

*Article*

# **Establishing Social Presence for an Engaging Online Teaching and Learning Experience**

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## **Abstract**

Unlike face-to-face classes where physical presence is a given, the lack of “real” interpersonal connections to establish a strong social presence in online teaching and learning experience affects student learning. Students tend to feel isolated and disengaged. This paper explores how I sought to create a supportive environment for my students reading a critical thinking and communication module for community leadership during an Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT) experience amid the pandemic last year in 2020. Using the Community of Inquiry framework as a lens to reflect on how well I established social presence in the online environment, I thematically analysed student qualitative feedback on their learning experiences. This investigation also serves as an inquiry into the effectiveness of the dialogic scaffolding pedagogical framework I adopted for the module. Moreover, this study compliments a reflection on the impact of my teaching philosophy that students are social learners before they become independent learners. I believe that students learn not as isolated beings, but as active members of a community; what they learn and how they make sense of knowledge depends on the social context in which they learn. The findings revealed the effectiveness of the application of dialogic scaffolding principles, which focuses on the orchestration of talk to scaffold student learning and co-construct understanding. With a socio-constructivist view of teaching, many tutors could consider their classes of students as communities of participants in learning. The paper concludes with recommendations for strategies that tutors can adopt to establish a supportive environment for physically separated communities of learners.

## **Keywords**

Emergency remote teaching, social presence, dialogic scaffolding, online teaching and learning

## **1 Introduction**

Emergency remote teaching (ERT) seems to be the buzzword lately as educators around the world grapple with it. Some consider it a new concept (Hodges et al., 2020), while others equate it with e-learning or online learning (Zimmerman, 2020). ERT, defined as “a sudden interim shift of instructional delivery to an online delivery mode as result of an immense catastrophe” (Mohammed et al., 2020, p.72), becomes a default solution to allow students to continue with their lessons (Golden, 2020).

Online teaching does create a flexibility for teaching and learning to take place anywhere and anytime. However, the unprecedented pace of the move creates many new challenges for tutors (and students). Many tutors lament that time passes very quickly when they teach online. The hours are never enough to complete every activity that they had planned. There is never enough time to meaningfully reconfigure their instruction to overcome the challenges of ERT, especially the “social disconnect” that students and tutors feel while they are online (Kebritchi, Lipschuetz & Santiago, 2017). Other difficulties with online teaching as reported by university tutors arise from the complexity of the instructional situation and shortcomings in planning and organisation (Ching, Hsu and Baldwin, 2018) and their low-comfort level to teach online exacerbated by their lack of confidence that online instruction can offer the same level of high physical interaction endemic to tutor–student engagement (Chang, Shen, Liu, 2014.)

Scholars have consistently posited that effective online learning results from careful instructional design and planning (Branch & Dousay, 2015). It is this process and the careful consideration of different design decisions that have a true impact on the quality of the instruction. However, in ERT, such a careful design process is typically absent as tutors make the emergency shift to online instruction. Tutors often focus on the subject-matter content. However, Fawns et al. (2020) emphasised that “it is often the social activity, the relationship-building, the problem-solving, the dialogue and generation of ideas, and the students’ own discovery of other content that has not been pre-defined by the teacher” (pg. 83), yet it is often in social activities and processes that much of learning takes place (Slavich & Zimbardo, 2012). Hence, there is a crucial need for tutors to shift their focus from teaching presence (covering the subject-matter content) to social presence (establishing interpersonal connection) and how social activities are enacted for student engagement during online instruction.

## **2 Social Presence in Online Learning and ERT**

In order to reach a clearer understanding of how challenges in establishing a strong social presence may differ in planned online learning and ERT, it is important to consider the differing ways in which both may affect learning.

Online learning, or e-learning, is a method of instruction that harnesses the affordances of the Internet. It allows for teaching and learning to take place at a distance rather than within a physical classroom setting. In fact, online learning often strives to leverage technology and provide students with the opportunity to earn educational qualifications or certifications without having to be in an institution. Means, Bakia and Murphy (2014) identify nine dimensions that an online educator could pay attention to: modality, pacing, student-instructor ratio, pedagogy, instructor role online, student role online, online communication synchrony, role of online assessments, and source of feedback. In particular, the dimension “online communication synchrony”, which refers to the types of student-tutor and student-student interaction (interpersonal connections), is one of the most studied by scholars. According to Bernard et al. (2009), the emphasis and presence of these social interactions in online learning enhances student learning outcomes. Although the consideration of the nine dimensions highlights the complexity of the design of an online learning course, they do support other evidence-based research, where scholars have reported on the effectiveness of online learning to engage students (see. Ngoyi, Mpanga & Ngoyi, 2014). This reiterates the fact that the deliberate design process for online learning (including the use of interactive tools) would include a consideration of how tutors support interactions and establish social presence.

