

# Cultivating Online Professor Presence as the Doorway to Discipleship

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## Abstract

Studies have revealed that professor presence, and not merely professor engagement, is essential to a student's success. While traditional, residential higher education programs often assume professor presence, the online experience requires proactivity by faculty members to fill the natural perceptions within virtual spaces. The challenge for Christian instructors is even greater, as effective professor presence is the doorway to spiritual influence. This paper aims to explore the theoretical foundations behind professor presence, demonstrate the connection between professor presence and discipleship, and provide practical ideas to assist instructors in the implementation process. Thus, faculty members will understand clearly why professor presence matters and how they can assume greater levels of influence within their online classrooms.

**Key words:** presence; online; influence; discipleship

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When a law enforcement officer completes a traffic stop, it is common practice for the officer to drag his hand across the back of the vehicle as he approaches the driver. In so doing, he leaves behind trace evidence in the form of fingerprints that could be used in court should the driver flee the scene. In the same way, *all* professors leave fingerprints on their students.

However, for Christian instructors, the stakes are higher—not only do these professors desire to influence, but more importantly, they seek to leave the indelible imprint of Christ upon the lives of each student. This imprinting most often comes about because of the relational credibility established through engagement and interaction. In other words, the professor's *presence* creates a doorway to greater levels of spiritual influence. However, the online teaching and learning space contains challenges in this regard.

Despite the evidence that when good teaching practices are observed online, students can learn a little more than in a comparable face-to-face course, a false perception persists (Nilson & Goodson, 2021). As early as 2003, Guidera (2003) conducted a study that included full-time faculty of both public and private universities to assess the perceived effectiveness of online instruction. Seven principles were utilized for the analysis: 1. Encourages student-faculty contact; 2. Encourages cooperation among students; 3. Encourages active learning; 4. Gives

prompt feedback; 5. Emphasizes time on task; 6. Communicates high expectations; 7. Respects diverse talents and ways of learning. Ultimately, the data led the researcher to conclude that study participants "perceive online instruction as somewhat more effective than traditional instruction" (Guidera, 2003, p. 163). In a different notable report, more than 1,000 empirical studies of online learning were examined and assembled by Means et al. (2010), which resulted in the identification of 50 independent effects that could be studied for meta-analysis.

This research found that online students "performed modestly better, on average, than those learning the same material through traditional face-to-face instruction" (Means et al., 2020, p. xiv). In addition, it was determined that "most of the variations in the way in which different studies implemented online learning did not affect student learning outcomes significantly" (Means et al., 2020, p. xv). As further evidence, Shachar and Neumann (2010) found in their comparison between online and traditional courses that students who utilized a distance education mode of education outperformed their traditional instruction counterparts 70% of the time. They concluded: "It is clear that the experimental probability of attaining higher learning outcomes is greater in the online environment than in the face-to-face environment" and "this probability is increasing over time" (Schacher & Neumann, 2010, p. 327).

Even though the evidence supports the legitimacy of online learning, the lack of physical face-to-face interaction has changed many of the norms upon which professors rely. For example, Nilson and Goodson (2021) observe that online learning can be lonely, even if it does not mean learning alone. In addition, in *Alone Together*, Sherry Turkle (2017) shares her concern regarding the challenges and impact of modern technology: “These days, whether you are online or not, it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart” (p. 14). Since almost one-third of college students take their classes entirely online, professor presence has become the most critical component because it establishes instructors are “real” (Dixson, 2010; Protopsaltis & Baum, 2019). *Real* refers to social presence and is demonstrated by visible activities which offer clues about the individual. Visible activities, as discussed later in the paper, help online students experience “other participants as both real in the sense of being a real person (a human being) and present in the sense of being there in (coexisting, inhabiting) the virtual environment” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 95). Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) added that social presence could be synthesized to mean “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (p. 9). Engagement with a *real* professor can help students feel they are seen and belong to a community. When professors are viewed as *real*, they can then position themselves to influence their students in significant and meaningful ways.

