

# MENDIVE



## REVISTA DE EDUCACIÓN

Translated from the original in Spanish

### The Social Presence of the Facilitator in online education. Good practices

#### La presencia social del facilitador en la educación en línea. Buenas prácticas

#### A presença social do facilitador na educação online. Boas práticas

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#### ABSTRACT

Online, virtual or Distance Education refers to that model of teaching which consists in a didactic dialogue, mediated by Information and Communication technology, that favors greater flexibility and personalization of learning. Teaching English in a virtual context implies necessarily creating a sense of Teacher Social Presence. This concept refers to the state or attitude of being aware of the participants, available, supportive and keeping emotionally connected and committed, truly interested in learning and

personality growth. The purpose of this article is to share some good practices that have worked in the Open University for Adults, a leading Distance Education institution in the Dominican Republic. A Google forms survey was applied to a sample of eight facilitators. The survey consisted of a list of strategies, resulting from an extensive Literature review, which referred to teacher social presence and popular procedures to promote collaboration and interactivity in synchronous virtual classes. The results indicated the generalized use of the strategies that favor the previous preparation to the course, communication, collaboration, interactivity and effective formative assessment. Complementary relations were identified between the Teacher Social Presence strategies and the procedures used in the online synchronous classes. Having identified these good practices could help other online facilitators to promote a facilitator-participant emotional connection.

**Keywords:** good practices; online education; Teacher Social Presence.

#### RESUMEN

La educación en línea, virtual o a Distancia, es aquella modalidad de enseñanza que se constituye en un diálogo didáctico mediado por el uso de las Tecnologías de la Información y las Comunicaciones, que favorece mayor flexibilidad y la personalización del aprendizaje. Enseñar inglés en un entorno en línea implica necesariamente crear un sentido de presencia social del facilitador. Este concepto significa el estado o la actitud de estar atento a los participantes, disponible, de apoyarles y permanecer emocionalmente conectado y comprometido, verdaderamente interesado en el aprendizaje y en el crecimiento integral de su personalidad. El propósito de este artículo es compartir algunas buenas prácticas que han funcionado en La Universidad Abierta para Adultos de la República Dominicana, institución líder en

Educación a Distancia. Se aplicó una encuesta en línea a una muestra de ocho destacados facilitadores de inglés en dicha institución, que contenía una lista de estrategias, resultado de una extensa revisión de la literatura, referidas a la Presencia Social del Facilitador y procedimientos populares para promover la colaboración y la interactividad en las clases sincrónicas en línea. Los resultados indicaron el uso generalizado de estrategias que favorecen la preparación previa al curso, la comunicación, la colaboración, la interactividad y la evaluación formativa efectiva. Se identificó complementariedad entre las estrategias que favorecen la presencia social del facilitador y los procedimientos utilizados en las clases sincrónicas virtuales. Haber identificado estas buenas prácticas podría ayudar a otros facilitadores a promover la conexión emocional facilitador-participante.

**Palabras clave:** buenas prácticas; educación en línea; presencia social del facilitador.

## RESUMO

A educação online, virtual ou a distância é aquela modalidade de ensino que se constitui em um diálogo didático mediado pelo uso das Tecnologias da Informação e da Comunicação, o que favorece uma maior flexibilidade e personalização da aprendizagem. Ensinar inglês em um ambiente online implica necessariamente em criar um senso de presença social para o facilitador. Este conceito significa o estado ou atitude de estar atento aos participantes, disponível, apoiando-os e mantendo-se emocionalmente ligados e empenhados, verdadeiramente interessados na aprendizagem e no crescimento integral da sua personalidade. O objetivo deste artigo é compartilhar algumas boas práticas que funcionaram na Universidade Aberta para Adultos da República Dominicana, uma instituição líder em Educação a Distância. Uma pesquisa online foi aplicada a uma

amostra de oito facilitadores de inglês de destaque na referida instituição, que continha uma lista de estratégias, resultado de uma extensa revisão da literatura, referente à Presença Social do Facilitador e procedimentos populares para promover a colaboração e interatividade em aulas síncronas online. Os resultados indicaram o uso generalizado de estratégias que favorecem a preparação pré-curso, a comunicação, a colaboração, a interatividade e a avaliação formativa eficaz. Identificou-se complementariedade entre as estratégias que favorecem a presença social do facilitador e os procedimentos utilizados nas aulas virtuais síncronas. A identificação dessas boas práticas pode ajudar outros facilitadores a promover a conexão emocional facilitador-participante.

**Palavras-chave:** boas práticas; Educação online; presença social do facilitador.

## INTRODUCTION

Online teaching, also called virtual, basically refers, according to Graham, Borup, Short & Archambault (2019), to that mode of teaching mediated by the use of Information and Communication Technologies.

