



## **Online learning: examining the role of social presence in distance education in higher institutions**

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### **Abstract**

In the advanced societies, the use of online or distance education is constantly on the increase, particularly at the tertiary levels. But this method of enhancing education delivery has not taken much root in developing worlds, especially in Nigeria. In fact, many of the institutions in Nigerian are yet to think of implementing distance education programmes at her tertiary levels of education system. Generally, the issue of social presence has been of much concern in all online learning environments in schools, be it in the developed or underdeveloped worlds. Hence, the authors discussed the concepts of social presence as perceived by scholars and other stakeholders in the field of education, and how lack of social presence affects online learners. The paper attempts to explore the need and general consequences of the absence of social presence in online/distance education programmes in schools. Also discussed are the types and the need for social presence in online programmes. The article concisely enumerated possible best practices for enhancing social presence in online learning environments, especially for beginner institutions via the review of related literature in the field.

**Keywords:** social presence, online learning, distance education, higher institution and, online environment

### **Introduction**

For a better comprehension of this subject matter, it will be appropriate to examine the concept of this two terms, "Online learning" and "Distance education."

Online Learning: Berge and Collins (1995) <sup>[3]</sup> defined online learning as any class that offers at least part of its curriculum in the online course delivery mode, or as a transmission of information and/or communication via the Internet without instructors and students being connected at the same In present times, this has been re-defined as any class that offers its entire curriculum in the online course delivery mode, thereby allowing students to participate regardless of geographic location, independent of time and place (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles and Turoff (1995) <sup>[19]</sup>. In agreements with the above authors, Richardson and Swan (2003) <sup>[32]</sup> have however stated that online education has progressed to the point where students no longer need to be able to meet face-to-face in order to complete a course.

Distance Education: Moore and Kearsley (1996) <sup>[27]</sup> defined distance education as, "Planned learning that normally occurs in a different place from teaching and as a result requires special techniques of course design, special instructional techniques, special methods of communication by electronic and other technology, as well as special organizational and administrative arrangements. U.S. Congress for Technology Assessment defined distance education as the "linking of a teacher and students in several geographic locations via technology that allows for interaction" (Daniel and Stevens, 1998) <sup>[8]</sup>. In the same development, Siddiqui (2008) <sup>[36]</sup> define it as "a process of extending learning by connecting students with distributed learning resources. In general terms, the term entails separating some or all learners from the site of instructional delivery; separation of teachers and learners in time and space, or both; separation may occur for some or all the learning activities; application of synchronous and asynchronous two-way communication; and some or all

students may be separated from computer-based learning resources and experiences (libraries, labs, computer rooms, formal or informal meeting opportunities, etc) to an extent that makes their utilization infrequent or impossible and necessitates development of alternative resources (Siddiqui, 2008) <sup>[36]</sup>, Ifeanyi and Olakunlehin (2010) <sup>[20]</sup>.

### **Introduction**

Different methods of communication are increasingly being employed in distance education programmes. Most of the higher institutions, especially in advanced worlds are embarking on online instruction as an alternative to long-established face-to-face teaching method (Berg, 2002; Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford, 2006; Natriello, 2005; Tabatabaei, Schrottner, and Reichgelt, 2006) <sup>[3, 10, 28, 38]</sup>. Its adoption is viewed as an integral and necessary mode of delivery (Berg, 2002; Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford, 2006; Natriello, 2005; Tabatabaei, Schrottner, and Reichgelt, 2006) <sup>[3, 10, 28, 38]</sup> with conveniences, increased access, fast delivery, potentially improved pedagogy, and decreased costs for both students and institutions (Sheridan and Kelly, 2010) <sup>[34]</sup>. Also, some of the preferences for the adoption of this method, the scholars argue, are due to low costs, unrestricted access, for both students and institutions. In view of its integration in teaching/learning process, several potential challenges arise for instructors trying to establish conditions to enhance the students' learning experiences (Natriello, 2005 <sup>[28]</sup>; Durrington, Berryhill, and Swafford (2006) <sup>[10]</sup>; Brinkerhoff and Koroghlanian (2007) <sup>[6]</sup>.

All these forms of communication are without some identifiable problems. Online education cannot be discussed today without mentioning the term "Social presence". This has become one of the importance concepts in online environment to be discussed. The question now is how instructional designers could increase social presence in their course content. This is an online problem that has to be tackled from all angles in order to motivate online learners.

