

Exploring perceptions of social presence among researching professionals

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Abstract

The Open University (OU) offers Professional Doctorates (PD) in Education and Health and Social Care. Since our students study remotely, except for annual residential weekends when they meet face-to-face, the programme team expected little disruptions from the implementation of social distancing measures enforced in educational settings due to COVID-19. In this case study of the PD programme at the OU managing the pandemic we focus on the impact of social distancing restrictions preventing PD researchers from meeting face-to-face. We examine the ways the Programme Leaders reconfigured the PD programme to develop opportunities for *social presence*. We focussed on the cohort who started their doctorate in October 2020, amidst the pandemic. Using an online questionnaire and focus group discussion we explored their perceptions of social presence.

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Introduction

In March 2020 the UK Government responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by instituting a national lockdown. A year later, the impact on our personal and professional lives has been profound.

For those studying a professional doctorate (PD), the pandemic's impact has been three-fold. Firstly, PD researchers have been unable to attend lectures, seminars, and residential schools on campus. Secondly, the overnight pivot to working from home or increased pressures on health services while home-schooling and/or looking after relatives has meant their professional workloads intensified at a time when their personal life was in upheaval. Thirdly, the context of their research altered. Data collection had to be abandoned or recalibrated to suit online methods, while the organisational context of their research — e.g. health organisations, social care settings or educational institutions — were either closed or caught up in managing the pandemic.

In this case study of the PD programme at the Open University (OU) managing the pandemic, we focus on the first type of impact: social distancing restrictions preventing PD researchers from meeting face-to-face. We examine the ways the Programme Leaders reconfigured the PD programme to develop opportunities for *social presence*, that is opportunities for individuals to demonstrate their state of being in a virtual environment, signalling their availability for interpersonal transactions (Kehrwald 2008). For this reason, we focussed on the cohort who started their doctorate in October 2020, amidst the pandemic. Using an online questionnaire and focus group discussion we explored their perceptions of social presence.

Contextual background

The PD programmes at The Open University

The OU offers two PDs, one in Education (EdD) and one in Health and Social Care (DHSC). These part-time sister programmes are typically undertaken by established professionals who, often working full-time, research their own practice. The blended programmes are structured into two stages and integrate online learning, supervision and an annual face-to-face residential weekend. Stage 1 (years 1 and 2) consists of nine self-study modules, and Stage 2 (years 3+) comprises of a supervised research project, the submission of a thesis and viva voce examination.

Defining social presence

Social presence theory explores and explains the social aspects of online learning. While there is contestation around precisely how it is best defined, it is beyond the scope of this chapter to explore its multiple meanings. We view social presence in close relation to interpersonal interaction, emphasised by individuals having the *ability* to send and interpret social presence signals, the *opportunity* to interact socially and the *motivation* — need for and interest in — for relational exchanges (Kehrwald 2008).

Enhancing social presence during the pandemic

The PD programme's online pivot was supported by an institution with more than 50 years' experience of digital learning. Predicated on personalised study patterns, flexibility is one of our core pedagogic values. Students have the option of up to two years of study breaks to manage the unexpected. We did not anticipate the pandemic causing major disruption to the programme. Nonetheless, with the confinement brought by the pandemic, as a short-term

intervention, Programme Leaders introduced a series of fortnightly Saturday morning drop-in support sessions for these researching professionals. We explored managing study during the lockdown, wellbeing, online data collection and writing COVID-19 into your thesis (Dennis and Waterhouse 2020). At the end of our four-planned sessions we were surprised to find that students expressed a desire for the meetings to continue. Aware that the uncertainty of upheaval had the potential to engender feelings of isolation and loneliness, poor performance and drop out (Liu, Gomez & Cherng-Jhy 2009), we established monthly student-led seminars which allowed for cross-cohort interactions.

While social presence is rightly understood as working dynamically with teaching (what teachers do to structure the learning) and cognitive presence (selection of learning content) (Nolan-Grant 2019), we note with interest that student-led seminars have leant away from cognitive material towards biographical accounts of doctoral study. Rather than presenting their research, students have foregrounded personal experiences. These biographies are a mutual signal of students' state of being and their availability for interpersonal transactions. They underlined the importance of ensuring that, in transitioning our October induction to an online format, we provided ample opportunities for the new cohort of PDs to establish social presence: being real, available and there.