Online teaching does not need a physical confluence of teachers and students, and offers participants greater flexibility and control of their time and pace of learning. Another advantage is that it offers greater possibilities for personalization in the mediated didactic dialogue that characterizes it (García-Aretio, L., 2020).

Online education of the English language as a foreign language must be constituted, as occurs in the best experiences of communicative and interactive language teaching, in a dialogue (social character)

between teachers and students, between students and of these with the contents, because this is how it is understood that developer learning occurs (in interaction, group cooperation) when facing the solution of authentic communicative tasks, mobilizing motivation, that stimulate self-regulation processes, metacognitive reflection and critical - creative thinking (Vigil, P. and others, 2020).

Teaching English effectively in an online environment involves creating a Facilitator's sense of Social Presence (PSF). Glenn & Berry (2015) state that "the teacher presence has been consistently identified as essential to create and maintain a quality learning experience" (p.58).

A challenge to online environments is precisely their lack of social presence that affects learning and growth. This article tries to demonstrate the importance of PSF by clarifying what it means from the facilitator's perspective, and sharing the good practices used by excellent facilitators at a prestigious distance education institution to promote it.

Bentley, Secret & Cummings (2015) define social presence:

Social presence refers to the extent to which people are perceived as real and are capable of being authentically known and truly connected with others in mediated communication (...) it has been linked both conceptually and empirically to the quality of the online learning, including levels of student participation, satisfaction and engagement (p. 494).

The social presence of the facilitator in online teaching means the state or attitude of being attentive to the participants, available, supporting them and remaining emotionally

connected and engaged, truly interested in learning and in the integral growth of the personality of the participants. Consequently, what facilitators do to promote motivation, build a climate of trust, commitment, interaction, and empathetic communication is identified as good PSF practices.

Despite their scientific relevance, identifying strategies that facilitate this social presence of the teacher in online courses of English as a foreign language and the procedures used in synchronous virtual encounters that could complement them have not been sufficiently explored, at least not from empirical studies.

The Open University for Adults (UAPA) of the Dominican Republic has been a leader in Distance Education for 26 years. The purpose of this article is to share some good practices that contribute to the achievement of the necessary social presence of the English facilitator and that have worked favorably in this institution, which could help other facilitators to promote the facilitator-participant emotional connection and commitment of the participants.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A sample of eight English teachers from the Open University for Adults (UAPA) was selected. They are outstanding facilitators who, in the institutional surveys carried out in the last three years, are revealed as popular among their participants; they have full acceptance for excellence in their didactic management: empathic communication, high levels of interactivity in synchronous online classes and are recognized by the participants for their decisive role in the progress of their levels of development of communicative competence.

The results in this qualitative study are the result of a nine-month interaction (February-

October 2020) between the selected facilitators and the authors of this article, who directed their continuous professional development, which endows this study with great credibility in the exposed results, product of triangulation and systematic collection of information.

The interaction based on the professional development of the facilitators participating in this study, led to weekly meetings by Zoom to model, train and discuss useful and effective procedures and tools that could be used in their synchronous and asynchronous online interactions with the participants. In addition, sessions for individual training, team teaching, observation and subsequent discussion of their synchronous online classes, as well as the evaluation of their teaching management in the Moodle platform courses were important sources used in this study, which allow a detailed description and exemplification of the strategies included in the online survey.

The facilitators voluntarily responded at the end of October 2020, as a conclusion of the study, to an online survey that contained a list of possible good strategies for the facilitator's social presence, reported in the literature and some procedures to promote collaboration and interactivity in the synchronous online classes that they would probably have used in the courses taught by them in 2020, and that could complement the impact of the use of the strategies, through the Moodle platform and the extensive use of WhatsApp (<https://forms.gle/2Bhct12KNXgSKp7d8>).

## RESULTS

In this study, the strategies were conceptualized as actions carried out by the facilitators aimed at promoting their social presence in the context of a virtual teaching

of English as a foreign language in university education.

Initially, 12 strategies appear, reported in the literature, related to the Social Presence of the Facilitator and details are given about the frequency of their implementation and how the UAPA facilitators applied them in their online courses. Then, it also covers some useful procedures that these facilitators apply to promote collaboration and interactivity in their synchronous online classes.

**Table 1-** Frequency of use by language facilitators in UAPA, of good practices (strategies) of the facilitator's social presence, according to the online survey

PSF strategies	Always	Often	some times	Barely	Never
1. 1. Create WhatsApp groups.	8				
2. 2. Check the functioning status of the resources.	2	5	1		
3. 3. Insert notices and warnings the courses.	6	2			
4.4. Establish an emotional initial connection.	6	2			
5. 5. Create tutorial videos like orientation and modeling of contents.	2	3	1	2	
6.6. Create new questionnaires that encourage additional practice of content with deficiencies.	1	1	3	3	
7. 7. Provide feedback from oral tasks, through videos.	2	2	2		2
8. 8. Transmits affective messages in WhatsApp groups.	7	1			
9. 9. Promote the analysis and exemplification of rubrics and Checklists.	5	3			

10. Convey high expectations of success.		8				
11. Promote curiosity.		4	4			
12. Promote collaboration & creativity.		3		4		1

Boon (2015) includes "effective course development and design" (p.2) as one of the criteria for establishing a teaching presence. Esani (2010) states that, "The instructor must begin preparing for an online course long before the course begins" (p.188).