The need for a professor’s presence is surely established by research. The subsequent section will provide a working definition and description of presence to establish a foundation for the rest of the paper. Following that, theoretical principles will be presented along with figures created by the writer to add cognitive and visual handles to the definitions. Those figures will illustrate (1) the disconnect that can occur when either form or content is overemphasized, (2) the role of professor presence within online environments, and (3) how professor presence impacts the student experience. In doing so, a bridge will be made from the concept of professor presence to discipleship. Finally, practical ideas will be offered to ensure movement from definition to theory, to theory and implementation.

### Defining Presence

Biocca et al. (2001) described *presence* as consisting of two interrelated phenomena: *Telepresence*: the phenomenal sense of “being there” and mental models of mediated spaces that create the illusion; *Social Presence*: the sense of “being together with another” and mental models of other intelligence (i.e., people, animals, agents, gods, etc.) that help us simulate “other minds.” In short, “*telepresence* in the online

environment happens when learners have the impression or feeling that they are present at a location remote from their immediate environment. *Social presence* means interactions with others in the online environment” (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). Thus, “being there” and “being together,” and more importantly, the degree to which a student *feels* a professor’s presence will come to define the overall classroom experience.

Since professors are already “there” and “together” with their students, some more significant distinctions must be introduced. First, professor presence differs from engagement (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). Universities expect instructors to perform certain duties, including posting announcements, grading assignments, replying to email inquiries, posting on Discussion Boards, and perhaps even being involved in the creation of course content and course design. Thus, engagement within a course is a given. However, this type of presence is expected and can be accomplished without making any emotional connection.

Second, presence requires a significant connection. Myers (2003), in *The Search to Belong*, describes four types of connecting spaces: public, social, personal, and intimate. While each space is different, each requires: 1. A connection; 2. Commitment and participation; 3. A connection that is found to be *significant*. They carefully point out that *significance* is not necessarily the same as being close or committed (Myers, 2003). In other words, professors do not need to enter a student’s personal life fully; indeed, they should not entertain entering a student’s intimate space. However, even if their relationship is limited to public and social spaces, significant presence is still possible so long as a connection is made.

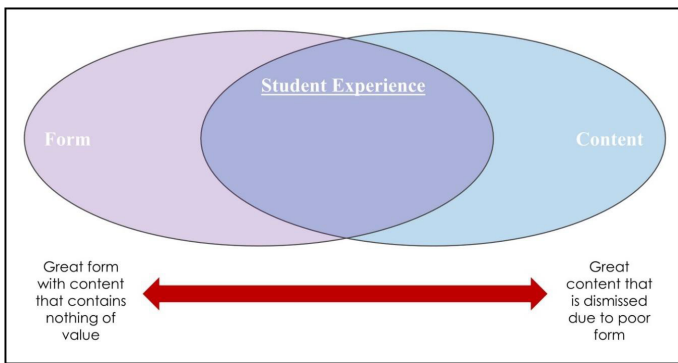
Third, professors need to understand that a connection may be one-sided. Myers (2003) stated: “Belonging does not need to be reciprocal. You can feel a sense of belonging—and in fact, can belong—without the other party’s knowledge or sharing the experience. Belonging is an individual experience” (p. 25). This is an essential concept for professors to understand, or they may give up trying to connect since they are not receiving the expected feedback from students. What this means is it is entirely possible for a student to feel as though they have made a wonderful connection with their professor without the instructor even knowing it! That said, there is a way for professors to assess their presence’s effectiveness, which comes mainly through course surveys. While course surveys are designed to measure multiple factors, the totality of the student experience is usually indicated. Since studies have shown that student satisfaction is primarily tied to professor presence,

course surveys usually reflect this reality (Glazier, 2016; Martin & Bolliger, 2018).

**Theoretical Principles of Online Professor Presence**

Higher Education has traditionally valued cognitive thinking, and rightly so. But there has also been a recognition that form and delivery of content are equally important. Content without form is void of value, and form without content is void of meaning. Essentially, the thinking has been that a great student experience comes about by marrying great form with great content.

