reported that learners want the flexibility and convenience offered by a blended environment; yet do not want to sacrifice social interaction. They describe the occurrence of traditional FTF learning and interactions in a live, synchronous environment as a "high fidelity" experience compared to online, self-paced asynchronous materials being "low fidelity" (largely text only) experiences. In a view supported by Dunlop and Lowenthal (2014) they propose that instructors in a blended learning format struggle to find an effective balance between face-to-face instruction that is high in fidelity but perhaps not as flexible, and online instruction that is high in flexibility but perhaps low in fidelity. This low fidelity information can be appropriate if relaying simple instructions or news items. However, if students are to effectively engage with substantive, educational content and subsequently interpret it, online learning instruction needs to incorporate more than asynchronous text-based approaches (Dunlop & Lowenthal, 2014; Jusoff, & Khodabandelou, 2009). Bittner, Blackstock, MacIntosh, and Merkel (2013) also report the benefits of online courses which include FTF interaction, and advise that purely text-based asynchronous learning environments do not have the ability to "replicate the richness of the face to face interaction" (p. 74) so must include engaging activities or sufficient social interaction.

This emphasis on active, constructive and reciprocal engagement between peers, staff and content is a significant feature of effective blended learning outcomes (Parker et al., 2013). Pallof and Pratt (2007) suggest that students will experience meaningful learning when they are in participatory learning environments that are intentionally designed to help them develop a sense of community and also provide them with opportunities to engage in collaborative discussions. These interactions are beneficial in that they encourage students to actively construct new meanings related to the course content (Lehman & Conceição, 2010). Effective blending of synchronous and asynchronous features can create a sense of stability, help students stay on task and gain a stronger connection with other participants (Hrastinski, 2010). Carvalho et al. (2009, p. 80) also define optimal blended learning experiences as those including "synchronous physical and online formats, and self-paced, asynchronous formats". It is the effective combination of these features that is argued as most desirable as it will lead to higher levels of sustained learning (Pelliccione & Broadley, 2010; Stacey & Gerbic, 2009).

Lehman and Conceição (2010) reported that blended online synchronous and asynchronous courses can also strengthen social presence. However, they advised that sustained, conscious effort is required to achieve this and participants need structures created by the facilitator to help them engage in meaningful learning activities. It is also highlighted that through trying to understand the physical, social, emotional, and psychological aspects of presence and its relation to participant engagement in a course, designers of online learning environments are "able to understand the inherently social nature involved in human learning that needs to be carefully addressed in asynchronous learning environments" (p. 221).

## Relevance of the inclusion of a social presence to teaching as a career

Research into the importance of a social presence, particularly in degrees where students' pursue a teaching qualification leading to a career that is innately based on

social interactions and relationships is also particularly relevant here (Alayyar et al., 2012; Weisenberg & Stacey, 2009). Kolowich (2010) highlight the benefits of exchanges occurring within an online learning environment resembling those that occur in classrooms and replicate genuine learning environments. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2014) argue that social presence is a critical aspect of the online course experience, contributing to "overall professional preparation" in the relevant vocation. Keppell et al. (2012, p. 245) also remind us of the importance of not losing sight of the "endgame"; that the key focus of academic development in students' needs to be the enhancement of student learning in their particular course discipline and to develop the knowledge they require to be competent in their chosen vocation.

## Connection with teacher and between student

There is a body of research that acknowledges the importance of human engagement and social presence for successful learning and student retention (Geer, 2009; Kolowich, 2010). These studies have found that students are more successful and have an increased level of comfort and ultimately higher retention levels as a result of social presence found in online learning. Social presence has also been found to lead to a reduced perception of "distance" between instructors and students (Kolowich, 2010).

It has been argued that social presence can be transferred into online systems thus creating a "weaving of the face to face and online community" (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, cited in Smith, Stacey, & Ha, 2009, p. 134). This suggests there is a legitimate place for a social presence and constructivist, active engagement that incorporates a combination of FTF contact and more remote electronic communication approaches (Gosper, Malfroy, & McKenzie,

2013; Parker, et al., 2013; Waniganayake, Wilks, & Linser, 2007).

Dunlap and Lowenthal (2014) caution that despite the presence of engaging online resources and activities, students can feel that the teacher is "absent for the course" which can then decrease levels of academic engagement (p. 1). They specifically argue that "the absence of social presence abraded the overall aesthetic learning experience" and students "need a sense of being 'there' and being 'real'" (p. 3). Further studies have also highlighted the challenge faced by lecturers to find ways of enhancing student learning "without being there" (Jusoff & Khodabandelou, 2009, p. 82). A sense of "instructor immediacy" has a positive effect on student motivation (Borup et al. 2011) and this can be enhanced by the teacher showing their face through using photos, uploaded recordings and videos of lectures (Kolowich, 2010).

