As online instruction continues to grow in both elementary and higher education, the question of how to establish and maintain social presence, the perception that students have that they are interacting with other human beings, not just working with a well-designed interface, becomes increasingly more difficult to answer. The verbal and non-verbal cues that support student-instructor interaction in face-to-face situations are not present in online environments, and the proliferation of technological tools and programs that allow for more accessible communication can also divide student populations and create further isolation.

Social presence has grown as a topic of critical discussion and focus of extensive study since it was first described in Asimov’s *The Naked Sun* and formalized as theory, 20 years later, by Short, Williams, and Christie. Social presence, the projection of one’s personal identity into the virtual learning environment, is seen as the root cause of effective student-teacher interaction. For that reason, this book goes beyond the mere issuing of suggestions to improve interaction; it aims to resolve the problems that hinder the development of student-teacher interaction by addressing the issues that limit social presence, and the other forms of presence, that should be active in effective online learning environments. The three sections of this book provide an inclusive collection of instructional models, learning theories, best practices, and emerging strategies that support student-teacher interaction in today’s online learning environments. They offer technological tools and instructional models that connect learners to their instructors and peers.

Section 1, “Theories, Conditions, and Emerging Best Practices” provides a broad collection of standing theories, recent studies, and reports on social presence in today’s online learning environments. This section of the book examines the impact of cultural context on interaction; it also looks at how interaction is promoted amongst such unique student populations as graduate researchers, and amongst mainstream online learners.

In “Social Presence in Culturally Mediated Online Learning Environments,” Vidya Ananthanarayanan discusses how cross-cultural concerns can “influence and inform” presence in online learning environments. The impact of culture on instructional design, instructional strategies, knowledge creation, and learning outcomes is detailed, and future research on the dynamics of culture within online learning environments is suggested. This chapter provides educators with the information needed to bring culturally responsive teaching to the online arena.
In their chapter titled “Examining Design Pattern Strategies as a Means to Achieve Social Presence in the Online Classroom,” Araminta Matthews and Robert Kitchin provide unique and innovative measures for designing coursework with an aim towards promoting social interaction. The authors explain how the study and collection of design patterns are used to create design pattern languages, which, in turn, can be assembled into design pattern libraries. They discuss how these tools underscore the importance of social interaction, differentiated design, learning-oriented social networking, and Web-design structures in overcoming online students’ feelings of separation from instructors and peers. Specific examples, geared towards overcoming common obstacles to engagement and interaction in online learning environments, demonstrate how even novice online course designers can identify challenges and can implement relevant solutions to problems related to the design of interactive learning environments.

In the chapter “Increasing Research Students’ Engagement through Virtual Communities,” authors Maria Limniou, Clare Holdcroft, and Paul Holmes address the needs of a different type of learner, that of the graduate-level research student. The authors detail the creation of a virtual community, with the adoption of a Researcher Development Framework, the use of Facebook™ and Twitter™, and blended learning activities that facilitated students’ engagement and interaction. Within such an environment, the graduate students experienced a stronger sense of community as they were more readily able to receive assistance from staff and faculty members, to share experiences with fellow researchers, and were better supported in their efforts to surmount research project difficulties.

In “Cultural Inclusivity in Online Learning,” Karen Milheim examines the many issues and concerns affecting cultural inclusion in online learning environments. As colleges and universities reach out to a global audience, it is imperative that instructors establish a meaningful social presence with their increasingly multicultural student groups. The author discusses the impact of cultural differences in online learning and offers steps to make courses more inclusive. The chapter addresses how curricula, course management, and communication strategies can be built upon the Community of Inquiry model to promote social interaction and to structure a multicultural framework that successfully provides students with strong ties to their instructors and to their peers. This approach to inclusivity will appeal to the instructor, the course designer, and the administrator who wants to learn more about the development of culturally inclusive learning environments in online course settings.

Patricia McGee and Jooyoung Voeller use their chapter, “Fostering Interaction and Social Presence through eCollaboration,” to discuss fundamental theories and design frameworks that support and direct the development of course interaction and social presence in online learning. The authors examine how the technology and the informal learning strategies used in our work and daily lives have moved into our educational experiences. They present existing research and collaborative models that not only offer solutions to the problem of online student attrition but also demonstrate how eCollaboration enhances social interaction between students and instructors, develops and reinforces teaching presence, and helps students to develop 21st century learning skills.