Nevertheless, lack of social presence has been identified as one of the noticeable problems confronting online learners. Researchers have given much credence to this claim by emphasizing on the need for online presence (Scollins-Mantha, n.d.) affirmed that researches indicate that social presence enhances instructional delivery and the classroom experience. Social presence is important in online learning because many students need to feel a link with others if they are to share ideas, exchange views and work together. Kear (2010) [21] identified low social presence as a particular problem in text-based asynchronous systems, such as discussion forums. This, the scholar asserts do not offer visual or auditory cues to communication, and there can be long delays between messages, thereby can lead to feelings of impersonality, and hence disengagement from online learning.

In the same development, research has also demonstrated that social presence not only affects outcomes, but also student, and possibly instructor satisfaction with a course. Teacher immediacy behaviours and the presence of others are especially important issues for those involved in delivering online education (Swan, 2003) [32].

As a social being, human beings need to interact with one another in real-times. Lack of body language and asynchronous method of communication causes lots of social presence problems among learners. This, as (Wegerif, 1998) [43] puts it can prevent online learners from participating confidently and openly in their perceived programmes, which in extreme can lead to withdrawal from the online environment.

### Concept of social presence

It will not be an easy task defining “social presence” on the ground that there is no unique definition agreed to by scholars on this subject matter. However, efforts will be made to examine some definitions on the subject matter. Attempts have been made by scholars in the field to define social presence in relation to online programmes. Some of the definitions of social presence in online learning will be examined hereunder.

The simplest and/or the most concise definition of social presence is that given by (Biocca, 2003), as scholar defined it as the “sense of being with another.” Boettcher (2010) [24], in his own attempt, defined social presence as “the ability to project oneself socially and affectively and getting to know each other as three-dimensional people despite not meeting face-to-face. Social presence is the foundation of building trust and presence for the teaching and learning experiences.” Social presence relates to the need for users of technology-based communication to perceive each other as real people (Kear, Chetwynd and Jefferis, 2014) [21]. Garrison and Anderson (2003) [12] stated that social presence means “creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, skepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas.” Tu (2012) [39] define it as “The degree of feeling, perception and reaction of being connected on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) to another intellectual entity.”

Tu and McIssac (2002) [40] also defined social presence as “a measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment.” As defined by Swan, *et al.* (2008) [32], social presence represents the students’ feeling of connectedness, both socially and emotionally, with others in the online environment. It encompasses three

elements: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion.

Social presence is further defined by Cleveland-Innes and Campbell (2012) [7] as the degree to which learners feel socially and emotionally connected with others in an online environment While Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) [35]; Rice (1993) [31]; Walther (1992) [41] and Gunawardena (1995) [23] have defined social presence as “the awareness of others in an interaction combined with an appreciation of the interpersonal aspects of that interaction.” Variations in the definitions however, did not deviate scholars attention or to lose focus on the role of social presence in the success of students and the need to design appropriate curriculum to address the issue (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Arbaugh (2008) [37]. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (1999) [12] also defined social presence as the ability of participants in an online community to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people.’ In the manner, Richardson and swan (2010) [32] defined social presence, as the “degree of the silence of the other person in the interaction and the consequence salience of interpersonal relationship.” This is interpreted as the degree to which a person is perceived as ‘real’ in mediated communication.

Generally, when learners are not talking and laughing at each other (Face-to-face interaction), no eye and body contact, and no body language in real-time within themselves or the teacher, and no groupings of learners in the same place at the same time, social presence is completely lacking or absent. In this case, the learners want to touch themselves, talk and ask themselves or their teachers some questions and get immediate feedbacks as lesson is on-going. They want to smile at each other; they want to sit as a group at the same place (classroom) and at the same time, drag space, match one another and even quarrel with each other as social beings.

Group cohesion is what the students need. The students would like to agree and disagree with each other. They would like to use inclusive terms, such as, “we” when addressing each other. They will also use salutations, vocatives, and phatics (words) when referring to classmates (Lowenthal, n.d.). They want to hear sound or noise made by colleagues; they want to play and peck others on the cheek, exchange gifts and hear the smell of perfume on others clothes, etc. Learners want to be aware of others as they share space and do things in common. In fact, the learners cannot only be together, but must be engaged with each other in one form of exchange or the other.

