

## **Connected and Engaged: How Social Presence Shapes Online Learning Communities for Veterinary Professionals on an online MSc in Veterinary Education**

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### **Research Domains**

Postgraduate scholarship and practice (PGSP)

### **Abstract**

Our primary research aim is to explore how veterinary professionals enrolled in a fully online postgraduate MSc in Veterinary Education perceive 'social presence' and the role that this has in shaping social interactions and connections in building communities of learning within our online programme. A mixed methods approach using Garrison's Community of Inquiry framework as a conceptual lens allowed us to explore this complex phenomenon of social presence within the asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities that our course provides for our students. Prioritising those early social interactions in the asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities allowed peers to collaborate, building personal and then professional connections that enabled external professional communities of practice to emerge, sharing teaching, resources, and perspectives that ultimately supported their educational practice and professional growth.

### **Full paper**

The nature of 'flexible' online learning has changed with institutions seeing that it is possible to move courses fully online to support and progress the development of a community of learners. Inclusive, accessible and engaging courses are important for our students and ensuring that our courses are designed to meet these needs is challenging. In designing an effective and engaging online distance course, facilitating those initial peer and tutor connections to build that community of learning within the student's experience is vital.

Garrison's Community of Inquiry (CoI) model is a framework for designing/delivering effective online learning experiences, with emphasis on the relationship between the three interdependent elements of 'social', teaching, and 'cognitive' presence. Social presence is a complex construct and has many definitions, but this study aligns with students feeling

socially and emotionally connected with peers and teachers, the ability of being able to communicate purposefully, and supporting those interpersonal relationships, in an online learning environment (Garrison et al., 1999). The Col framework is a useful conceptual lens through which to view the complexities of our online veterinary postgraduate course and to begin our investigations into 'social presence' and how this supports the establishment of learning communities on our online course.

This study was set at the Royal Veterinary College (University of London) with veterinary professionals who were enrolled in a fully online postgraduate certificate, diploma and master's in veterinary education from 2022-2023. The MSc in Veterinary Education is primarily aimed at those actively involved in veterinary education, and focused on being part-time, fully remote and flexible. It explores students' perceptions of social presence and how those perceptions and initial peer/tutor connections supported and established the building of learning communities within the programme.

Using a mixed-methods (Quant-QUAL) interpretivist approach enabled us to gauge an understanding of how our veterinary professional cohort perceived social presence (through the Community of Inquiry survey), then further delving deeper into those perceptions of social presence and how this creates potential for social interaction and the building of learning communities (through interviews.) (Creswell, 2004.) Students completed the Community of Inquiry survey, which explored their sense of belonging in the course, their interactions with peers/lecturer (social presence), their understanding and critical thinking (cognitive presence), and further the effectiveness of the facilitation of the course (teaching presence). This then led to further individual experiences being explored via semi-structured interviews, with twelve students being recruited. The interview transcripts were analysed using Braun & Clarke's reflexive thematic analysis.

Three main themes were generated from the dataset:

- Interaction preference for how they engaged with learning activities (asynchronous and synchronous)
- Identifiability and visibility (influenced social presence development, facilitating or impeding the building of social presence)
- Hybrid learning communities -personal and professional communities of learning (building online and offline social interactions that facilitate social presence)

Asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities that our course offers were discussed in surveys and interviews, sharing specifically that students had a preference for how they interacted with the program, synchronous webinars were prioritised, as there was an ability to have a 'real-time' dialogue with a peer/teacher, providing a sense of immediacy and a way to make social connections for creating that initial sense of belonging. There were more mixed thoughts around engagement with the asynchronous opportunities, such as the forums, with students recognising time and effort as barriers, and a good response taking time to craft.

Visibility and identifiability of peers and tutors in our webinars and forums were key overarching factors that facilitated or impeded social presence development, further impacting our students' ability to build their sense of belonging to their peers, in the course and further develop into a learning community.

A unique but interesting finding from the dataset was the communities that have been set up as a result of social connections being built through our learning opportunities, and the crucial role that students developing social presence played in this. Organically personal and professional learning communities external and parallel to the course were set up independently and have been a valuable step in building educational communities of practice, that are a long-term impact on our course on our students' professional lives and practice.

Prioritising those early social interactions and connections in the asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities provided allowed peers to collaborate, building personal and then professional connections, that enabled external professional communities of practice to emerge, sharing teaching, resources, and perspectives that ultimately supported their educational practice and professional growth.