Of the many challenges to distance learners, that of isolation is cause for utmost concern amongst students and educators alike. In “The Value of Social Presence in Developing Student Satisfaction and Learning Outcomes in Online Environments,” Michael Marmon uses Moore’s Transactional Distance Theory to offer an explanation for why feelings of isolation pervade the online learning arena. By assessing the impact of Moore’s theory, and by gaining an understanding of the theoretical foundations of online instruction, Marmon demonstrates that educators can develop effective practices and procedures for generating a sense of social presence in online learning environments. He provides methods for eliminating feelings of isolation and fostering social presence through the use of these best practices, sound instructional methods, and the communication tools within the learning management system.
In “Building Social Presence through Engaging Online Instructional Strategies,” Sarah Mitchell and Mary Friend Shepard demonstrate how social presence can be developed when the instructor takes the role of facilitator throughout the students’ learning process. Working with the Online Steps to Complex Cognition model, the authors describe how strategies for creating more challenging and involved discussions can improve learning outcomes and foster greater interaction between students and their instructors, and with the students’ peers.

The chapters in Section 2, “Technology and Student-Teacher Interaction,” offer different views on engaging learners through the utilization of technological tools that connect users with instructors, peers, and course content. Accounts of successful in-service programs are complemented by research involving pre-service teachers. Veteran educators and those preparing to enter the field will find valuable tools in these readings.

In “Bridging the Social and Teaching Presence Gap in Online Learning,” Bei Zhang offers a thorough look at the tools and best practices that provide innovation and advancement in the establishment, development, and support of social presence in online learning environments. She details how bringing students and teachers together as human beings, rather than merely connecting them through a system of interfaces and learning management system platforms, can effectively “shorten the distance in distance learning.”

In “Digital Identity, Social Presence Technologies, and Presence Learning,” Chaka Chaka writes on how Web 2.0 technologies have been used to create digital identities and to support presence learning. Starting with an overview of four social presence technologies, he presents a series of projects demonstrating how digital identity, presence learning, and presence pedagogy are mediated by these technologies. He goes on to discuss higher education’s use of social presence technologies for content delivery, for instructional program deployment, and for the creation of virtual meeting spaces that support synchronous and asynchronous interaction between students and instructors. Chaka concludes with a look at the future trends likely to influence social presence technologies, presence learning, and presence pedagogy in higher education.

Narelle Lemon’s “Pre-Service Teachers Engaging with Twitter as a Professional Online Learning Environment” presents findings of a research project that addressed what happens, pedagogically, when Twitter is incorporated into learning activities. The chapter details the progress in students’ ability to professionally engage with Twitter and demonstrates a growth in confidence as they learned to participate and critically think about the use of social media as an effective online learning environment. While the subjects of the study were pre-service teachers, the practices can very well be applied to a much broader audience. The chapter also relates the value of providing such training to educators by describing how teachers “can make connections, share ideas, collaborate, and follow through on innovative learning and teaching practices that inspire themselves and in turn their own students.”

In spite of the ubiquity of familiar technologies in education, and the emergence of a generation of learners for whom the use of technology has become second nature, promoters of online instruction are still challenged to meet the expectations of students and educators. In “Leveraging Web 2.0 for Online Learning,” Prerna Lal discusses how educational institutions that offer online courses can utilize Web 2.0 technologies to provide collaborative social learning environments for students and teachers. She provides a thorough evaluation of current Web 2.0 technologies and offers examples of how they may best be applied to online learning. She concludes the chapter with a look towards some of the emerging technologies in this quickly evolving section of modern-day education.
Finally, the works presented in Section 3, “Establishing and Supporting Student-Teacher Interaction,” focus on efforts to promote social presence as an essential function of education. The chapters offer a collection of new models that have been created to help develop and support student-teacher interaction and show how familiar instructional models can be utilized to create social presence online. This blend of old and new is a fine way to conclude the book, by offering the reader a sendoff from familiar surroundings towards new horizons.

