The Critical Role of Presence in Instruction
as COVID-19 Forces Learners and Instructors Online

COVID-19 has made technology-mediated learning the new normal. While online instruction can be just as effective as face-to-face instruction, and indeed sometimes can be more effective than face-to-face instruction, this is only possible when technology is used effectively and the communication fosters presence. This panel will review the range of presence research to suggest critical knowledge for instructors and learners to be their most effective selves in the COVID-19 classroom.

Your presence is a gift: Communication, social presence, and the classroom

Many books and materials about teaching online highlight the importance and challenges of establishing social presence in the classroom (e.g., Darby & Lang, 2019). However, few, if any, focus on the wealth of research in communication that highlight the communication practices that can help lead to an increased experience of presence, giving lip service if anything. The importance of social presence, and of communication as central to it, will be discussed in general.

Using story to enhance presence and reduce anxiety in the COVID-19 classroom

In this segment of the panel presentation, we will explore how stories can be used to enhance all types of presence and reduce anxiety and uncertainty in the COVID-19 classroom. In F2F, hybrid, and online courses, the power of story can be harnessed to support cognitive presence, strengthen teaching presence, and build social presence all while empowering students and promoting collaborative learning. This engaging environment, in turn, can reduce anxiety and uncertainty about class logistics, learning objectives, and classmate interactions. We will share stories, reflections and best practices.

Technologically mediated out of class communication to increase presence

Teachers faced a new 'first day of school' reality in response to the COVID-19 pandemic: meeting students at a distance and increasing presence early using technologically mediated out of class communication (TMOCC). My past research has discovered TMOCC (e.g., email) is a chance to increase students' perceived immediacy. Further, the use of a paralinguistic digital manipulation (e.g., 😊), and variants (i.e., 😌, 😂, 😊), affected students' perceptions of the instructor's credibility. They may serve as a simple yet effective strategy to increase presence. Dialogue can follow addressing instructors' use of TMOCC to increase presence in our more digitally-enhanced educational future.

Communicating with students when the world stops: Highlighting the best communication practices to use during and after a pandemic

The shifting to hybrid and online instruction due to COVID-19 has increased the need of the instructional communication concepts of perceived immediacy, clarity, and confirming messages. There is a plethora of research documenting the challenges and importance of being immediate with students in an online/hybrid environment. Clarity is another key component for students and instructors especially where the students and instructor maybe novices to online education. Finally, students need confirming messages so they know that their teachers care and understand their needs. The authors will highlight these three key concepts to help faculty and their students succeed in online education.

Teaching students to develop social presence
There is an abundance of literature focusing on the process of developing social presence for online instructors and the benefits of those instructors developing social presence as related to student learning. Yet, little literature focuses on how to teach students to develop social presence, despite establishment that online classrooms with higher presence from all communicators will result in a more satisfying communication experience for learners. This talk will review what is known about how to teach students to develop social presence in the online classroom.

A new normal: Revisiting traditional Lectures and student expectations in the virtual classroom
Interactive teaching, group discussions, peer reviews, and office hours are just a few of the classroom dynamics that have been thrust into a new normal, online setting. Finding memorable ways to relate material and engage the students through a computer-mediated channel without overwhelming them requires creativity and substantive thought from instructors. In many instances, this requires a complete overhaul of the traditional lecture model used in the physical classroom, the use of new technologies and tools to increase interaction and perceived immediacy, and clear communication that prioritizes and centralizes student learning.