## Best practice in blended learning approaches

Facilitators of blended learning courses need to seek out best practices in effectively combining instructional strategies in both the FTF and online environments that take advantages of their strengths and avoid their weaknesses (Hrastinski, 2010). Dunlap and Lowenthal's (2014) recent research into "the right mix of social presence" in an online course reported that "low technology solutions" such as personalised detailed written feedback, one-to-one emails and phone conversations had greater impact, and were cited as greater value than that of other high technology solutions (such as Twitter) in terms of supporting engagement. Initial contact and introductions are key factors (Dunlap & Lowenthal; Shank, 2011). Shank (2011) also found that an initial personal five minute phone call, short videos containing images of the instructor's face and features of the course and information on support networks at the university were very

effective. Subsequent online quizzes, discussion threads or email response activities can follow, encouraging students to engage with information, locate materials and form important connections (Dunlap & Lowenthal; Kolowich, 2010; Shank, 2011). Discussion sites have become a standard feature in online courses (Dunlap, 2009). However, although this seemingly "constructive" tool can actively engage students to avoid more static purely text-based experiences and to weave a FTF and online community (Parker, et al., 2013), they need to be created to benefit and support student learning in meaningful ways. The sharing of personal and professional stories, anecdotes, expression of emotions and emoticons and addressing students by name have also been found to be effective practices (Lowenthal & Parscal, 2008). To maximise the engagement of all students—not just those that access the online learning system regularly—links to video clips, articles and discussion sites can be purposefully sent to students' email. This acts as a reminder to encourage students to engage and can increase motivation and interaction (Geer, 2009). Incorporating these approaches in ongoing and summative feedback on progress or assessments has also been found to be an important element for creating a successful social presence (Scutter, Palmer, Luzeckyj, Burke Da Silva, & Brinkworth, 2011).

## The study

Using a qualitative case study approach, the study sought to investigate the perceptions of graduating pre-service teachers about the delivery mode used in this teacher education course in meeting their learning needs. The Case study design was chosen for this research as it was examining a chosen single entity; the early childhood teacher education (ECTE) course delivered at this University. Case studies explore the details and meanings of experience and the researcher attempts to identify important patterns and themes in the

data. Case study research does not propose to present statistically generalisable findings, but is an ideal methodology when a holistic, in-depth investigation is needed.

This ECTE course had been specifically designed to provide a pathway for diploma qualified early childhood educators to gain teaching qualifications while remaining in the workforce. The course delivery incorporated a combination of FTF workshops, online learning and enabled the students to apply their learning outside the classroom by linking their learning to their practice in the workplace. The delivery mode was designed so that students attended a two day, FTF workshop three times a semester, usually on Fridays and Saturdays. In between these scheduled workshops, the students, supported by their lecturer were expected to engage in weekly readings posted online and then to contribute to online discussions and reflections of these readings. They were also expected to participate in and reflect upon weekly activities that had been set by the lecturer.

The participants in the study were drawn from those students in the final semester of their studies, enrolled in this flexible delivery mode. Forty-nine attending the final workshop for the year were invited to participate in the study by completing an online qualitative survey, incorporating seventeen open-ended questions that required the participants to write a short reflective response to each question. Due to teaching constraints, the participants were not able to complete the survey while on campus. Forty-one students initially consented to participate in the study however only seven students eventually completed the online survey. Case study research is focused on exploring the phenomena—in this study the lived experiences of the students. The richness of case studies is related to the amount of detail and contextualisation that is possible when only a small sample size is used. While the sample size is small, the open-ended nature of the responses provided a depth of analysis

that would not otherwise have been available. As the survey was anonymous, following up with consenting students who did not complete the survey was not possible.

Responses to the survey however elicited a rich insight into the perceptions of the participants of how the delivery mode supported them as successful learners. Each of the individual responses were de-identified and then coded to draw out emerging themes. While it emerged that the flexible course mode was supportive in enabling the participants to maintain a work, study and home life balance, it was the balance between FTF workshops and the online learning that was most supportive. The notion of social presence emerged strongly as a key influence in how the participants felt engaged in the learning.