There were several pedagogical challenges associated with this adaptation. The online environment offered fewer opportunities for corridor conversation. Nor are systems, tools and platforms universally familiar or accessible. We adopted a synchronous flipped approach to sessions (Zheng, Bhagat, Zhen & Zhange 2020) maximising time available for discussion and collaboration. Before the event, we sent students an induction pack which included MP4 recorded orientations to their year of study and website tours. Students made themselves known to each other — an important part of establishing social presence (Kehrwald 2008) — through their profiles on a digital wall (Padlet). Students, supervisors and the programme

team posted an image, an account of their research and a brief biography. In addition, we used Twitter to engender the social presence of the programme team (Weidlick & Bastianens 2019), this was especially helpful for new students who did not yet have access to the university's communication systems. During the online induction various strategies were used to create a collaborative space and stimulate discussion (Yaun & Kim 2014). These included a 'Sharing your research' session where students, along with members of the programme team, in small groups clustered by research topics, discussed their professional backgrounds and proposed research topics, a session where students brought in objects which were critically analysed in breakout rooms using a 'study diamond' (Clifton 2012), while invited guests gave presentations (around academic writing or life after the Professional Doctorate). The weekend culminated with an online a pub quiz.

Each year we host four synchronous seminar discussions. Two weeks after the induction residential, during our first seminar we asked students to reflect on 'developing as a researching professional' prompted by a series of questions and activities. This seminar was notably dominated by affective responses (Rouke 2001). Students shared goals and concerns about starting their doctorate. The October 2020 cohort joined the programme at a point when student-led seminars were firmly established, and the new cohort of students had a platform upon which to interact with students further along in the doctoral journey. The PD team also fostered greater online engagement with the Faculty's PhD programme, creating opportunities for social interaction between two usually disparate groups of doctoral researchers. We have hosted a new year lunch online where participants brought in and shared household objects that represented their research, a Faculty online doctoral research conference which included traditional presentations, a wellbeing drop-in strand and a gallery of creative representations of research and an intensive online writing camp week.

Research approach

The purpose of the research was to explore perceptions of social presence amongst the 2020 PD cohort at the OU using a mixed-methods approach. Given the on-going nature of the pandemic and the uncertainty of future face-to-face encounters, the research aimed to develop activities to improve the programme for new and existing cohorts. After receiving ethical approval from the OU's Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC/3885/Waterhouse), we used a survey to measure students' perceptions of social presence, and a focus group discussion to enable them to exemplify and explain survey responses.

Online survey

There were 37 PD students in the 2020 cohort (28 on the EdD; 9 on the DHSC). Over a two-week period in March 2021, they were invited to complete an anonymous 15-minute survey (with both closed and open-ended questions) embedded on the programme's website. 11 students responded.

The closed questions consisted of adapted items from the validated scale of social presence developed by Arbaugh et al. (nd) as part of the Community of Inquiry questionnaire. This scale covers three components of social presence: affective expression, open communication and group cohesion. Respondents answered on a Likert type scale ranging from 1= 'strongly agree' to 5= 'strongly disagree'. The inclusion of open questions additionally enabled the collection of students' views in free-text responses. These questions explored what specific programme activities, or formal and informal communication spaces enabled students to or prohibited them from establishing and maintaining social presence.

Focus group discussion

Given that richness of data derived from text responses to open-ended survey questions is frequently less than information derived from interview or focus group discussion (FGD)

(LaDonna et al. 2018), a focus group discussion was held subsequently to investigate the main findings from the survey's questions in greater depth. The FGD was conducted, transcribed and anonymised by a researcher outside the Programme team. The discussion covered students' needs and feelings while studying the PD, preferences and difficulties communicating with peers and supervisors online and the delivery of the doctoral programme under the circumstances of the COVID-19 pandemic. Five students took part in the FGD.

Structured responses: The survey

Table 1 displays the responses on the social presence scale. Considering open communication first, the majority of respondents reported comfort with interaction in the online environment. Over 90% reported that they strongly agreed or agreed with the statements relating to feeling comfortable communicating in the online environment, participating in programme discussions, interacting with the programme team and with other doctoral students. Despite this comfort with interacting in the online environment, only 45% saw online communication as an excellent medium for social interaction and only 18% strongly agreed or agreed with the statement 'I have been able to get to know some of my peers', with 36% reporting experience of isolation, disconnectedness or loneliness whilst studying for their doctorate.