ERT on the other hand, works on the premise that tutors are working on a course design that was never intended for an online one. Thus, any consideration for establishing interpersonal connections in an online environment is often overlooked. According to Hodges et al. (2020), when there is an urgent need to get a course online, tutors are not prepared to facilitate the online teaching and learning, as it

would take a different set of planning and organisation to make the experience as meaningful as it would be in a physical setting. Despite decades of research on technology-enhanced learning, some scholars still believe that many educators are “ill prepared to teach with technology” (Foulger et al., 2017, p. 418). Trust and Whalen’s (2020) findings showed that “the lack of preparation, training, and support tutors had for designing quality instruction with technology created additional stressors and barriers to teaching and learning remotely in times of need” (p. 193). Studies thus suggest that the sudden expectation of transforming a physical experience to an online one often throws tutors off guard. Perhaps tutors are simply not aware of the importance of establishing a strong social presence during ERT.

In a study on communicative language teaching through synchronous online teaching, Ng (2020) found that most of the participants in her study preferred face-to-face instruction. Participants shared that lessons conducted online via Zoom were ‘not as good’ when compared to face-to-face lessons which were deemed to be “more fun and interactive” (Ng, 2020). Ng further quoted Lim (2020, p. 7), positing that as “social beings, we will always miss the social interaction of meeting up physically, which is irreplaceable, and can only be poorly approximated in virtual interactions”. In fact, many tutors somehow perform “better” in face-to-face lessons, compared to when they need to teach online. The lack of a physical presence for both the tutors and students in a tutorial room is reported to be one of the main reasons for the preference. Trinder (2015) argued that the preference to have a face-to-face instruction could also be a result of a fundamental trait of humans to acknowledge “the joy of being with another human being” (p. 94) and feel energised by direct contact with others. In another study by Vurdien (2019) on acquiring communicative competence through Zoom video conferencing, participants reported their preference for face-to-face interactions because they would feel their peers’ instantaneous support which is typically lacking in virtual interactions.

Fortunately, recent studies have reported that an emphasis on social presence can have a positive effect on online instruction (eg. Cesari, Galgani, Gemignani & Menicucci, 2021). Although Cesari et al.’s (2021) study was focused on the use of augmented, mixed and virtual reality to counteract the detrimental effects of physical distance, they argued that there is a need to facilitate participants’ experience in online learning (Cesari et al., 2021). They discussed the importance of feeling one another’s presence while being part of a community in online learning. This is crucial as the lack of social interaction, as perceived by students, was reported to be the factor hampering their learning and causing feelings of isolation during online experiences (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005). Indeed, “affective repercussions can have a serious impact on learning if student-student and tutor-student interactions are not managed effectively” (Brooke, 2020, p.38).

In fact, decades ago, Steuer (1992) wrote about the role of *telepresence* in virtual or online environments, which is determined by a high degree of interactivity. Later, Biocca and Nowak (2001) expanded on the ways to create a strong *presence* in the online environment. They argued that participants have to make an effort to be aware of the intentions of others and their thoughts, emotions, and behaviours when they are connected via technology (Biocca & Nowak, 2001). Hence, to reduce students’ feelings of disconnection, isolation, distractions and lack of attention exacerbated by the physical separation (Rovai, 2002), their sense of community online needs to be augmented with the emphasis of the social connectedness between participants.

Despite the many social challenges associated with online teaching, it does not seem altogether bad. Some scholars posited that online instruction also “has a way of narrowing the hierarchical distance” (a common challenge in physical classes) between the tutor and students such that “the emotional and social distance between them is more easily bridged” (Wong, 2020, p. 96). According to Wong (2020), in physical classrooms, tutors tend to “tower above” students, further accentuating the power difference between tutor and students. However, in online lessons, conducted typically in Zoom, individual thumbnails of the tutor and students are featured in equal size. This seemingly “equal standing”, coupled with the tutor’s efforts to ensure social connectedness between all participants, will make the tutor “more approachable” (Wong, 2020, p. 96).

My recent ERT experience and literature review have prompted me to reflect on how I used a *dialogic scaffolding* approach to foster a strong social presence and establish a sense of belonging for my students to enjoy their learning experience as a community.

### 3 A Pedagogical Framework Adopted: Dialogic Scaffolding

Foundationally, my teaching philosophy stems from a sociocultural perspective, where learning is a socially situated activity. Although I use talk as my main “pedagogic tool” to guide my students and scaffold their learning, I am always cognizant of balancing my control of dialogue. In my observations of colleague’s lessons, often one kind of talk predominates: the so-called ‘recitation script’ of closed questions, brief recall answers and minimal feedback which requires students to report someone else’s thinking rather than to think for themselves. This is otherwise known as ‘monologic’ talk (e.g. Bakhtin, 1986; Skidmore, 2006; Howe & Abedin, 2013) - one that I absolutely strive to avoid in my classrooms.