## Social presence and learner satisfaction

Social presence emerged as a feature of the flexible course delivery mode as it was seen as an important component not only of the online aspect of the delivery, but the factor found within the FTF workshops that was perceived to be most influential to how the participants engaged in the learning process throughout the course. This social presence was not only between the peer group but it was also the extent to which the students perceived the social presence of the lecturers that also impacted on their sense of learner satisfaction.

Comments regarding a social presence were found across both questions pertaining to areas of the online learning system (OLS) which offered most engagement and motivation whilst completing the course, as well as those questions focusing on the FTF delivery. One participant when asked to comment on the aspects she felt were most supportive of her as a learner responded by saying it was:

> the human contact ones.

Other responses supported the notion of social presence as being an important component supporting success:

> (FTF workshops) are great for that FTF contact and reassurance that you're on the right track.

> (The OLS) helps you stay in touch with people.

> Reading discussion from other classmates and others online.

That these participants were all undertaking a teaching qualification led to a perception that being able to develop interpersonal interactions with peers throughout their course was important:

> we are embarking on a 'human' social career where we deal with real people so it's important.

The notion of being in a community of learners was also suggested

> it's important to have a network of support.

## Social presence in blended learning

In a question asking about which of the features of the flexible delivery mode offered most engagement and motivation for pursuing the course, there was a strong suggestion that successful learning was influenced by the intentional combination of both FTF workshops and the social presence created in the online learning interactions.

> (FTF workshops) are great for that FTF contact and reassurance that you're on the right track. (OLS) helps you stay in touch with people.

> Mostly (the FTF workshops) and the (OLS).

While it was the blending of both FTF contact along with the more remote online learning that emerged as key to a perception of being supported as a learner, there was a strong

indication that it was the FTF engagement with peers that was a significant factor for success for these workshops. This was evident in the comments which included:

> Really enjoy the practical workshops with others
>
> by providing (FTF workshops) you still have FTF contact.
>
> I feel the FTF time valuable.
>
> Provides opportunity for class debates and discussion with passion.
>
> (FTF workshops) are an important part of the course delivery.
>
> (FTF workshops) are an integral part of this mode of study, (you) don't feel like you are doing it alone.

In exploring aspects of social presence found within the online component of the course, it was the interpersonal communication gained by students engaging in the discussion sites and email available in the OLS that was perceived as offering support for their learning. The participant responses again reflected that is was as a result of the engagement with and by others in the OLS that was influential. Participant comments reflected a notion of social presence as being important:

> Reading discussions from other classmates and others online.
>
> Through discussion, or email at times.
>
> Online discussions, emails .... were effective too for communication.
>
> through discussions with others.

## Social presence and lecturer engagement

The survey then shifted the focus to the extent to which the lecturers were perceived as meeting their needs as learners within this flexible delivery mode. Again it was the social presence of the lecturers, perceived as a result of timely responses to student concerns that was critical in influencing a sense of learner satisfaction. While lecturers who responded with what was perceived as timely feedback were seen to be supportive:

> most lecturers were extremely responsive of my needs as a learner and were active on (OLS) but some were very difficult to make contact with and were quite inactive.
>
> I was satisfied with in-depth feedback as it helped me develop the skills for future assessments.
>
> By usually getting prompt responses from staff;

those lecturers whom the participants felt did not provide feedback presented a challenge:

> I used the support of other students and family.
>
> Some lecturers don't return emails quick enough when you do ask for help.
>
> (Lecturers need to) be quick as possible to respond to questions and give constructive feedback.
>
> I feel they need to be more prompt with replying either online or email so the students don't feel they are left hanging.

## Discussion

Drawing upon the belief that learning is constructed through interactions between humans, it is clear from this study that, for these participants, it was the blending of FTF with the online, off campus engagement that has been the most significant influence on the way these students have perceived their learning experience as successful. In some ways, it has been the social interactions and relationships formed during the on campus workshops that created the social presence which enabled the students to be more active

participants in the online learning. Participation in these workshops was high, with consistently around 95% attendance, demonstrating that the students found the interconnections established in these workshops beneficial. The perception that they were connected with a broader learning community was a strong influence on the way they felt the course had supported their learning–the elements of "*human contact*" that they engaged with both FTF and online through the discussions that built this social presence.

There is a strong relationship between social presence and overall student satisfaction (Hostetter & Busch, 2013). However, learner outcomes should be predicated on more than just a measure of satisfaction. There is a correlation between social presence and online interaction and a perceived level of learning (Oztok, Zingaro, & Makos, 2013). The blended nature of the course delivery has enabled the learning community to foster a supportive online presence, leading to the creation of an environment where these students felt comfortable in sharing ideas and emerging thinking. Recognising the influence of social presence in building collaborative learning communities should be an important factor in establishing distance online courses.