Figure 1: The Relationship Between Form and Content



The problem with this line of thinking is it confuses the means with the end. Bowen and Watson (2017) iterated:

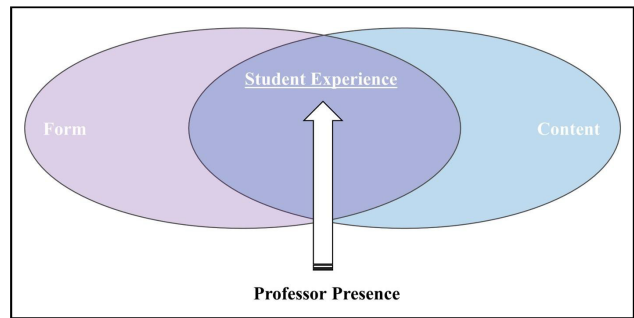
As faculty, if we are primarily concerned with transmitting content, our value will continue to decrease. If, however, we are more concerned with faculty-student interaction and the motivation of students in balance with course design, critical analysis, and student mental models, then the value of what we do will increase. (p. xxii)

While content and form are critical components of learning, they serve as the vehicle for the greater goal: to help students improve how they process and integrate information (Bowen & Watson, 2017). And for Christian professors, this also means assisting students in processing and integrating information through a Christian worldview. That said, the other hidden variable, the *secret sauce*, is the professor's presence.

Figure 2: The Injection of Professor Presence into the Student Experience

In addition to the research, anecdotal evidence also clearly affirms the power of professor presence. Ask

any person to look back on their academic journey, and most would likely agree that the classes they found



most memorable were not necessarily the easiest or the ones in which they received an “A,” or even the ones associated with their specific degree program. Instead, the best classes, and the most memorable were the ones where the student made a significant connection with the professor.

**The Relationship Between Professor Presence and Discipleship**

The connection to discipleship stems from the previously established relationship between form and content, along with the impact of the professor's presence on the student experience. The argument for proactive professor presence has been made, but it merely serves as the vehicle, not the goal. For the Christian professor, the goal is always spiritual growth. Because influence utilizes the professor's presence as the means, discipleship can occur in any class and not just in Bible courses.

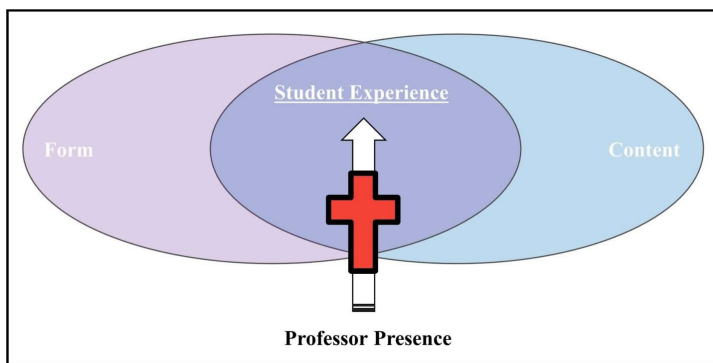
The word discipleship is closely related to spiritual formation, which can be defined as “our continuing response to the reality of God’s grace shaping us into the likeness of Jesus Christ, through the work of the Holy Spirit, in the community of faith, for the sake of the world” (Greenman & Kalantzis, 2010, p. 24). This definition is based upon Scripture passages such as 2 Corinthians 3:18 and 2 Peter 3:18, which emphasize growth and transformation. Gangel and Wilhoit (1998), add Romans 12:2 as support to make the point that spiritual formation moves beyond knowledge to transformation: “Formation is not concerned with passively receiving the information, even true information. Formation requires knowledge of specific data and integrating those data within the larger whole of one’s life” (p. 15). Bill Hull (2006), known for his extensive research and catalog of authored books on the topic, defines discipleship as relating to a transformed mind, transformed character, transformed relationships, transformed habits, transformed service, and transformed influence. Author and professor, Dr.

McClendon (2022), adds that most definitions of discipleship can be synthesized down to the transformation of three key areas: Knowledge (what I am), Character (who I am), and Behavior (what I do). Thus, discipleship must be viewed through the lens of growth and development. While it involves cognitive development as a component, holistic growth is emphasized.

The life of Jesus serves as a great example of one who made incredible progress with a small group of followers within a very short, condensed period of time.