When I first started teaching critical thinking related modules, I found that students were not able to offer deeper insights into their analysis of the case studies. Discussions in the f2f classes were “shallow”, online forum discussions were “superficial” and often did not deepen student understanding, and quality of assignments proved to be lacklustre. As I believe that the quality of my talk in the classroom can influence the learning and development of thinking across disciplines, I focused on encouraging students to take part in dialogues and exploratory talk even in online environments. Therefore, I took my experiences during f2f instruction - encouraging students to engage in criticality in thought, further into my facilitation of online lessons.

To support the development of critical thinking skills online, I adopted a ‘dialogic’ approach where students would contribute to the progression of their understanding by being given a chance to refine and work on their own ideas. According to scholars, during a dialogic discourse, a tutor’s engagement in tutor-student interaction is considered a method of scaffolding, only if the latter consists of three elements: (1) contingency teaching; (2) fading; and (3) transfer of responsibility (van de Pol, Volman & Beishuizen, 2010). In the first stage, the teacher needs to diagnose student learning needs and apply strategies for learning that are contingent on student responses. In the second stage, the teacher gradually removes support over time, and finally in the third stage, the teacher transfers the responsibility to student(s) for completing a task or demonstrating their understanding. These three elements are argued to work interdependently and are necessary for scaffolding to be faithfully implemented (Many, Dewberry, Taylor, & Coady, 2009). As such, only when there is evidence of high-quality discourse without a teacher exercising tight control over interactions, that scaffolding is possible.

Thus, it is also crucial to consider how the adoption of dialogic scaffolding as a pedagogical framework supports my aim to establish a strong social presence in my students’ online learning experience. In dialogic scaffolding instruction online, students consult one another during collaborative group tasks and the tutor during whole-class discussions when they encounter “disequilibrium” in their understanding (Clapper, 2015). Here, students share individually constructed understandings and develop new ones together to create a communal meaning with which they need to complete the task (El Kadri, Roth, Gil, & Mateus, 2017). As shown in my students’ assignments and posts in discussion forums, I found that student learning was enhanced as they modelled after my scaffolded application of the critical thinking tools onto the analysis of case studies, then practice collaboratively online with their peers, and finally apply the tools on their own in their assignments (where transfer of responsibility of learning happens).

It is with this social interconnectedness achieved during the dialogic scaffolding experience that supports the development of social presence during online instruction. In fact, Dow’s (2008) study found that the factors impacting online social context, presence and interactivity are effective dialogue, well-

structured interactions, and transparency in interactions. In another related study, social presence has been reported to stimulate peer-to-peer interactions, and thus fosters sociability in online environments (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The researchers further argue that in order for students to be perceived as real, they need social presence to interact with their peers. In turn, when students participate more actively, they contribute to the establishment of a strong social presence in the online environment (Oztok & Brett, 2011). Therefore, it was no surprise that the dialogic scaffolding approach allowed my students to demonstrate a high level of interactivity and criticality in the online class discussions and discussion forums. In fact, their level of criticality was also shown in their assignments, where students were able to form strong arguments with reasoned analysis and excellent supporting evidence.

In their feedback, students reported that their understanding deepened, learning and student engagement enhanced. A further qualitative analysis of student evaluation feedback in the next section will show that students felt the dialogic scaffolding approach provided an inclusive and supportive learning.

#### **4 Context of the Module and Motivations for Inquiry**

The module that I taught fully online last year during the pandemic is called ‘Critical Thinking and Communication for Community Leadership’. The module is interdisciplinary in nature and its objective is to develop a deeper understanding of the relevance of communication and critical thinking in the context of community leadership. The module is open to all undergraduate students. We met on Zoom, once a week for about 2 hours across 12 weeks in a semester. There were reading materials, recorded lectures and online tasks for students to work on before they met me in a synchronous online session. Through an understanding of the constructivist theory of communication (Burleson, 2007), and Paul and Elder’s (2014) critical thinking framework, this module aims to facilitate the development of deliberative and active citizenry among students. Students apply these concepts individually to case studies and critical reflections on community leadership. In the final assignment, students conceptualized team projects, relevant to their respective community settings and discipline specialisations, to demonstrate an application of the critical thinking and communication skills they learnt in the module.

Last year, when we navigated the ERT experience, I was motivated to critically reflect on my teaching and the swift move to fully online teaching. Naturally, as a language tutor and education researcher, I turn to talk as my main pedagogic tool. Talk refers to all forms of communication, be it verbal or non-verbal. Indeed, it is hard to imagine a physical classroom without talk. But what about online platforms? Should there be so much more of it or should I be expecting much less of it? With the loss of physical presence in online platforms, will talk be without any recognisable and meaningful non-verbal ways of communication? Is there an expectation for more or less of it?