The role of the teacher in fostering the learning outcomes through his/her social presence also emerged from this study as being critical in influencing learner satisfaction. When the teacher was deemed to be not present, then student perceptions of their learning satisfaction was lowered. Online learning is largely asynchronous in nature, creating a context where feedback is not instantaneous. The sense from the participants that teachers were unavailable or unresponsive was a significant influence on how they perceived their learning experience. The blending of FTF with the online learning did support the connections between the teachers and the students. However, the asynchronous nature of

the online component of the course delivery resulted in teachers being immediately available outside of these workshops. Student retention and successful completion of the qualification is the ultimate objective for both students and teachers and a genuine social presence is a vital conduit for this to occur. Students need to feel that the teacher is available, accessible and responsive. When students perceive that the teacher is *absent,* this can affect levels of academic engagement. Online technology allows for access twenty-four hours a day. Building this sense of being present in online learning environments becomes problematic when the teacher and learners are in difference places and at different times in the learning space, widening the divide between them. Social interaction with the facilitator as well as with peers is instrumental in motivating students' efforts to learn as well as promoting their satisfaction with online courses (Cobb, 2009). Setting ground rules for the online presence of the teacher is important at the beginning of the course. However, the teacher also needs to build the sense of trust by being available when indicated. Social presence is encouraged through trusting and reciprocal relationships. Students need to feel confident that feedback to concerns and queries, assessment outcomes and guidance will be timely and responsive.

The notion of reciprocal relationships is important for teachers to incorporate when engaging learners to build social presence. Reciprocal relationships are grounded within a notion of reciprocity, which suggests an interdependence of the shared understanding in that the *knowing* is a two-way process both causal and influencing the interaction. In this context, it is the understanding of the causal influences which the student brings to the interactions and the teacher's own lived experiences that create the nature of the interactions, creating the common regard between them. In building a sense in the recipient that the student/teacher relationship is reciprocal, relies on the teacher developing a

shared understanding with the student and examining the causal influences on the student participation. The student experience in an online distant learning environment where a social presence has not been formed can be lonely and isolating for a student not used to learning in this way. This becomes more complex if the teacher is felt to be absent in the eyes of the student grappling to make sense of their own presence in the learning space. Timely and responsive feedback that acknowledges a reciprocal understanding in common with the student will build a social presence leading to increased online interaction as the student feels respected and valued.

Teachers, when considering their pedagogical approaches and teaching strategies in these online learning environments, will need to draw upon practices aimed at supporting the development of social presence – not only among the students but also between themselves and the students, enabling students to connect and create the appropriate level of trust, recognition and reciprocity needed to effectively engage in the learning. The teacher has a responsibility to create the online social presence that generates for the student a feeling of recognition and acknowledgement of their and other's contributions, aimed at encouraging further engagement. The sharing of personal and professional stories, anecdotes, expression of emotions and addressing students by name, making specific reference to valuable and thoughtful contributions, and sharing of ideas are useful teaching strategies that can build an online social presence. In blended delivery modes, using the connectivity of the FTF workshops to build the social presence should be a critical pedagogical approach when determining the learning outcomes – with a focus on relationships as much as on content knowledge. It is the effectiveness of the relationships formed within these FTF workshops that the students will then rely on when away from the classroom and will be a catalyst for extending the community of learners into the online environment.

## Conclusion

While higher education institutions increasingly look for innovative ways to make courses more accessible for students, this study has highlighted that it is the balance between FTF on campus contact along with asynchronous learning that is founded on a notion of social presence that supports learner engagement and satisfaction. An effective balance between FTF instruction that offers the richness of human interaction creates the relationships between students, their teachers and their peers which then is carried over into the asynchronous online instruction supporting students to feel confident and validated in their online engagement. An emphasis on active, constructive and reciprocal engagement between peers, staff and content should be a significant feature of effective blended learning courses, with teachers adopting a pedagogy of relationships in the FTF component of the blended learning approach to foster the formation of these collaborative relationships. Of added importance is the perception of teacher presence in which students feel they are valued and supported through consistent, timely and responsive feedback to any concerns, queries or assessment guidance. Teachers need to present a human face to the students through the use of professional narrative, video, sharing of personal experiences and emotions to foster reciprocal relationships which in turn will inspire deeper student engagement and improved learning outcomes.

By inaugurating social presence in the online course experience and motivating student engagement with relevant educational content, the benefits also contribute to the overall professional preparation of the early childhood teacher and the knowledge they require to be competent in their chosen vocation.

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