

Enhancing Instructor Social Presence in Asynchronous Courses Using Weekly Videos

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Abstract

Understanding best practices in online learning environments has become an important area of research in recent years, both before and during the pandemic. Instructor social presence has been studied as a way to increase student learning and engagement; however, more research is needed to understand the most effective ways to increase students' instructor social presence in various contexts. The current study sought to understand the extent to which asynchronous weekly videos impacted instructor social presence. Participants included four sections of online asynchronous courses, two of which were undergraduate-level courses and two of which were graduate-level courses. An exploratory action research design that included surveys (n=36) and course evaluations was implemented to explore student perceptions of the asynchronous weekly videos. Findings demonstrate that the weekly videos increased student perceptions of instructor social presence and their understanding of course materials. Implications for student outcomes and instructor planning in online courses are discussed.

Keywords: video, asynchronous, instructor social presence, college teaching, postsecondary instruction

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The prevalence of online courses in postsecondary institutions has been increasing for some time. Since the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students enrolled in online courses has increased tremendously (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023). In 2019, 36% of all undergraduate students were enrolled in at least one online course; by 2021, this was true for 61% of students. Similarly, in 2019, 15% of all undergraduate students took online courses exclusively. By 2021, that figure almost doubled to 28%. In short, online coursework is likely to only continue to expand in the coming years. Research has consistently demonstrated that faculty and student relationships are an important component of student academic success (e.g., Ullah & Wilson, 2007). However, one potential shortcoming of asynchronous online courses is the lack of interpersonal interaction between instructors and students (Darby & Lang, 2019). Instructors and learners are not physically together in the online learning space as they would be in a physical classroom. As such, it becomes important for those designing and implementing asynchronous online courses to build opportunities to establish relationships and increase the connection between instructor and learner. This exploratory action research project sought to understand how embedding weekly instructor videos in asynchronous courses might work to improve instructor social presence. This work was guided by a single research question: *To what extent does the incorporation of weekly videos in asynchronous coursework impact instructor social presence?*

Instructor Social Presence

Social presence has been considered in a variety of contexts, though scholars have recently been interested in how social presence impacts online spaces. According to Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, the online educational experience consists of three presences: social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence (Oyarzun, Barreto, & Conklin, 2018). This framework posits that these three presences overlap to create an effective learning experience and specifically discusses how social presence, defined as the learner's ability to present himself or herself as a 'real person,' (Garrison et al., 2000, p. 89) can be a prerequisite for cognitive presence, or the extent to which students are able to construct knowledge from their interactions with others in an online environment (Borup et al.,

2014). Teaching presence is defined as the design, facilitation of discourse, and direct instruction of the cognitive and social processes of learning to achieve higher-order thinking (Anderson et al., 2001), and the intersection of teaching and social presence is known as instructor presence or instructor social presence (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). Garrison and colleagues (2000) go on to explain that social presence should be understood from a multi-dimensional perspective that overlaps with other presences (cognitive presence and teaching presence). These dimensions include affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000; Rourke et al., 2001).

Although social presence is largely focused on student social presence within the Col framework, researchers have acknowledged that a teacher's responsibility to facilitate discourse overlaps with the behaviors identified in the Col's framework for social presence (Anderson et al., 2001). Specifically, instructor social presence has been defined as instructors establishing their presence in terms of frequency of communication and interaction with students as well as supporting students through the learning process (Richardson & Lowenthal, 2017). In their study on the nature of social presence in online course discussions, Swan and Shih (2005) found that instructors' social presence had a larger impact on student outcomes than students' social presence. More recently, Pollard and colleagues (2014) found instructor social presence to be a significant contributor to positive learning communities.