<INSERT TABLE 1 HERE>

Unstructured responses: Focus group discussion and open survey questions

The findings from the qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis. Initial codes were generated representing similar phenomena by the lead authors. Codes were then collated into three main themes using a theory-driven approach and discussed and agreed upon by the whole project team. The three themes – ability, opportunity and motivation - reflect the

definition taken of social presence we work with (Kehrwald 2008). All the quotes in the following sections are from focus group participants.

The first theme examines students' ability for engaging in online activities and reveals the importance they attributed to their previous online learning experiences and capacity to navigate virtual environments. The theme of opportunity was the most prominent and exposes four perceived factors affecting personal connections: need for face-to-face encounters, opportunities for more informal small group interaction, personalisation of presence, and lack of time. The third theme captures students' motives for interaction where we found clear evidence of the impact of the pandemic on their willingness to connect online as well as a selective participation on what was felt most relevant. The issues emerging from each theme could be seen as interrelated. Students' digital ability could be affecting their perceptions on what may be possible online as well as their motivation for engaging in virtual spaces. At the same time, lack of time could be impacting on the range and length of online activities they wish to engage with. Furthermore, when the professional, the personal and the learning take place remotely, a reduced motivation to engage online could block opportunities for fruitful exchanges. Overall, for the majority of students, there seems to be a sense of disconnection online and a desire for the replication of the real in the virtual with respect to social presence.

Theme 1: Ability

This theme is related to students' ability to engage within the online environment during the first year of the PD programme. Two main aspects were highlighted.

Respondents suggested that their capacity to interact with others was attributable to their previous experiences. Some students reported that they were familiar with communicating via Teams or Zoom in their professional roles, whilst others also highlighted that they had

studied previously with the OU so had experience of using online forums. Forums were appreciated because they enabled students working in different time zones to contribute.

They also encouraged careful, thoughtful contributions:

I think it allows you in writing to put your views forward in perhaps a more considered way, but you have to think about what you're going to write, so that might be an advantage.

Focus Group Discussion participant

On the other hand, a small number of students felt they did not have the knowledge needed to meaningfully interact with others on the programme. For some this related to a lack of awareness of the different activities taking place, whilst for others they felt they did not have sufficient information to make decisions about which events to attend:

Also, I'm not really sure what to get involved in, so there's various things that have been suggested through the Prof Doc. There's a Tuesday evening and a Thursday 11.00 o'clock but [I don't really know] what to prioritise. Or what would be the best and how to best use one's time. Because there is a time limit. And I think that we were introduced to all these things, but not really helped along the way or given the next step in the journey somehow. And so, as a result I haven't really done a great deal.

Focus group discussion participant

Navigating online learning environments could be stressful, especially as a range of online spaces were used to organise events by the PD programme team, the faculty and the Graduate School. Not all students had the ability to navigate the virtual environments needed to access events and resources:

I did actually try and join (GS [Graduate School] coffee morning) a couple of weeks ago, but I couldn't get into it. So, I then emailed and the reply was that I needed to be let in. There was another way and there was something else had to be done before I could get in so it's more complicated than just...so that was it then, I didn't join that week and I haven't had chance.

Focus group discussion participant

Theme 2: Opportunities

Opportunities are related to contextual factors that enhance or inhibit students getting to know each other on the programme. Four aspects emerged.

Firstly, lack of face-to-face interaction. Most students felt the cancellation of the face-to-face induction due to COVID-19 prevented them from developing supportive peer groups:

I think that that weekend that we did online, if we'd been able to do face to face we [would] have made friends, in inverted commas, or you'd buddied up with people in a natural way because organically you do that when you're face to face. And you get a choice of somehow it works out and then you would have had a little group; maybe you could have followed through, or at least one person.

Focus group discussion participant

In contrast, one research participant emphasised her preference for a wholly remote learning experience. This brings into sharp relief the extent to which online events remove the stress of travelling to campus and thus enhances the opportunity for social interaction:

The activities [for the induction] were moved online and actually this suited me.

When interacting with colleagues and fellow students online I was relaxed and happy

rather than exhausted and uncomfortable [after] a physical journey [...]. Everything was much better during the pandemic regarding interactions.