A problem I first noticed when we had fully online classes was that it took a lot more effort and deliberate, strategic instructional approaches to ensure students were interacting enough. Colleagues thought that it was an impossible task as they felt like students did not want to interact; they did not speak up, they did not even switch on their cameras, they did not respond to questions, and they did not pose questions. In fact, they would rather close down a conversation swiftly than put in any effort to extend it beyond a microsecond of an awkward silence between turns. Thus, as part of a larger research study where I used the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework as a lens to investigate student learning in a blended environment, I sought to answer the following research question: How do I facilitate social interactions in my online classes such that a strong CoI social presence is established?

The CoI model, based on Dewey’s social constructivist theory, was evaluated by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2001) and proposed as a framework for blended learning with a consideration of three dynamic presences: teaching, cognitive and social (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) define social presence as the ability of participants in an online learning environment,

“to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real’ people” (p. 89). Garrison and Vaughan (2008) are among scholars who have addressed online learning communities as an important new dimension of social presence. For example, social presence has been studied by investigating if learners can communicate purposefully in a trusting environment and develop interpersonal relationships within their communities (Garrison, 2009). Furthermore, Garrison and Vaughan (2008) described the CoI framework as a unifying process that ‘integrates the essential processes of personal reflection and collaboration to construct meaning, confirm understanding, and achieve higher-order learning outcomes’ (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008, p. 29). Hence, this was appropriate for the critical thinking and communication module as it seeks to develop higher order critical thinking skills and communication skills in students as they engage in concepts of community leadership.

## **5 Interventions to Support Online Student Engagement**

As I reflected on my experiences last year teaching online, I realized that contrary to many other tutors, I had thoroughly enjoyed it. Further, my students’ feedback and evaluation reports suggest that they seemed to have enjoyed their learning experience in my online classes too. The absence of a physical classroom did not seem to adversely affect my teaching performance and their learning process. In the next few paragraphs, I link the interventions I took to create a supportive online learning environment to what scholars say about student engagement.

First, I started the semester not so much with expectations but rather of assurance. I shared with my students that no matter what the learning outcomes were, I was keen to know their personal aims and motivations for reading the module. I thus encouraged them to share their personal aims and motivations with me (either verbally in Zoom class or via email), as I was happy to guide my students to achieve them. I wanted my students to see that I strived to be as engaged as how much I wanted them to be engaged in our online lessons. Indeed, an engaged educator is a prerequisite for engaging students (Middlecamp, 2005). While I ensured that students knew what were expected of them in terms of tasks, assignments and their level of participation to get the most out of their learning, I always offered assurances that any doubt or concerns with their learning experiences could be shared with me. This open and honest communication between my students and I allowed meaningful interpersonal connections to be built. Consequently, when my students were not fearful of not meeting my expectations, their increased engagement became a prerequisite for effective learning to take place (Pittaway, 2012). This forms the first step for me to establish a social presence in the online learning environment.

Secondly, I emphasized the importance of students to communicate openly with me. If they needed to revisit a past lesson or have the tasks assigned re-ordered, they could always request for that. I believe that respectful and supportive relationships are especially crucial when engaging students online (Allodi, 2010). The fact that students are physically separated during online learning experience means that tutors need strategies to ensure that there are opportunities for students to “learn together apart” (Kaye, 1992, p. 1) so that meaningful teaching and learning can be facilitated at a distance (Keegan, 1995). Hence, the supportive communication I offered is crucial for students to feel a part of the learning community in my class, in that interactions can be felt “real” (Pittaway, 2012).

I also affirmed my commitment to ensure that my students get the best out of their online experience with me and that I would do all I can to cater to their learning needs. This means that I am flexible and adaptable with the ungraded tasks regarding when and how they are to be completed. For example, during synchronous online tutorials, students may be tasked to work on learning activities which do not count towards their final module grade. These activities are designed in such a way that students would need to apply the skills and concepts taught so that an assessment as learning can take place. Students

were able to decide if they preferred to work on them in a group, a pair or individually. In addition, students were encouraged to consult me during the process for guidance without being pressured to complete the activity assigned on their own (without my assistance). This was possible without compromising the intended learning. The important factor here was also encouraging student autonomy in taking responsibility for their learning (Allan & Clarke, 2007). I did not expect all my students to “fall in line” with the prescribed tasks, in the prescribed order that I had planned. By encouraging my students to take responsibility on how they would like to demonstrate their understanding and when they would like me to assess their achievement of the intended learning objectives, I witnessed more interactions and social connections from them. In fact, Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999), who developed an engagement theory intended as a conceptual framework for technology-based teaching and learning, emphasised such group relationships and encouraged learner control. They posited that it is the interactions and negotiations which are necessary to establish rapport between the participants in a class. Hence, as I respected my students’ needs and focused on creating a supportive learning experience for them, I quickly gained their trust and cooperation in journeying through the unique online experience of the ERT semester with me.