An important way in which instructor social presence can be established is through various forms of feedback and communication students receive throughout an online course. Previous literature has established that audio and video feedback can convey the non-verbal immediacy cues necessary to create closeness and increase social presence (Anson et al., 2016; Borup et al., 2014; Dikkers et al., 2017). Collins, Groff, Mathena, and Kupczynski (2019) also argue that asynchronous video may improve student engagement by increasing students' perceptions of instructor social presence in online courses. In a recent review of the literature on video feedback, Bahula and Kay (2021) found that a majority of higher education students preferred video feedback over text-based feedback. Specifically, they found that video feedback: (1) offered more detail; (2) was easier to understand; (3) supported higher-level thinking; (4) kept students engaged; (5) was perceived as more personal and authentic; (6) increased social connections and their connection

to the instructor; and (7) increased student interaction with the course (Bahula & Kay, 2021). In another recent review of the literature on video use in online courses, Belt and Lowenthal (2021) found that video communication was used in four distinct ways: delivering video lectures, fostering video discussions, offering video assessments and video feedback, and creating video check-ins. Within these categories, additional research is needed to understand how video use is defined and leveraged in these different spaces.

Lowenthal (2022) specifically investigated the types of videos students valued most, considering the differences between video announcements, instructional videos, and video feedback. Consistent with other research (e.g., Bahula & Kay, 2021), his study found that video can help establish instructor social presence and that instructor social presence was more important to students than their peers (Lowenthal, 2022). Results were mixed regarding the value of types of videos, with students reporting that instructional videos were more valuable than video announcements and video feedback, though students reported that they preferred video announcements to text-only announcements. These findings were consistent with Conklin and Dikkers (2021), who found that students preferred instructional videos to other types of video interactions and specifically appreciated individual, targeted instructional intervention videos for struggling students. Watson, Sullivan, and Watson (2023) also found that student video-viewing behavior was inconsistent and tended to dwindle as the course progressed, highlighting the fact that not all types of video communication are valued equally.

Given the relatively recent surge in video use for online courses, research in this area is still emerging. Therefore, it is important to continue to investigate student perceptions of video feedback and communication to fully understand the impacts it may have on student engagement and instructor social presence.

Method

We conducted an exploratory action research study (Smith & Rebolledo, 2018) to understand the impact that incorporating weekly videos would have on our instructor social presence¹.

1 This study was approved by Auburn University's Institutional Review Board (#23-420 EX 2308) as Exempt.

Weekly Videos

We each organized our asynchronous courses by week, with each week running Monday through Sunday. Assignments were typically due at 11:59 pm on Sunday. Each Monday morning, the previous week's assignments would be graded, and those grades would be posted on Canvas, the learning management system used at our respective universities. After grading was completed, we would record the week's weekly video. Videos were recorded using Zoom, which allowed us to share our screens. Videos discussed the previous week's assignments, addressing common points of misunderstanding. Additionally, students who wrote something that was particularly good in class discussion assignments would receive shout outs and have a brief excerpt of what they wrote highlighted. Videos would then conclude by previewing expectations for assignments that would be due the following week. A link to the Zoom recording would be posted on Canvas and students would receive an email informing them that all assignments were graded, and that the week's video was posted. Videos were typically posted around midday each Monday. Each video was created with a target length of five to six minutes. Typically, it took about 20-30 minutes from start to finish to create these videos each week. A statement was included in each syllabus stating that students were responsible for the content included in the weekly videos.

Participants

Two data sources were consulted to answer our research question. First, we looked at the open-ended responses found in each of our student course evaluations. Second, we administered a survey to students enrolled in the four asynchronous online courses we taught during the 2022-2023 academic year. One of us (Savanna) taught two undergraduate educational psychology courses. The other (David) taught two graduate-level courses including an educational research methods course and a survey research methods course. All students enrolled in the courses were invited to complete the survey at the end of the course after grades had been submitted. A total of 36 participants completed the survey, including 22 who were enrolled in graduate courses and 14 who were enrolled in undergraduate courses. No additional demographic data were collected to ensure the anonymity of our students. Students who completed the survey could click on a link to a separate survey to enter a raffle to win one of ten \$10 Amazon gift cards. The survey was conducted via Qualtrics.