Likewise, online professors often only serve their students for eight short weeks. While the term of investment is brief, the point of discipleship is to develop someone further than they were at the beginning of the relationship, and that is a worthy goal for every instructor.

*Figure 3: Imprinting Christ through Professor Presence into the Student Experience*



Something very satisfying about investing in a student is that what is produced will always be tied back to the professor. Online students are located worldwide and will influence people within those spheres of influence. However, there is a reaping and sowing element here. Any forward spiritual movement in a student's life precipitated by the professor's work is often carried on in ways that will never be known. However, there is a recognition that whatever is produced in a student's life always contains a tie to the professor's investment, and hence there is a mutual sharing of those accomplishments. Thus, it is essential to take the words of 2 Timothy 2:2 (NIV) to heart: "And the things you have heard me say in the presence of many witnesses entrust to reliable people who will also be qualified to teach others." Because of this reality, professors must always view courses as more than the facilitation of academia; instead, they must look for meaningful opportunities. Sometimes these present themselves naturally as a

student will email a prayer request or post a concern within a public forum. Often though, it comes by reading between the lines. When a student asks for an extension, that is an opportunity to influence. When a student plagiarizes, that is also an opportunity. These are issues that require academic solutions, but they are also key moments when some spiritual probing is appropriate.

An instructor may find that a student is asking for an extension because they have been sick, in which case some care and concern can be offered. In other cases, it may be discovered that the student is going through a divorce, in which case an instructor's guidance, encouragement, and support can make a world of difference. The point is that being sensitive to our students opens up windows of opportunity to meet needs at a pivotal moment in a person's life. Professors must always be cognizant that behind the computer screens are real people with real dreams and aspirations.

Viewing teaching through the lens of a discipleship process also forces professors to keep the big picture in mind when difficult decisions arise. For example, instructors sometimes agonize over reporting a student for plagiarism. However, if appropriately handled, some of the most spiritually productive conversations can come from such a decision. And that should not come as a surprise—after all, most people recognize that their best-learned lessons came about because they learned them the hard way. However, viewing students through the lens of discipleship forces professors to see the greater potential rather than fixating on short-term pain.

For Christian professors with discipleship in view, the goal should not be to merely get students through a course; instead, it is to help them become all God intends. If a student is issued a zero on an assignment because of plagiarism, yet they come to understand why integrity is so important and are determined never to make that mistake again, then the instructor has served them well. But if faculty let the violation slide, the problem will likely only manifest itself again in another class and could have future character, job, and relational implications.

There is a practical reason online faculty members should view what they do as discipleship. While it does not happen immediately, it is easy for instructors to start going through the motions over time. After all, they often end up teaching the same course over and over again. The course content is the same, the announcements can be the same, and the schedule is the same, meaning it can become a job. That, of course, is bad for the instructor and the student and ultimately hurts the

university. The only real variable is that with every new section comes new students. With them comes the opportunity to minister and disciple. It is only when discipleship is in view that each section can become something fresh, exciting, and meaningful.

Because the process of discipleship is a critical element for each professor, instructors must intentionally work hard to make it the common thread in everything they do. In other words, feedback on a written assignment does not merely serve as the means for pointing out what a student did wrong; instead, it is filtered through the discipleship grid and thus constructed in a way that will be encouraging to help them learn and grow. Likewise, announcements are not given just so students can stay on track; instead, there is an attempt to connect the dots between what they are learning and real life because spirituality should never just be an academic exercise. Ultimately, every form of contact and communication contains an opportunity for the professor's presence to translate into discipleship.

### Practical Ideas for Bridging the Gap Between Presence and Discipleship

It has been established that professors engage students to influence them for academic and spiritual development. With influence as the backdrop, consider the following proactive ways to reinforce the professor's presence and open the door for discipleship opportunities.