Next, I always projected an authentic, real self of me to my students. This meant that I did not use virtual backgrounds. I tried not to hide what (or who) might be in my space as long as they were not disruptive to the online class. In a Harvard Business Review article (Zandan & Lynch, 2020), it was reported that online audiences prefer to see the actual room behind a presenter in Zoom meetings rather than a virtual background. According to the authors, this is because the authentic background generates a sense of trust and intimacy. This was reported to provide a glimpse of the “realness” of a person and a strong social presence. I believe that my authentic background ensured that students felt that they too could be their authentic self without fearing of being judged. This, consequently, allowed my students to warm up to my lessons almost from the start and let their cameras stay switched on throughout the lesson (most with no virtual backgrounds too). I also projected an enthusiastic and high-energy disposition while engaging students in my online class. I started every online session with a fun “check-in” activity (see figure 1). To respond to a prompt, students each had 20 seconds to speak or share screens. Examples of prompts include (1) What’s your animal personality? Why?; (2) What was your last photo/video in your mobile phone? Why?; (3) What food are you craving for now? Why? Students commented that they do look forward to my online tutorials as they felt that their presences were truly appreciated. Furthermore, they felt that the interactions seemed “real” and genuine. Perhaps, these strategies allowed me to emphasise the importance of group relationships, interactions and even negotiations to establish rapport between my students and I.

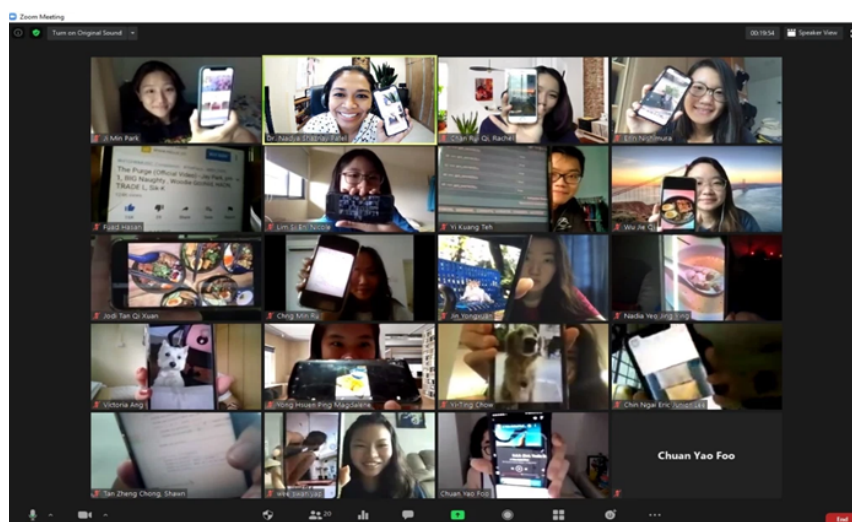


Figure 1. Check-in activity at the start of my online class. (Source: Author)

When engaging students online, I prioritised collaborative construction of knowledge over the actual completion of tutorial tasks. When students were tasked to collaboratively analyse a case study, I emphasized the importance of applying the critical thinking tools which I had modelled in earlier lessons into their group discussions. I also stressed on sharing critical insights about the case studies such that they collaboratively deepen their understanding of key concepts rather than the completion of the (ungraded) writing task. This is in line with what Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) argued in their engagement framework, which has the fundamental premise that “that students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks” (p. 1). This means that I engaged students in a dialogic scaffolding (Rojas-Drummand, 2013) experience of the concepts and materials. They had many opportunities to engage in active dialogues with myself and their peers in groups. At the same time, I provided opportunities for students to “catch up” with their e-learning (asynchronous) tasks by designing bite-sized instructional activities that require students to apply the concepts during the online tutorials. Through these, I was able to provide just-in-time instruction and scaffolding so that students’ misconceptions are cleared and understanding deepened.

Finally, I welcomed out-of-class zoom consultations with students at a mutually convenient time. My main aim was to show my students that I would make myself available and accessible to them at any (reasonable) time they needed me. This allowed students to trust my support and value the additional scaffolding they received. I found that in an online teaching environment, I should not be expecting students to progress in the exact same time as everyone else. Differentiated instruction, referring to a belief that students learn best when their teachers accommodate the differences in their readiness levels, interests and learning profiles (e.g. Tomlinson, 2005), does take a whole new meaning in teaching online. Thus, by designing tasks to allow students to work collaboratively at first in groups during online tutorials and out of tutorials, I could get students to ultimately complete tasks independently for assignments once they had gained the competence to do so. This probably increased the students’ motivation to want to give their best for the module since they were able to sense that I too was doing all I can to support them.

Therefore, I feel that the physical presence that is lost in teaching online can be replaced with a deliberate and meaningful online social presence. In summary, the interventions I shared to provide a supportive environment when engaging my students online constitute a consideration of the 3Vs. They are (1) Verbal: the dialogic interactions between myself and students and among students themselves matter; (2) Vocal: varying my use of vocal for higher engagement and clear enthusiasm; (3) Visual: the multimodal visual aids that I use to complement my instruction and how I carried myself as their positive, and cheerful tutor. Students attending lessons online should be treated just as important as face-to-face students as they would need tutors to break down formal barriers (O’Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015) by being relatable and one who would communicate both verbally and non-verbally.