Instrument

The survey instrument featured 10 items, 8 of which comprised an instructor social presence scale (Borup et al., 2014). Participants were asked to respond to the extent to which they agreed with each of the eight items on a 7-point Likert scale where a response of 1 indicated that they *strongly disagree* with the statement and a response of 7 indicated that they *strongly agree*. A separate 5-point Likert scale item asked participants “*How often did you watch the weekly videos that were posted?*”; responses of a 1 indicated *almost never* and a response of 5 indicated *very often*. A final, open-ended item asked participants about their experience with the weekly videos.

Data Analysis

To analyze the quantitative survey data, we conducted a series of independent samples *t*-tests. We compared students who indicated that they viewed the weekly videos *very often* ($n=16$) with those who reported viewing the videos less often than that ($n=19$). We compared the two groups’ overall levels of instructor social presence and also compared their responses on each of the eight individual items. We conducted a second, similar set of independent samples *t*-tests to see if differences existed between undergraduate and graduate students’ responses. Assumptions were checked prior to analysis. A priori alpha significance levels were set at $p < .05$. All tests were conducted using SPSS version 29. Qualitative data derived from the student course evaluation open responses, as well as from the open-ended item from the survey were analyzed using Microsoft Excel. A hybrid coding approach was employed (Saldaña, 2015). Codes were initially created based on Garrison et al.’s (2000) definition of instructor social presence. Additional codes were added based on the transcripts. Emerging themes were first identified individually. We then met to discuss any discrepancies that existed; we agreed upon two overarching themes.

Results

This study sought to learn the extent to which incorporating weekly videos in our asynchronous courses increased instructor social presence. To answer this, we analyzed both quantitative and qualitative data we obtained through survey administrations and our student course evaluations. First, we were interested in learning if a relationship existed between how often students viewed the videos and their reported level of instructor social presence. To do so, we com-

pared the responses of students who reported watching the videos *very often* with those who reported watching the videos less often. Students who watched the videos very often (M=6.67, SD=0.49) reported significantly higher levels of instructor social presence than students who watched the videos less often (M=5.86, SD=1.45). For each of the eight items that comprise the scale, the mean values were greater for students who reported watching the videos very often. For four of the items, the differences were found to be statistically significant. See Table 1 for means, standard deviations, and *p*-values for each of the comparisons made. A second series of independent samples *t*-tests were conducted to compare the responses of undergraduate and graduate students. Effectively, this also served to compare our students’ responses with one another. No significant differences were found, both in terms of overall instructional social presence or for any of the eight individual items.

Table 1
Instructor Social Presence – Comparing Students Who Watched Videos “Very Often” with Others

	How Often Videos Were Viewed		N	M	SD	<i>p</i>
	Very often	Less				
Overall Instructor Social Presence	16	19		6.67	0.49	.040*
I feel connected with the instructor in this course.	16	19		6.25	1.29	.112
My interactions with the instructor are sociable and friendly.	16	19		6.88	0.34	.032*
I feel comfortable expressing my feelings to the instructor.	16	19		6.88	0.34	.035*
My online interactions with the instructor seem personal.	16	19		6.38	1.09	.216
The actions of the instructor in the course are easily visible in our online system.	16	19		6.94	0.25	.013*
In my interactions with the instructor I am able to be myself and show what kind of student I really am.	16	19		6.69	0.60	.075
I trust the instructor in the course to help me if I need it.	16	19		6.88	0.34	.046*
When I log on I am usually interested in seeing what the instructor is doing or had done.	16	19		6.50	0.73	.097

*Note: *p < .05; Responses on a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1=Strongly Disagree to 7=Strongly Agree*

We also analyzed the open-ended responses from the survey and our student course evaluations. Two overarching themes emerged from the data: (1) videos helped make instructors seem more engaged and (2) videos helped students understand course content.