Students need affective expressions, such as emotions, use of humour, and self-disclosure. Students want open communication whereby they will be willingness to strike up conversations and respond to one another in an honest and respectful manner (Sheridan, 2010) [34]. Boettcher (2010) [24] stated it all, when she stated that “being there” is the core of presence; that is, letting your students/learners know that you are there to direct, guide, listen and share your expertise knowledge with them. Learners need intimacy, which is a function of eye contact, physical proximity, topic of conversation, etc. (Tu, 2012) [39]. Learners need immediacy, which is defined by Short *et al* (1976) [35] as the psychological distance communicators placed between themselves and their recipients. This, the scholar said, includes eye contact, smiling, vocal

expressiveness, physical proximity, appropriate touching, leaning toward a person, gesturing, and using overall body movements, being relaxed and spending time.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) lacks social nonverbal cues (Tu, 2002)<sup>[39]</sup>. All these form parts of social presence, which is highly lacking or absent in almost all online environments. Social presence builds confidence in learners, as confused terms or concepts, words or phrases are instantly clarified by their teachers as the lesson progresses, or as they study their course materials. In the same process, other students, especially the introverts can gain from such questions and answers from fellow students and their teachers.

### Types of presence in online community

Boettcher (2010)<sup>[24]</sup> identified three major presence in online learning; they are: Social presence, Teaching presence and Cognitive presence. The scholar is of the view that sharing where you live, your family, your pets and who you are as a person, your likes and dislikes encourage students to share who they are as well. The scholar furthermore asserts that all these connections lay the basis for creating a climate of trust and safety. This climate of trust, the scholar emphasized prepares the learners for their teaching presence and the cognitive presence of the community.

In the same vein, Boettcher (2010)<sup>[24]</sup> outlined hereunder some tools and behaviours by Faculty and Students for Social

### Presence as follows

1. Introductions and sharing in the pre/or first week
2. A special discussion thread or forum for informal exchanges
3. Sharing times and spaces within the course site and schedule
4. Willing to think aloud about why you think about what you do
5. Showing respect and care for others
6. Taking advantage of the cultural foundation and environment of your institution

### What is Teaching Presence?

Teaching presence is the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educational worthwhile learning outcomes.” (Garrison, 2006)<sup>[13]</sup>. In simple terms, Boettcher (2010) defined teaching practice as the work of teaching that is done before and during the course, which includes all the preparatory work in designing and developing the course and the hands-on teaching of directing and supporting the learners during the course delivery. The author states that the teaching presence is visible in the course materials, such as in the syllabus, assignments, choices of readings and discussions. Teaching presence is also noticeable in all you do to guide, support and shape the learners’ understanding. Successful teaching presence sets clear prospect and provides helpful guidance for learners to succeed in a programme.

However, Boettcher (2010)<sup>[24]</sup> in his write-up identified some tools and behaviours that will guide the Faculty teaching presence. Let us discuss some of these hereunder.

### Tools and Behaviours by Faculty for Teaching Presence

1. Sets clear expectations for students; is specific about how learners are to be “present”
2. Is visibly present in the course site every day if possible; is substantively present at least four days a week.
3. Coaches and guides learners to keep pace with their learning and think deeply about what they know and why they know it
4. Encourages questions regarding activities, assignments, etc.
5. Restates assignments, pacing on assignments
6. Helps students not to be surprised by course requirements and events
7. Uses announcement tools to ensure students are aware of their responsibilities, due dates and other activities
8. Uses email or other private communications for confidential correspondence and gentle and firm guidance as might be needed
9. The open, tended and untended spaces or jungles of cognitive presence

### What is cognitive presence?

Cognitive presence is the extent to which a group of learners are able to “construct meaning through sustained communication.” (Garrison, 2006)<sup>[13]</sup>. Cognitive presence is sharing how our brain is adapting, integrating, thinking and sometimes struggling with concepts, ideas and structure. It is a presence that requires that we observe our own learning and how we build and confirm meaning (<http://www.designingforlearning.info/services/writing/ecoach/tips/tip36.html>). Cognitive presence can also be defined as the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained personal reflection and discourse. In the same development, some tools and behaviours needed for by Faculty and students for formation of cognitive presence have also been outlined below.