Questionnaire respondent

Secondly, a major topic in the FGD data was the nature of interaction. There was a sense that the opportunities for interaction offered by the PD programme were structured and formal. Whilst students felt these sessions were useful in terms of cognitive development, they did not see them as offering opportunities to develop a sense of belonging:

The forum discussions are useful but fairly cold and objective. There is no sense of reaching out to people and feeling supported here. When putting something for the whole cohort to read, especially when you don't know them, I don't feel comfortable letting my guard down in any way.

Focus group discussion participant

Most students highlighted positively programme activities that had allowed them to interact in small groups enabling them to get to know their peers. There was frequent reference to the 'Sharing your research' session offered during induction. In fact, our induction evaluation identified this session as one students gained from the most. Having a fellow traveller on the doctoral journey seems important. One student described the impact of a newly created study buddy system:

They said 'we're thinking of doing some study buddies' and I thought anything, just to talk to someone and just to have someone to talk to. And then [named student] and I just got paired up. [...] that's been really nice. We are doing different topics, but it was just nice to [...] share top tips between us and going 'Ah'. [...] Also, we've had some wins as well, you know.

Focus group discussion participant

Research participants repeatedly expressed a desire for more small group activities, while highlighting the tension between formality and structure:

Would I have liked to have more contact with people? Yes, that would have been good ... but I wouldn't want it to be a formal space so you could take out that worry about sounding academic enough. [...] So, it's a space where you could just go and say I haven't a clue what I'm doing here. Has anyone got any ideas about, you know that sort of space, but with a structure so it doesn't turn into a moan fest for half an hour or whatever.

Focus group discussion participant

Thirdly, an absence of the visual was felt. Postgraduate researchers are social beings, whatever your mode of learning, being seen and being able to see matters. The acquisition of knowledge is a necessary but insufficient aspect of achieving goals which are only accomplished through emotional engagement (Busteed 2019). It is therefore unsurprising that participants highlighted the lack of 'faces' in the online environment as inhibiting their capacity for getting to know others. The absence of a face makes connection difficult – as this participant explains:

[I like to] have pictures as I often see folks on Teams except if they come in as a guest with no picture even so not everyone has their camera on. The padlet at the beginning of year one was a really good idea as I felt I could see and read about tutors, peers, etc.

Focus group discussion participant

Similarly, in written forum discussions, when people did not set up their profiles, or added their picture to their profiles, there was a sense of an absence of others, of them being not fully there, a feeling of disconnection:

I like the [asynchronous forum] seminars and feel a link when I read and type in them, but without faces to names the people feel very distanced.

Focus group discussion participant

A fourth aspect mentioned was time. Researching professionals working full-time and studying for 18.5 hours per week lead complex lives with multiple and competing calls on their time. COVID-19 exacerbated what many already felt was time and effort intense, stressful, pressed and lacking in breathing space. Most participants reported that family and work demands prevented them from attending seminars and social events. This, for some, meant they had to be strategic in what activities they engaged with:

[...] it's time. [...] I am short of time. Doing the job that we're all doing in the middle of a pandemic has been difficult [...] I don't even think it's time, it's brain space. [...] I've got teenagers at home as well. [...] So I've cut down strategically to the absolute bare minimum of what I need to do.

Focus group discussion participant

Theme 3: Motivation

This theme related to the extent to which the PD programme provided the need for or an interest in students expending limited time and effort on relational exchanges. The issue is whether there are specific tasks requiring relational exchanges which deepen relationships.

Two points were raised in relation to this.

One was screen time. The pandemic affected students' willingness to interact socially online. For some, their professional roles required hours in front of a computer. Even if events were accepted as valuable for their studies more '*screen time*' made them unappealing:

I'm on [...] Zoom all day. It's just, it's just too much. I saw on Twitter over the weekend that some people were talking about the writing weekend and my supervisor was involved in running it and I would have liked to have done it and I've heard great things about it, but I was just like 'no!?'

Focus group discussion participant

The other point was about the perceived relevance of events. For some the time demands of spending too much time on the computer, combined with a perceived lack of relevance or usefulness of organised sessions resulted in nonattendance. It was reported that sessions with a large group of students did not appear to have the potential for comfortable communication with others:

I haven't really attended some of the things that are available, but I think if it was something that I was going to [offer] emotional support [...] it would get it into my diary, but the groups would have to be a size to feel comfortable for people to be open. You don't want 30 people in it.