Videos helped make the instructor seem more engaged. Students reported in their open-ended responses that the weekly videos made us as instructors seem more engaged in the course. One student shared, “I found them to be incredibly helpful and it made the class seem ‘live.’ I’ve taken other asynchronous courses, and the professor just seems to be replaying old work.” Another student shared, “[The weekly videos] were aligned with weekly goals, were informative, and provided the personal aspect that was needed to make the professor seem more accessible. A third student shared, “The videos were made as if [he] was with me in class.” Student responses indicated that the videos created a learning environment that fostered elements of instructor social presence.

Videos helped students understand course content. Student responses also indicated that the weekly videos aided in their ability to understand the course content. One student shared, “The weekly videos were the first thing I watched. They were brief and covered common misunderstandings from the previous week.” Another student similarly shared, “[The videos were] positive – I really appreciated the way [he] reviewed the previous week’s [assignments] and introduced the next week’s material.” Students also shared that they missed out on key information when they did not watch the videos. A student shared, “The videos made a positive impact in the success of the course. One week I didn’t watch all of the video, and I missed valuable information.” Overall, students found the content of the videos to be a net positive aspect of the learning experience in the course.

Discussion

This exploratory action research sought to understand if incorporating videos in asynchronous courses improved instructor social presence. In online, asynchronous courses, the instructor can easily be a name on the screen in the students’ email inbox and/or in the learning management system that is used. However, research grounded in the CoI framework (Garrison et al., 2000) has demonstrated the important role that establishing a strong instructor social presence can have in

creating effective online learning communities (e.g., Pollard et al., 2014; Swan and Shih, 2005) As such, finding ways to create a more personal learning environment and improve instructor social presence is important. This study's findings suggest that incorporating weekly videos is one way to help accomplish that. Students who watched the videos more often reported greater levels of instructor social presence. Students also reported that we seemed more engaged in the courses compared to other asynchronous courses they had taken. These findings are in line with previous research that has found incorporating video in asynchronous courses to improve instructor social presence (Borup et al., 2014; Henderson & Phillips, 2015; Lowenthal et al., 2022; Marshall, Love, & Scott, 2020; Love & Marshall, 2022) as well as research that suggests asynchronous video may improve student engagement (Collins et al., 2019). This is also consistent with the literature on universal design for learning principles, which suggests that incorporating multiple means of representation positively impacts students' motivation to learn (Scott et al., 2015; Seok et al., 2018).

Perhaps the most important takeaway from this study is that a relatively small investment of time led to an increase in instructor social presence. A common concern that instructors often have in teaching online courses is the time commitment required to do it well. Adding audio and video elements to courses is often a new skill for instructors and may take time to learn to implement. Additionally, much research focuses on audio and video feedback on larger assignments, such as term papers (i.e. Bahuala & Kay, 2021), which can be time-consuming for instructors, particularly given that class sizes for online courses are often large. However, the current study's findings demonstrate a strategy to incorporate weekly videos that can be implemented relatively quickly and easily into any course. Similar to the preparation and planning that goes into the introduction of an in-person class each week, the weekly videos were designed to be a "check-in" and, therefore, did not require much formal preparation or planning. Using strategies such as this that engage learners with the technological tools readily available within the LMS and increase social presence in effective ways can benefit both the instructor and the students by increasing engagement, learning, and overall course experience.

There are limitations worth noting regarding this work. Action research generally does not aim for generalizability; rather, it seeks to understand a problem of practice. We initially opted to begin creating these videos, not out of an abstract research-based aim, but rather to tangibly

improve our own online teaching in asynchronous courses. Though we do not claim that our findings are necessarily generalizable to other college or university-based asynchronous learning environments, it is our hope that sharing what we learned from our own action research might benefit the practice of others as well as add to the larger knowledge base on effective asynchronous teaching. This study has a relatively small sample size; not all students who were invited to complete the survey opted to do so. It is always possible that those who elected not to complete the survey differ in important ways compared to those who did complete the survey. Future work might seek to explore the incorporation of videos more systematically, with an aim toward generalizability. Finally, our study relied on self-report data to determine how often students accessed the videos. Future work should consider incorporating video viewing analytics to have a more reliable measure of how often students access the videos.

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