### Tools and Behaviours by faculty and students for cognitive presence

1. Faculty sets high expectations for student inquiry and expectations
2. Faculty examines student responses and probes, challenges, questions learners, thereby encouraging thought and analysis of ideas
3. Learners participate thoughtfully in the discussions, responding to content and thoughts and questions from other learners, so that a “sustained communication” occurs.
4. Faculty and students strive to ensure that project outcomes are long-lasting and meaningful.

### Needs for online social presence in teaching-learning process

The impact of online social presence cannot be overemphasized. Mandernach, Gonzales, and Garrett (2006), while addressing the importance of social presence affirmed thus, “Direct instruction focuses on presenting course content and discussion prompts, summarizing discussions, examining and reinforcing students’ understandings of main concepts, diagnosing students’

misperceptions, providing information for students, and responding to students' concerns. Research has also shown that facilitation of discourse and instructor visibilities are of key importance for establishing teaching presence." While teaching presence has been defined by Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) <sup>[12]</sup> as "the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the realization of personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes."

The findings of Sheridan and Kelly (2010) <sup>[34]</sup> confirm that instructor presence is one of the keys to the effectiveness of online learning and that instructors need to be actively engaged in online courses. While Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) <sup>[12]</sup> observed that social and cognitive interactions are vitally important to a successful online learning community. The scholars declared that when teachers/instructors show enough online presence, it improves learning. This assertion has been supported by Bliss and Lawrence (2009) <sup>[4]</sup> and Wu & Hiltz (2004) <sup>[19]</sup>, as the scholars indicated that teacher presence has an impact on students' success in online learning. In the process, LaPointe and Gunawardena (2004) <sup>[23]</sup> also reported that students' perceived teaching presence had a direct impact on their self-reported learning outcomes. Having concisely examined the value of social presence in online environment, let's scrutinize the negative effect of the absence of online presence in online programs in schools.

### **Negative Effects of the Absence of Social Presence on Online Communities**

Human beings as a social animal normally like to be in group and also discuss in group at all times. Several Researches have shown that there is a relationship between social presence and perceived learning in online communities. For instance, Fabro and Garrison (1998) <sup>[13]</sup>; McIsaac and Gunawardena (1996) <sup>[26]</sup> assert the social presence is a vital element in influencing online interaction. In the same vein, (Tu and McIsaac, 2002) <sup>[26]</sup> observed that social presence impacts online interaction. Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) <sup>[23]</sup> also pointed out that social presence affects user satisfaction; while Tu and Corry (2002) affirm that social presence affects critical thinking. In expression of the magnitude of the negative impacts of online social presence in distance education, Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk (2012) <sup>[44]</sup> stated that without social presence, learning interaction suffers, which has negative effects on learning performance.

Rashidi (2015) <sup>[30]</sup> citing a study that examined Empire State College online students, which explored the relationship among student's perception of social presence in online courses, as well as student's perceived learning and satisfaction with their instructor, revealed that students who had very low social presence with their instructors were reported feeling less satisfied with their instructors. The same research found that students, who felt very low social presence with their instructor, perform poorly in online courses. This is a very good indicator that there is a relationship between instructor satisfaction and perceived learning. When the level of social presence is low, interaction is also low (Garramone, Harris, and Anderson, 1986) <sup>[12]</sup>. A lack of social presence may lead to a high level of frustration, a critical attitude toward the instructor.

### **Methods of Reducing Negative Effects of Social Presence on Online Learners**

Online social presence has become one of the most discussed issues on online programmes. In fact, it has become a cankerworm that is causing disaffections on distance education students/learners. It has given much concern on online instructional designers and teachers as well. Consequently, it has become a tripartite problem that needs triangular solutions, since it affects the students, teachers and the instructional designers.

(Hampel and Dallinger, 1995) pointed out that a lack of social presence may lead to a high level of frustration, a critical attitude toward the instructor's effectiveness, and a lower level of affective learning. Hence, Gunawardena (1995) <sup>[23]</sup>, while emphasizing on the need for social presence argues that social presence is necessary to improve effective instruction in technology-based classrooms. In order to increase social presence, the roles of instructors have been seriously emphasized. In emphasizing the role of the instructors in building social presence, (Cooper and Hendrick-Keefe, 2001) suggested that the new role of the instructor should be "redefined as a facilitator, organizer, and manager." The scholars opined that online learning demands a different strategy; hence, new instructional strategies will afford the teachers and their online learning classrooms greater success in building a social presence space where students learn actively from each other, the instructor and the content.