#### State of Mind

Imagine what would happen if professors took a moment this week to consider what is going on in the lives of their students. Many are still facing challenges related to COVID. Some will have lost jobs, there is anxiety about the future, some face family or relational conflict, and others simply are stressed out and overwhelmed. Conklin and Dikkers (2021) found that students felt more connected when instructors incorporated empathy into messaging. Another study recognized how caring professors distracted students from the anxiety surrounding the pandemic (Ensmann et al., 2021). Recognizing how a student may be feeling will go a long way in helping professors empathize. But teachers must go a step beyond compassionate thoughts and take specific steps to express their care. For example:

*Jim,*

*I want you to know that I prayed for you this morning. I don't know what you may be facing, but I prayed James 1:5 over your life—that God*

*would give you wisdom for the decisions you need to make today. I know my prayer is just a small thing, but this seemed to be the most important of all the things I could do today.*

#### Building Rapport

If professors desire to influence their students, they must invest some time in building rapport. Glazier (2016) conducted a study to demonstrate that the online format makes building instructor-student rapport difficult and leads students to disconnect. They found that rapport alone produces “a strong, significant, and consistently positive effect” that must be initiated by the instructor (Glazier, 2016, p. 438). Types of communication can include phone calls or emails, but the key, they contend, is ongoing communication instead of one-shot interventions. To begin the process, some professors write a personal email to every student during the first week of class. Other professors call every single student on the phone. While these examples certainly go over and above, the method isn't nearly as important as the effort. For example, many professors may feel like introductory Discussion Boards are a waste of time as they are unweighted and do not correlate to the *important course content*. However, creating relational touchpoints often opens up doors for greater influence, whether it takes time to dialogue with students within the Introductions Discussion Board or strategically respond to emails with intentionality.

#### Personalization

Universally, every person has an egocentric bias. It's why people naturally look for themselves when presented with a group picture. Still, it is also why students notice when a professor begins their correspondence or grading comments with the student's name (Aragon, 2003). Doing so communicates that the teacher sees the person who matters behind the screen.

As previously noted, a significant key to establishing an effective professor presence is for instructors to be perceived as *real*. Leh (2001) observed that a lack of social presence leads students to view instruction as impersonal, resulting in decreased sharing of information. In contrast, high levels of social presence creates a perception of warmth and approachability (Rourke et al., 1999). Theologically, the image of God in man recognizes the intrinsic value of each individual, and professors can emphasize this reality through a commitment to personalizing. Aside from addressing students by name,

printing a hardcopy of the student roster and keeping it front and center on one's desk throughout a term makes it very easy to note and track any number of items, including:

- Student nicknames
- Prayer requests
- Extensions
- Disability accommodations
- Dates of follow-up
- Learning habits
- Life circumstances

### Announcements

Burkle and Cleveland-Innes (2013) encouraged instructors to engage in the online environment as facilitators, mentors, expert participants, and guardians of practice/discourse that is student-centered. And since ongoing communication is key to establishing a professor's presence, weekly course announcements serve as one of the most essential forms (Glazier, 2016). While these certainly provide an effective means to keep students on track concerning the course schedule and assignments, there is an opportunity for discipleship here, even if the course is not a Bible class and students are not all Christians. For example, a great primer may be a statement like this in the Week 1 Announcement:

*Welcome again to Leading Organizational Change! Before getting into the weekly academic requirements, I would like to take a moment each week to provide some spiritual focus. While I understand that not every student may be a follower of Christ, psychological research studies have long demonstrated the value of faith in a person's life. Since my goal as an instructor is to develop the whole person, I hope you find these opening thoughts each week relevant, encouraging, and insightful.*

Then, before getting to upcoming assignments, professors can take a moment to share a relevant connection between Scripture and real life. For example:

*It's pretty difficult to watch the news of late and not feel a little anxious over world events. Not only did the Corona Virus create great upheaval in our lives, but in recent months we've seen war in the news and even violent protests break out*

*across our nation. Then, as if civil unrest isn't enough, we've experienced some pretty devastating weather conditions in the last few years, with hurricanes and tornadoes around the nation as well. It's easy to forget in these moments that while the world seems to be spinning out of control, there is a God who is aware and in control. I was reminded recently of a verse from Exodus 3:7 where God said to Moses regarding the Israelites who were enslaved in*

*Egypt, "I have seen, I have heard, and I am concerned." That same God is alive and well today. He sees you. He hears you. He is concerned for you.*

A simple yet relevant introductory spiritual thought can encourage students and firmly establish the professor as one who is bridging the gap between presence and discipleship.