## **6 An Analysis of Student Feedback**

Receiving my student evaluation feedback for the academic year, which includes the ERT experience of teaching fully online, I decided to use the software NVivo to analyse the qualitative comments which students provided. In relevance to specific questions in the feedback report, I sought to study the justifications for why students gave me above average scores (as compared to other modules in the same critical thinking category). I used the following keywords as nodes: (1) thinking; (2) feedback; (3) interest in communicating; (4) supportive; (5) enhanced learning; (6) communication skills beyond the module. These keywords (bolded) were chosen as they are linked to each of the statements in the student evaluation feedback - Refer to Table 1 below. A total of 72 students (four groups of 18 students) were invited to complete the standard university-wide student evaluation feedback exercise at the end of each



semester. 54 students, an average of 75%, responded to the survey. All the qualitative comments captured were included as data which was then coded for the above chosen nodes.

Table 1

*Student Evaluation Feedback, Semester 2 AY1920 (Jan – May 2020)*

Statements in Student Evaluation Feedback	Overall Score (out of 5)
Overall, the teacher is effective.	4.7
The teacher has enhanced my thinking ability.	4.7
The teacher provided timely and useful feedback.	4.7
The teacher has increased my interest in communicating in my discipline.	4.7
The teacher has created a supportive environment for participation and learning.	4.8
The teacher has enabled me to acquire effective communication skills which I can use beyond this module.	4.7

The coding results were presented with the number of references for the node and the percentage coverage (of text) (see tables 2 and 3). In addition, specific text search was done to create NVivo word tree diagrams to see the context of the feedback in which the text appears (see figure 2). The keywords (with stems and similar words) chosen were similar to the nodes coded earlier: (1) skills; (2) learn/learning; (3) feedback/response; (4) interesting/interest; (5) support/supportive; (6) think/thinking. This analysis allowed me to understand how my students valued my pedagogical and instructional approaches in my delivery of the curriculum, possibly justifying the scores they gave in their evaluation. Furthermore, by analysing students' feedback, I could explore the effectiveness of the pedagogical framework adopted, dialogic scaffolding, and the principles of my teaching philosophy (dialogic teaching and orchestration of talk) which I had enacted in my teaching. This was especially crucial since the analysis was informed by data collected from the perspective of students on how their learning was enhanced during their online learning experience.

Table 2

*Sample References Coded for Nodes “Communicate” and “Learn”*

Files\\Student Feedback Qualitative Feedback AY1920 6 references coded, 0.79% coverage	Files\\Student Feedback Qualitative Feedback AY1920 21 references coded, 1.60% coverage
style which enables students to communicate their ideas and learn about... (Reference 1:0.11% coverage)	so that the students can learn better. Her classes are also... (Reference 1:0.05% coverage)
as these are thinking and communication concepts. She has made class... (Reference 2:0.13% coverage)	our preference so we can learn better. Dr Nadya took away... (Reference 2:0.05% coverage)
well-versed in the concept of communication. Took a class in... (Reference 3:0.13% coverage)	students as well as their learning styles. She proactively adapts to... (Reference 3:0.08% coverage)
and interactive. Very clear when communicating with students, very encouraging. With... (Reference 4:0.13% coverage)	she proactively adapts to our learning style to promote better learning... (Reference 4:0.08% coverage)
and grow their cognitive and communicative skills. Good communication skills and... (Reference 5:0.13% coverage)	learning style to promote better learning and have a more interactive... (Reference 5:0.08% coverage)
cognitive and communicative skills. Good communication skills and there was clear... (Reference 6:0.13% coverage)	truly feels that what we learn in her classroom we will... (Reference 6:0.05% coverage)
	gain the most of their learning experience. Friendly and effective teacher... (Reference 7:0.08% coverage)
	an audience. Lecturer prioritises student learning before other matters. Engaging, enthusiastic... (Reference 9:0.09% coverage)