Most online instructors build online modules that facilitate students understanding of the course content, but neglect the critical social aspects that engage learners' to promote virtual community. Since students are naturally used to face-to-face interaction with their teachers, this method must be intentionally built into online classes to reduce alienation of students/learners. Now, how do we solve this problem?

Scollins-Mantha (n.d.) declared that the students, teachers and the instructional designers must work together to face the challenge of creating social presence in the virtual world. Garrison *et al* (2000) <sup>[13]</sup>, Palloff and Pratt (2003) <sup>[29]</sup> indicated that instructors presence is of paramount importance during the delivery of an online course. To affirm the above statement, they indicated that social presence could be reduced via instructors' communication with students both within and outside of content discussions, the sharing of information related to the students' professional interests and goals, and efforts to establish and maintain a sense of community among students. Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001) <sup>[12]</sup> indicated that the instructional design component includes organizing the course, setting curriculum, establishing time parameters, and laying out netiquette criteria.

Nevertheless, a number of suggestions have been proffered by other scholars like, Wang (2010) <sup>[42]</sup>, Kathleen (2010), Dreon (2013) <sup>[9]</sup>, Rashid (2015) <sup>[30]</sup>, Scollins-Mantha (n.d.), etc. on how to curtail the impacts of online social presence in online education environment. Listed hereunder are some of the recommendations:-

1. Welcome Letter: Special greetings to learners at the beginning of each online programme will be helpful to reduce online social absence. This may be attached to the courseware or be posted to the online course website. Learners, after reading this message will feel



- that they are welcome and cared for by the instructors, thereby feel the instructors' virtual presence (Wang, 2010) <sup>[42]</sup>.
2. **Instructors Personalized Introduction:** Ordinarily, when you read a letter from someone, you feel as if the person is right there with you. This is so because sometimes you smile or get angry after reading the letter. Therefore, in order to hold students' attention, especially in the first class, instructors must create social presence. This could be achieved in several ways, such as, concise introduction of your person to the learner. The learners will know who they are dealing with in the programme. A short poem relevant to the course can hold the students' attention. An overview of a well-planned course and a display of a fun and humorous personality, and more could be of good help to reducing online social presence (Wang, 2010) <sup>[42]</sup>. The display of instructor (s) photograph (s) could show a sense of presence to online learners. In addition, learners can be provided with an overview of the course content with a short orientation video by which the teachers/instructors' voices are heard, thereby creating social presence.
  3. **Student-Student Personalized Introduction:** In this case, students are directed to introduce themselves to each other so as to open communication among them outside the course content. Discussion board should also create to permit learners to concisely introduce themselves each other through texts, or via multimedia approach either web 2.0, My Brain Shark, or Fotobabble, etc.
  4. **Electronic Mail:** Sense of community could be created when electronic mail is frequently used to inform learners on any issue arising from the programme. Email could be used to guide students' academic issue(s). For instance, it could be used to inform the entire students on time schedule changes for a particular course. It may be used for group assignments, feedback on a particular assigned work, or a guide on how to go about a particular issue. Also, it could be used to motivate students to study and following-up with students for special issues. Correction of misunderstandings or misconceptions could also be achieved via email. Giving of tests, assignments, guidance, or instructions of ideas on issues of importance, feedback on individual student's question (s) or groups are some of the things instructors/facilitators could be achieved through the use of electronic mail communication. Aragon (2003) <sup>[11]</sup> stressed the need for timely responses via the use of email in online environments. The author pointed out that answering email with a shorter turn-around time is pertinent to fostering social presence in the online learning classroom; while (Woods and Ebersole, 2003) also emphasized immediacy or timely response to learners' emails. It has also been proven that email also allows the students to engage in a more personal way with their teacher (Woods and Ebersole, 2003).
  5. **Synchronous Tools:** Some course management systems offer synchronous online classrooms, such as chat rooms for teaching/communication. Online instructors sometimes schedule specific time when they meet and discuss with students on issues bordering on course content. The instructor may initiate a group discussion or inform a student leader to start the discussion. The instructor may at last summarize the group discussion and students in turn ask questions and instant feedbacks are gotten. When students and instructors are engaged in this type of conversation, and the instructors use the forum to comment on their posts and guiding their learning, it frees students from online boredoms. When communication is in real-time, it often enhances online social presence.
  6. **Course Announcements:** Frequent use of web-based course announcements will make the students feel connected with the instructors/facilitators, hence, add flavour to learning. If an instructor makes one to three announcements per week, the students will feel the sense of community as they go on with their studies.
  7. **Web 2.0 Tools:** This tool is a very good forum for fun and collaboration among students and also between students and their teachers. Students can create their own blogs through which they communicate with peers and the teachers. Researches have shown that students still maintain the blog and keep communicating with instructors and fellow students after they had completed the online programmes.
  8. **End Remarks and Best-wishes Statements:** Most students do appreciate concluding remarks at the end of every task given to them. These statements or wishes create social presence. This could be done at the end of examination question, at the end of semester exam, or comments/corrections on a final learning assessment. When a student receives a welcome letter at the beginning of a course and best-wishes statement at the end, he/she feels a sense of belonging.
  9. **Feedback mechanism:** A proper feedback mechanism is very vital and should be put in place by which students/learners' questions or requests will be responded with immediate effect. In support of fostering social presence through feedback mechanism, (Vrasidas and McIsaac (2000) <sup>[26]</sup> stated thus: "Feedback in an online classroom is more important than in a face-to-face class; if not told exactly how they are doing, students have no other non-verbal cues to go on." Feedback also offers acknowledgment and immediacy (Woods and Ebersole, 2003). In emphasizing the importance of feedback, Tu and McIsaac (2002) <sup>[26]</sup> affirmed that if time frame expectations are not met, students feel less socially connected in the online learning classroom. The scholar stated that the teacher must take into account the isolation felt by students during online communities in order to generate social presence between students and the teachers (facilitators).
  10. **Humor:** Scholars have suggested that humor is another factor that increases the rate of social presence in online environments. In face-to-face contacts, humor plays a vital role, as it is used in tense situations. Stressing the importance of humor in online learning, (Woods and Ebersole, 2003) assert that it has been tied to improving learning outcomes. Also, (Aragon, 2003) <sup>[11]</sup> states that humor reduces social distance and conveys goodwill by offering students something to share in. The author stressed that this could be achieved through online greeting e-cards. These e-cards could be sent to students periodically, such as, during holidays, midterm breaks, or after some stressful exams, or major paper assignments. If chosen appropriately, an e-card can get