The UAPA facilitators observed and evaluated in their performance use, as the main means of instruction, a 3.3 Moodle platform (a course learning management system) and the courses they facilitate follow a RASE learning design model. According to Kumar, Martin, Budhrani and Ritzhaupt (2019), RASE stands for digital resources (R) -contents, instructional materials and tools that students use while working on activities-; activities (A) -any questionnaire, forum, wiki, problem solving, projects or collaborative work that involves students in achieving learning outcomes-; supports (S) - spaces to seek help and who to ask for it-; and assessments (E) - spaces to promote reflection on learning progress (can dos) called "Now I can" in UAPA English courses, as well as the summative end-of-unit test and the final course test -.

As part of their preparation for the course (strategies 1 and 2) the UAPA facilitators write personal information such as: full name, telephone number and email address in the course of the Moodle platform. Likewise, most facilitators always or often check the functioning of the resources and activities and their suitability for the age of the participants and the level of the course; identify any content, linguistic, and design errors in course assignments and update dates for learning activities.

In addition, all reported the creation of a WhatsApp group by inserting a link (an external URL). Finally, some warning or advisory notes are always or often included, for example in reference to the nature and scores of the assessment, the timing and linkage of the synchronous weekly classes, etc. (Strategy 3).

Strategy 4 is generalized among UAPA facilitators. Courses designed at UAPA include a video-recorded introduction to the purpose and content of the course. Its transcript is also included and visible in the courses. Once the course begins, the UAPA facilitators always or often send each participant a welcome message to their institutional email addresses and create a Social Forum in which they share a short welcome video. These first two contacts focus on connecting emotionally, ensuring confidence in success, and promoting a climate of trust. Participants are also invited to record a similar video on the course platform or use any other available free video platform, such as Flipgrid.

Facilitators who favor their social presence promote connection and the feeling of being part of a learning community and oppose the usual sense of loneliness and isolation felt by online participants (Esani, 2010).

There is consensus among UAPA facilitators that empathic communication is crucial. To achieve this, they claim that they maintain a constant stream of personalized and humanistic messages in their feedback on learning assignments, their emails, and their WhatsApp messages.

Facilitators agree that it is especially important to convey high expectations for success, highlight the role of effort and perseverance in success, and show them the passion for teaching and learning languages that they feel as teachers. Furthermore, they suggest that striking a balance between flexibility and rigor while being fair and

treating participants as unique human beings are other crucial aspects. They also point to the use of humorous jokes and emoticons as effective procedures to develop that feeling of emotional connection.

Not everything is a panacea at UAPA. The results reported in the applied survey indicate those strategies 5, 6 and 7 offer opportunities for improvement.

Clark (2020) recalls "... showing the value of participating in the eLearning program", as a key procedure that demands to be used repeatedly using all available tools and devices. Consequently, WhatsApp groups are always or often reported by five out of eight facilitators, as a means of communication to share short tutorial videos (strategy 5,) modeling strategies to use the content and resources of the Moodle platform, clarifying the characteristics they expect to have their learning outcomes and how the tasks relate to their social and professional contexts and to the other didactic components as well. They are usually delivered before the start of each unit and are constantly taken up in feedback messages and in any communication facilitator-participant exchange.

It is interesting to note that some of the facilitators prefer the orientation of future content and tasks in the synchronous virtual meeting, which is planned only five or six times during a virtual course. Hence, some report this strategy infrequently.

Assessment for learning works well in online courses (Strategy 6). One way to collect information about learning and participants is student-centered reflection. Baporikar (2016) states: "When students are given the freedom to choose how to reframe, remix, relearn, and reflect on course content, more meaningful and engaging learning can occur" (p.19).

This means that participants should periodically reflect on their learning progress and are allowed to suggest ways to improve the effectiveness of the course using a variety of time and space opportunities, for example, in the sections called "Now I can" in think tanks and wikis.