Focus group discussion participant

For others, the research topics of peers in their cohort were not relevant to their own interests and therefore affected their attendance to sessions. Instead, some students placed greater value on cross-cohort interaction, rather than within-cohort interactions, due to the sense of belonging they felt in groups with similar research interests.

Scholarship on long-term impacts

The impact of the move of our residential weekend online will last considerably longer than the COVID-19 pandemic. Context is key in evaluating learning points from this case. Pedagogies are situationally contingent, embedded and enacted within specific environments

(Bayne et al. 2020). The OU has more than 50 years' experience of distance learning. Our online pivot brought us into line with the University's default mode. Technical support and practical advice were close to hand and with some decisions we had only to follow agreed institutional protocols.

Taking social presence as our conceptual guide, our final reflections are organised within its three ongoing conditions.

Ability

- Digital pedagogies require more than simply transferring face-to-face delivery into their online equivalence. The significance of this may well have been lost in the speed with which transformations were made. In selecting modes of learning students need for social presence is as important as a cognitive challenge.
- It is possible to both build and bridge meaningful encounters online which embeds personalised flexibility and enables more careful considered interactions. Online learning need not be equated with a less personable learning approach.
- The ubiquity of online platforms ensures that PD researchers come to the online pedagogic encounter with experience of digitally mediated communication which can be drawn upon to shape platform choice and use.

Opportunities

- Interpersonal interaction is a necessary component of social presence. Given constraints on time and energy opportunities, successful interpersonal interaction is greatly a matter of programme design.
- Opportunities for online interaction will not resonate with all students. PD researchers will need guidance in what to prioritise.

- Bandwidth limitations mean it is not always possible to have cameras on during seminars. But a face attached to a name, research profile and biography can be made possible through platforms that run parallel to the programme. The PD learning journey is enjoyable and successful when fellow travellers are experienced as ‘real’ and ‘there’.

Motivation

- Not all students identify interpersonal contact as important to their learning journey, but if learning is understood as a combination of the social, the emotional and the cognitive (Illeris 2003) a successful online programme needs to incorporate interpersonal interaction as a core necessity.
- Social presence need not add to screen fatigue; it can be encouraged through online profiles, study buddies and writing groups.
- Relationship building is a core rather than optional activity, programme design could include varied tasks and opportunities from whole group to paired or small group interaction.

Conclusion

This study provides a cautionary reminder for colleagues who – driven by the immediacy of COVID-19 - found pedagogic solutions that were exclusively technological. The urgency of simply keeping programmes running understandably obscured all other considerations. More than 12 months into the pandemic, defined by successive waves of infection and the continued presence of a virus we may yet learn to live with rather than overcome, the importance of creating critical friendships, achieving open communications and engendering peer-to-peer support has been brought into sharp relief. This paper evidences the importance of pedagogic relationships that extend beyond supervisor / supervised, mentor / mentee suggesting social presence as a necessary corrective to an exclusively technological approach

to managing learning in lockdown. But our horizons are inevitably short term. The extent to which programmes, having made a successful pivot to online learning make the more graceful pirouette to developing online learning communities (Adams & Jeter 2021) remains open to empirical exploration.

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Table 1: Perceptions of social presence of Year 1 OU professional doctorate students (n=11)

	Percentage			Mean Score
	Strongly agree or Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Strongly Disagree Strongly agree	
Affective expression				
Getting to know other doctoral students and academics gives me a sense of connection to the programme	45.5	36.3	18.2	2.8
I have been able to get to know some of my peers	18.2	36.3	45.5	3.4
Online communication is an excellent medium for social interaction	45.5	27.3	27.3	2.7
I experienced a sense of isolation, disconnectiveness or loneliness whilst studying for my doctorate	36.3	9.1	54.6	3.3
Open Communication				
I feel comfortable communicating in the online environment	91.0	0.0	9.1	1.5
I feel comfortable participating in the programme discussions	91.0	9.1	0.0	1.5
I feel comfortable with other doctoral students	91.0	9.1	0.0	1.6
I feel comfortable interacting with the programme team	100.0	0.0	0.0	1.4
Group cohesion				
I feel comfortable disagreeing with other doctoral students whilst still maintaining a sense of trust	18.2	73.7	9.1	2.9
I feel like my point of view is acknowledged by other doctoral students or academics	45.5	54.5	0.0	2.3
Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration	36.3	45.5	18.2	2.7