### Discussion Boards

Discussion board assignments are important in higher education online curricula because they promote peer-to-peer interaction, which can easily be overlooked in virtual spaces. While discussion boards serve an academic purpose, they are couched in relational forms, meaning professors miss out on discipleship opportunities when they omit themselves from conversations that occur within these forums. Hoey (2017) observed that students were influenced positively, not by the number of professor interactions but by the type of engagement. Thus, quality rather than quantity is the goal.

Part of the difficulty for professors is that they are naturally correctors. And while discussion boards contain a graded component where corrections can be pointed out, the forum is relational. Thus, rather than correcting students within a discussion forum and risking public embarrassment, instructors must strategically use discussion boards to add value and cultivate unconsidered perspectives. Additionally, this is a great place to draw connections to spiritual matters so students can connect the dots between the Bible and real life.

### Email Communication

Regarding email communication, two key aspects need to be considered. First, prompt responses are essential for establishing a professor's presence. Aragon (2003) points out that "social presence is the extent to which individuals in electronic environments are perceived as real" (p. 64).

In face-to-face environments, students can approach their professors to ask questions or voice concerns removing the question of whether an instructor is real. However, an untimely response within the online context diminishes this perception.

Secondly, since online communication is primarily text-based and can be largely corrective in nature, intentions can easily be misunderstood and misinterpreted. Thus, professors must work hard to manage perceptions. In both cases, a person's perception, whether right or wrong, is their reality and, therefore, must be carefully handled (Stevens & Morgan, 2004).

Email communication is most often a response to a student's inquiry and therefore serves as a significant opportunity for influence. An instructor could offer a one-word reply to a student's question and view the process as effective because they were efficient. However, a few added elements could make the difference between providing an answer and strategically creating a discipleship opportunity. As previously mentioned, addressing the student by name is a great first step. In addition, asking how the course is going and inviting feedback may provide a window into the student's world that otherwise would have been unknown. Finally, after addressing the student's concern, ending correspondence with the question, "Did that help?" conveys care and invites further feedback. Students often respond to these small and simple steps by expressing appreciation and sharing about themselves, resulting in opportunities for professor influence and discipleship.

### Academic Dishonesty

As previously mentioned, incidents of academic misconduct require academic solutions. However, opportunities for discipleship are presented in the process. Plagiarism detector company Turnitin (2021) observes that a learning continuum exists at all points of a student's experience. Thus, they advocate for harsh penalties *and* remediation, recognizing that academic dishonesty is a symptom of something much more significant. Ultimately, they conclude: "It's possible to transform instances of plagiarism into positive outcomes" (Turnitin, 2021, p. 10).

While not every situation will turn out well, professors can facilitate the process in a way in which discipleship and learning become potential variables. In short, instructors should make it their practice to inquire rather than accuse when investigating an issue. For example: *Jane, It appears your paper was flagged for plagiarism. Please respond and offer your perspective on this very serious academic violation.* If a professor makes an accusation, it

automatically causes the student to become defensive and shuts down productive conversation. Furthermore, it removes the possibility that a system error occurred or that a reasonable, alternative explanation exists. By framing the contact as an inquiry, the stage is set for effective communication. While corrective measures may still need to be enacted, if the goal is discipleship, the professor can help the student understand the life-long implications of integrity and may prevent infractions with greater consequences.

### Conclusion

Shachar and Neumann (2010) observed that although universities usually offer the same degrees in both residential and online environments, distance learning is often treated as an aberration rather than an emerging standard or new norm. Since the legitimacy of the online platform has been established, administrators and faculty alike must give due attention to maximizing its influence. Research has confirmed that how an instructor establishes their presence in an online environment can significantly affect the student's overall learning experience (Richardson, 2016). However, for the Christian professor, presence is the doorway to discipleship. In this paper, professor presence was defined and described to set the stage for how greater levels of spiritual influence could be attained. Practical ideas were presented for how instructors could increase their degree of professor presence and, in turn, increase discipleship opportunities. The hope is that instructors will experiment and, in the process, birth new and better insights with the recognition that better professor/student connections will ultimately result in higher levels of spiritual influence.

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