both a laugh, support, and a connection to the students, and it will show students that the teacher not only cares but that they are paying attention (Scollins-Mantha, n.d).

11. Audio Files: The inclusions of audio files in online content also add to social cues in online environments. The inclusion of audio files can be achieved through voice mail and e-mail file attachments. In recent time, technology has made it possible for teachers to create audio files with some software. Hence, mp3 files could be created to add a voice to texts to enhance social cues which invariably connects the students to the teacher.
12. Group Assignment: One other way of enhancing social presence is assigning small group works to learners. In this case, teachers are to monitor the discussion but not to have overall control of the discussions. The teachers work at this point is to provide guidance to students/learners as they discuss on the assigned work. The teachers should also give the learners the opportunity to freely discuss issues and arrive at their own conclusion. Palloff and Pratt (2005) <sup>[29]</sup> stated that prior to the start of small group work that the teachers may wish to explain the purpose of the group work and encourage the groups to set out and agree to their own rules of conduct. This, the scholar affirmed will enable students to engage with and buy-in to the process.

### Conclusion

The reviewed literature on online programmes revealed that social presence represents the students' feeling of connectedness, both socially and emotionally, with others in the online environment, which Swan, *et al.* (2008) <sup>[32]</sup> affirmed encompasses three elements: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. Affectively, students' need to show expression of emotions in their online course, they need to use humor and self-disclosure. Online learners need to communicate openly by representing their willingness to strike up conversations and respond to one another in an honest and respectful manner. Online learners need to express themselves cohesively by agreeing with one another, and using inclusive terms such as "we" when referring to the group, and using salutations, vocatives, and phatic when referring to classmates as expressed by (Lowenthal, 2003) <sup>[24]</sup>. In order to maintain online social presence, instructors/teachers should develop learning materials and activities that will seriously engage and challenge students/learners in order to develop their cognitive abilities. In the same development, timely and in-depth feedback should be effective in their online courses since students generally placed high value on communication and the instructor's responsiveness. Also, clear and simple language in online courses should be emphasized as literature on online learning indicates that a high degree of clarity and communication is essential for student satisfaction (Durrington, *et al.*, 2006).

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