Table 3

## Sample References Coded for Nodes “Feedback” and “Think”

Files\\Student Feedback Qualitative Feedback AY1920 8 references coded, 0.66% coverage	Files\\Student Feedback Qualitative Feedback AY1920 16 references coded, 1.18% coverage
always provide feedback to us. Dr Nadya is... (Reference 1:0.08% coverage)	able to impart valuable critical thinking skills and knowledge about community leadership... (Reference 1:0.08% coverage)
her best. She provides constructive feedback which helps me work on... (Reference 2:0.08% coverage)	supportive and help enhance my thinking process. She conducts supportive environment... (Reference 2:0.08% coverage)
and very willing to give feedback. Very engaging, friendly, very understanding... (Reference 3:0.08% coverage)	guide us through our critical thinking. Good explanation... (Reference 3:0.08% coverage)
always gave good and useful feedback! Her dedication and passion for... (Reference 4:0.08% coverage)	she encourages us to always think critically and reflect on the... (Reference 4:0.05% coverage)
to participate. Also provided timely feedback for our work. She gives... (Reference 5:0.08% coverage)	ideas and learn about critical thinking in a holistic environment... (Reference 5:0.08% coverage)
our work. She gives constructive feedback all the time and reply... (Reference 6:0.08% coverage)	I really learnt good critical thinking and evaluation skills that is... (Reference 6:0.08% coverage)
learning and give us useful feedback for all our assignments. She... (Reference 7:0.08% coverage)	applicable to other modules. I think about applying the EOTs and... (Reference 7:0.05% coverage)
very well. She also provides feedback whereby I am able to... (Reference 8:0.08% coverage)	she also often stretches our thinking further by asking questions which... (Reference 9:0.08% coverage)



Figure 2. Sample text analysis with tree diagrams for chosen keywords

From the coding, it is found that the highest coverage of references are linked to the nodes “enhanced learning” and “thinking” - 21 references and 16 references respectively. Students reported that:

*She often stretches our thinking by asking questions which allows us to ask the same critical questions. She does not turn down suggestions right off the bat and tries to guide us through our critical thinking. Her ability to contextualise and provide effective responses to any question we ask as well as push into aspects we didn't expect to ask.*

*She encourages us to always think critically and reflect on the underlying assumption. She teaches concepts in a clear and concise manner which makes understanding tough concepts much easier to understand.*

Here, it is found that students had perceived the dialogic style of instruction to have enhanced their learning of concepts taught and developed their critical thinking. This is aligned with the intent of the pedagogical framework, dialogic scaffolding, I had written for the module and my teaching philosophy

on orchestration of talk as a pedagogic semiosis (meaning making) for effective teaching and enduring understanding. The emphasis on social connections became consequential when I focused on the dialogic nature of the interactions during lessons.

From the text analysis with tree diagrams, it is found that the highest references were for keywords on “supportive/inclusive”, and “feedback”. Students reported that:

*She makes the class a safe space to make mistakes as well as clarify misconceptions. She is also able to predict our misconceptions well and does her best to clear these misconceptions for better learning. Thus, creating a supportive environment for learning.*

*She is an extremely understanding and reasonable tutor who ensures that students can maximise their learnings and voice out their opinions during classes. This provides an engaging class session for the students, and Nadya emphasises a lot on voicing out of opinions as she feels that it is an important part-and-parcel of learning. She is able to provide clarity to points that I am unsure about and provide help very selflessly. Able to facilitate class discussions well and encouraged all of us to participate.*

*She gives constructive feedback all the time and replies to our queries promptly even outside of class. She is a very helpful teacher that goes all the way to enhance our learning and give us useful and timely feedback for all our assignments.*

*Dr Nadya is able to relate to her students very well. She understands the needs of the students as well as their learning styles. She proactively adapts to our learning style to promote better learning and provide timely and useful feedback.*

In line with my teaching philosophy, the use of various means of scaffolding strategies like giving examples/hints, using recasts and confirmation checks, clarification requests and giving feedback (including peer feedback) was successful in ensuring that no student was left behind feeling like they needed more guidance or that their experiences online did not feel “real”. These were additionally complemented with the use of multimodal resources, like prosodic features of my speech, other non-verbals like gestures, body language, and other visual aids used in my instruction. This iterative and dialogic process of cumulative, purposeful cycles of orchestrating verbal and non-verbal communication in the lessons facilitated meaningful meaning-making experiences.

Also, the analysis shows that students gained interest in communicating in their discipline and acquired communication skills and critical thinking skills that they can use beyond the module. Students reported that:

*Dr Nadya took away my dislike for writing. She showed me that writing is not as ‘painful’ as it seems. She related to us(students) very well and helped to understand the basics of writing. Now, I am more confident in my writing abilities. Her weekly encouragement to speak up in class allows me to gain confidence in speaking in front of an audience. She has taught me that whatever I learnt is not bound in the classroom and that we should apply it beyond our classroom. She truly cares for student’s learning and pushes them to learn beyond the scope of the module as well as out of curriculum time.*

To harness the affordances of digital tools at our disposal during the online teaching and learning experience, I facilitated the production of student output in the form of online student presentations (see figure 3). This created an opportunity for students to recreate their reading or reconstruct their understanding in their own representations. I encouraged students to work on different interactive formats and utilise different online tools for their presentations and discussions, share their thoughts and pose questions for all, and offer constructive peer feedback. These proved helpful for students to gain interest in communicating their discipline and using the skills they learnt beyond the module. These strategies also provided me with sufficient feedback in assessing my students’ understanding and challenges in their

critical reading and writing. Hence, the emphasis on dialogic scaffolding to encourage social connections and interactivity during the online lessons was effective in creating a supportive and engaging learning experience for students.



