



Establishing Facilitator Presence

Facilitator presence is a contributing factor in how the relationships in your online course or activity develop. Of the three types of presence outlined in the Community of Inquiry framework (teaching presence, social presence, cognitive presence), teaching presence is the one that facilitators in online language learning have the most direct control over.

A facilitator's presence (included in the concept of teaching presence) in the online space can lay the foundation for interaction and for community to develop later in the course. Specific actions designed to establish your facilitator presence will provide your language learners with visible examples for engaging in the course or activity. This initial engagement is very valuable for learners because presence in online learning requires some action on the part of the learner, unlike face-to-face classrooms where learners are physically present by default.

Facilitator presence also requires delicate balance between guiding the class and dominating the class, especially in language learning contexts where many learners will naturally look to the facilitator to lead any text-based discussions, model language, and scaffold content. A useful approach for balancing your interaction is to think of yourself as participating in the course or activity as a member of the community, rather than seeing yourself as teaching or instructing from any prominent position.

“A facilitator’s presence in the online space can lay the foundation for interaction and for community to develop later in the course.”

On the following pages are a few actions that you can make at the start of an online course or activity to help you establish your facilitator presence.



Initial Actions to Consider

ESTABLISH INDIVIDUAL COMMUNICATION

Establishing contact with learners individually will lay a foundation of clear, direct communication for your online course or activity and directly engage your learners. Contacting learners by phone, by email, or by Learning Management System direct message prior to or at the start of the course shows learners that you are available for support.

Individual contact can help language learners feel more comfortable using language online, preparing them for the more open environment of the class discussion board. One-to-one communication with your language learners can be used throughout a course for many reasons, such as:

- to provide positive reinforcement
- to provide motivation
- to solve or identify technology problems
- to provide informal language feedback
- to elicit course feedback from learners
- to check in when you notice a learner who is absent or struggling

POST A WELCOME MESSAGE

A welcome message can set expectations for your course and guide learners into the language of the course space and course content. A welcome message can also establish a place where learners can consistently and routinely expect to find relevant course information from you in the form of weekly course news. A welcome message can include multiple types of information:

- office hours and contact information
- any anticipated changes that you might make to the course or activity (e.g., changes in discussion group sizes or changes in partners for pair work)
 - making the possibility of these changes explicit at the onset will reduce any feelings of surprise later
- information and expectations about communication, netiquette, or cyber safety
- explicit reference to a “language safe” environment that you hope to create
- vocabulary or phrases about the course interface that can help learners right away
- vocabulary or phrases about the course content that can help learners right away



MODEL COMMUNICATION

Showing learners how to communicate is an important part of facilitating an online language course. Learners may come from a variety of cultural backgrounds and need experience in cultural communication – either for a Canadian/multi-cultural environment or for an online environment, or for both.

As well, referencing the nuances of your communication explicitly can help learners develop the habit of observing you (and others in the class) for effective ways to improve their own communication. While this type of observing happens naturally and incidentally in a physical classroom, learners may need explicit prompting to transfer this practice into the online environment. There are several ways to model good communication at the start of a course or activity:

- fill in your own profile and make it relevant for the current course or activity
- post your introduction first
- keep your discussion forum posts short and specific, and include open-ended questions that can encourage further discussion
- respond to others with genuine interest – ask questions and challenge learners to provide more specific details about their language experience and learning context
- ask about specific vocabulary and language familiarity
- provide models and examples of discussion forum posts
- provide examples of questions that learners can use to prompt for information and build conversation
- post links to interesting course-related news stories that you come across
- respond as quickly as possible to all messages directly addressed to you



CREATE CONNECTIONS BETWEEN LEARNERS

As you respond to introductions or connect with your learners individually, use the opportunity to actively point out potential connections between learners. At the start of an online course or activity, learners may experience language overload and not have enough time to carefully read through all introductions to learn about everyone. As you respond to learners, make reference to others who have similar contexts or have experienced similar concerns.

Simple statements like, “Mary has also experienced problems with online learning” or “Joe also mentioned that he works in the accounting industry. Did you respond to his introduction?” will provide entry points for learners to start building social relationships. When learners share a common context, they will likely share similar language learning goals and be able to build a relationship around this context and learning goals. Here are some common points of interest to highlight:

- similar professional experience
- similar cultural background
- lived in similar places
- similar reasons for enrolling
- similar concerns about online learning
- they have asked similar questions