In “Strategies for Establishing and Sustaining Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment,” authors Credence Baker, Sarah Maben, and Jennifer Edwards provide instructors with detailed plans for creating and maintaining social presence in the online learning environment. By applying specific instructional strategies to develop a community of inquiry, faculty members are able to foster an atmosphere of sharing, support, and success for students enrolled in their online courses. A series of demonstration videos, accessed by mobile devices scanning the QR codes appearing throughout the chapter, complements the content with additional resources for incorporating some of the more technical strategies.

David Abraham’s “Technology Readiness and Social Presence in Online Higher Education” explores students’ willingness to use technology and its possible influence on their perceptions of social presence. The chapter offers an overview of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, explaining the three elements of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence, and also provides details of CoI survey instruments. These are complemented by a description of the technology readiness index, an overview of the nature of its quantitative elements, the implications for online education, and suggestions for future studies.

Redesigning face-to-face courses for online or blended delivery can be a formidable task. Katherine Erdman Becker’s “Creating a Culture of Engagement” details how a quality faculty development program can facilitate student-teacher interaction by providing instructors with the proper teaching strategies, adult learning theory, and information concerning the appropriate use of online technologies. Addressing faculty beliefs that are crucial to the implementation of social presence strategies in online learning, the chapter deals with the various concerns of instructors, both those who have effectively taught online and those who have not.

In “Using a Distributed Learning Environment Model to Foster Learner-Educator Interaction,” Pam and Bill Havice present a model that helps educators to create, deploy, and evaluate interaction in an online course by keeping the student at the center of the learning process. They begin with a brief overview of learning technology as it exists today then move forward with a discussion of their Distributed Learning Environment Model, providing the reader with descriptions of the model’s elements along with instructions on how to use the model to facilitate the design of courses that foster interaction while integrating assessment. The Havices provide strategies and tools to assist readers in designing an interactive online distributed learning environment of their own.

In “Planning, Designing, Implementing, and Managing Social Presence in Online Programs and Classes,” Kartik Patel takes a rather unique approach. Drawing upon childhood experiences and observations, he discusses social presence in terms of the dynamics working within individuals, as well as the interactions taking place between them. By examining the nature of social presence, its epistemological and psychological frameworks, and also surveying contemporary social presence models, he lays out an effective strategy for the origination, development, application, and support of social presence at the program and course levels. Dr. Patel analyzes the institutional factors of online class size, faculty workload, learning management systems, faculty and staff development, and social presence measurements. His discussion of social presence at the course level details how proper syllabi, course design, and techniques for implementing social presence can assist instructors in creating effective online learning environments.
“The Human Element MOOC” documents Whitney Kilgore’s and Patrick Lowenthal’s development and implementation of a connectivist Massive Online Open Course (or cMOOC) aimed at training educators in the different strategies used to humanize online learning. Using the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, the authors and their team integrated technology with a human purpose into a large enrollment course. They describe participants’ experiences while immersed in learning, and learning within, the Community of Inquiry model, and they detail how the course leaders modeled instructor presence while supporting the creation and understanding of both social and cognitive presence amongst the participants.

The different sections of this book are not offered as mutually exclusive silos of information. Indeed, it was difficult to decide where to place many of the chapters, as their topics often applied to the themes of more than one section. The chapters in this book represent the valid observations, rigorous studies, theoretical developments, and the practical applications of sound ideas honed into best practices. The authors have been given an unusual amount of latitude in both the treatment and the focus of their works. This has been done so the many elements that influence student-teacher interaction can be brought to light and thoroughly discussed in these pages.

The materials presented in these chapters serve as excellent resources for those involved in online education. Certainly, not every practice or recommendation will apply to every technology-based learning situation, but the varieties of research, techniques, and theoretical foundations contained herein will, surely, offer plenty of food for thought and inspiration for action.

In short, this book succeeds in its attempt to offer something to everyone. Those new to online instruction will discover a wealth of information, ideas, and practices to experiment with and adopt. Veteran instructors and administrators of online programs will find new perspectives and, perhaps, validations of tools and practices that they have developed over the years. Students will gain a greater understanding of “the lay of the land” through which their educational journey takes them. All readers of this book are provided with a detailed look at the efforts to create meaningful and supportive interaction within the technological environments of 21st century education, and between the students and instructors who occupy and function within these distributed domains.

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