Figure 3. Collection of screenshots of students' online presentations

## 7 Recommendations for Tutors

With a socio-constructivist view of teaching, I have always considered my classes of students as my own little community of participants in learning. It is especially important for me to consider not only their cognitive but also their emotional connectedness when they are physically separated. I strived to develop a sense of belonging for my students and that everyone's learning needs will be met through their commitment to be together as a community of learners. Thus, in creating a supportive environment for physically separated communities of learners, tutors ought to focus on establishing a strong social presence in their online instruction – one that emphasizes interpersonal connections and the “realness” of learners. Here are three important considerations that worked for me.

First, tutors should focus on the well-being of their students and level of comfort when encouraging them to interact in online classes. Begin each online session with a fun “check-in” activity so as to encourage rapport among students. These could be in the form of individual student responses or demonstrations to a 20-sec prompt given. Tutors can also encourage the smallest of casual talk outside class time, where light-hearted moments that infuse humour can be shared among students and tutor. Opportunities should be provided for students to introduce themselves, beyond the typical name, programme and year of study. There should also be further opportunities for ongoing social interaction to take place either before online lessons begin or end.

Second, ensure that there are always opportunities for students to talk about materials that are not directly related to the lesson. Tutors should also view the lesson and interactions from their students' perspective. This will be easier if tutors can record their Zoom lessons and view the recording afterwards. Interact with the students the way you want them to interact with members of the class. Additionally, ensure that students can continue to interact among themselves without tutors having to “visit” their virtual breakout rooms or join their discussions. In other words, allow students to have some time for themselves when they are engaged online in groups. Tutors need not feel obliged to “jump” from one

breakout room to the other immediately once the group task is assigned. Students could be put into breakout rooms and be given 5 to 10 minutes to discuss on their own. With the trust and respect that is shown to the students, they will in turn show the same level of respect and trust for their tutors.

Third, ensure that clear instructions and expectations (e.g., “these will be reviewed, and your participation will be assessed”) are provided for the activities and discussions (synchronous and asynchronous) relating to lesson materials. In addition, invite them to seek clarification from you. Tutors ought to make learning visible to students. This means highlighting very explicitly to students when they are expected to achieve a specific learning objective, where they are at in that pursuit and when they are able to demonstrate their understanding and learning. For example, if a particular conceptual framework is used to assess student learning, ensure that the framework is modelled effectively with dialogic scaffolding principles so that students are able to grasp the framework and apply the principles successfully in their tasks. With a clear model of how tutors apply concepts in their instruction, interaction, and engagement with students, the students themselves will be able to do the same when they are engaged in the materials and activities, interactions with their tutors and peers (whether synchronously or asynchronously).

Before I conclude, this study should not be interpreted as promoting a causal relationship between social presence and a certain pedagogical framework - as a correlation between two variables does not imply causation. There can be a variety of factors that can affect how social presence is established in online instruction. These factors include the affordances of differing digital tools, communicative patterns of individual students, and attributes of the learning communities within which the students and tutors are situated.

In summary, these recommendations will allow for interactions to be stimulated meaningfully in online lessons such that discussions or conversations are not prematurely closed down. Furthermore, there will always be extended talks, denoted by longer responses and turns, that enhances deeper understanding and promotes higher order thinking skills. It is shown that with an emphasis of social presence, tutors can create and sustain a supportive environment for students, thus enhancing learning outcomes.

## 8 Conclusion

There are increasing focuses on how the quality of talk influences learning and the development of thinking across disciplines. There are also increasing focuses on the advantages of teaching students to take part in dialogues and exploratory talk, even with discipline-specific empirical investigations, to support cognitive and intellectual skills. Despite this, there is still an under-representation of such ‘dialogic’ practice in teaching, in which students contribute to the progression of their understanding by being given a chance to refine and work on their own ideas (Alexander, 2004). Nevertheless, there are also increasing focuses on the advantages of teaching students to take part in dialogues, exploratory talk, and extended talk, to support higher cognitive and intellectual skills (Mercer, Dawes, Wegerif, & Sams, 2004). Thus, I believe that with talk, in an effective and sustained way, I will be able to engage students cognitively, scaffold their learning and deepen their understanding – not only in face-to-face but also in an online environment.

Finally, meaning-making, or pedagogic semiosis in any classroom, especially in online environments, is also a result of the interplay of a repertoire of semiotic resources, not just language alone, expressed through a range of modalities. Hence, I believe that the orchestration of multimodal resources can be described as an instantiation of my pedagogical strategy. Particularly, in language and communication skills instruction, where such orchestration of multisemiotic teaching and learning experiences would contribute significantly to my utilisation of scaffolding strategies to enhance students’ ability to make meaning and gain deep understanding from their social construction of online communicative acts and

interaction with multimodal texts. Hence, students will be consistently engaged online and develop a sense of belonging to enjoy their learning experience as a community.

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