Furthermore, facilitators can even have reports of quiz results based on comprehension questions assigned using Google Forms (a Google application) to inform their teaching. In all these new questionnaires, focusing on previously diagnosed language and comprehension weaknesses, it is possible to provide a correct / adequate answer, why the given answer is incorrect or inappropriate, or to offer information and links to additional resources and activities. However, most do so infrequently, as they report preferring the inclusion of remedial activities

**Table 2-** Some procedures used by UAPA facilitators to promote collaboration and interactivity in their synchronous online meetings, through Google Meet and / or Zoom, according to the online survey

Procedures	Number of facilitators who use them
Provide feedback on group progress experienced.	7
Use activities that promote interactivity.	8
3. Guide future content and tasks.	7
4. Include remedial activities based on Frequent past group mistakes.	6

The observation of the UAPA facilitators during their weekly online synchronous classes showed the priority given by all or almost all the facilitators to the procedures in Table 2. Other useful procedures reported in the follow-up discussions are the sending of PowerPoint presentations sufficiently in advance to the participants with activities that have a remedial nature, based on their frequent errors in the activities carried out

previously in the course of the platform. Another attractive reported strategy is asking participants to contribute questions about content and resources before the meetings, to help make these synchronous meetings meaningful and more interactive.

## DISCUSSION

The facilitator's social presence practices, which favor pre-course preparation, communication, collaboration, interaction and formative assessment in a technology-mediated teaching-learning process are possible and appear to be effective in promoting the feeling of being part of a learning community, the facilitator-participant emotional connection and the commitment of the participants.

The results presented above reflect the possible causes and even details of how the facilitators selected in the sample have implemented the reported strategies, which is not reflected in the studies referenced by the authors, which focus on the practical component, when listing or refer to suggestions for actions to be carried out in virtual teaching to enhance the effectiveness of this modality.

Additionally, in this study that combines the systematization of the literature on the subject with its dissemination, through improvement actions and methodological work, which are inserted in a strategy of continuous professional development of its teaching staff (which lasted for more than eight months), in the Department of Languages of the UAPA. Consequently, this study refers to a group of actions that are the result of the integration of theory and practice, since it was the theory that initially allowed improving the practice, but later, its creative application and the debate and collective construction allowed a higher level

of empirical concretion and theoretical generalization.

The article establishes relationships between the general strategies and the procedures used in the planning and execution of synchronous virtual encounters. This was possible due to the intense work carried out as part of the numerous actions of the applied continuous professional development strategy.

This research is the result of the awareness of the importance of the social presence of the facilitator to contribute to the success of learning English in a virtual environment. It refers to the real experience of a group of excellent facilitators of English as a foreign language, which reveals the favorable results of the application of a strategy of continuous professional development.

His proposal of strategies and procedures is the result of the theoretical systematization and the collective validation of its effectiveness in its application in a real context of virtual teaching during the period February-October 2021.

Having identified these effective strategies from excellent online facilitators, together with the explanation and practical exemplification of how to achieve complementarity between the use of the strategies through the use of the Moodle and WhatsApp platforms and the procedures that should be used in their virtual encounters. Synchronous could help other English facilitators to promote the facilitator-participant emotional connection.

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## Appendixes

### Appendix 1. An online survey: Good Practices of Social Presence of the facilitator in UAPA

Teaching English effectively in an online environment necessarily means creating a sense of social presence for the facilitator. The purpose of this survey is to identify which are the most frequent actions that the virtual English course facilitators used in their 2020 courses. It is an anonymous survey and to respond voluntarily, therefore, we ask you, please, be sincere in reflecting your reality.

Thank you

1. How often did you create WhatsApp groups to facilitate asynchronous communication in the courses facilitated by you during 2020?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

2. How often did you check and identify content, linguistic and design errors in the assignments and materials of the courses you taught during 2020, before starting your online facilitation?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

3. How often did you include visible Notices and Warnings in your online courses, in relation to relevant aspects of the nature of assignments, assessment and others?

- Always
- Often

- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

4. How often did you try, at the beginning of the course, to connect emotionally with your participants, sending welcome messages to your institutional emails and / or in the Social Forum in the form of short videos?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

5. How often did you create and share tutorial videos to guide and motivate your participants regarding the content of the unit to begin and / or model learning strategies?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

6. How often did you design and share new questionnaires in the Moodle course or Google Forms based on the diagnosed group learning weaknesses?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

7. How often did you provide feedback on your participants' oral task responses by recording videos?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

8. How often did you include messages of encouragement, recognition for good performance and / or images / incorrect answers through WhatsApp or in the feedback of the tasks carried out in the courses in Moodle?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

9. How often did you promote self-regulation processes and autonomy in learning, through the explicit analysis and exemplification of rubrics and checklists in your courses?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

10. How often, in your interaction with the participants, did you convey high expectations of success, highlight the role of effort and perseverance in success, and convey your passion for teaching and learning languages in your courses?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

11. How often did you promote the curiosity of your participants, for example, by putting simple challenges / challenges in their WhatsApp groups and / or in their synchronous virtual meetings?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

12. How often did you encourage collaboration and creativity, for example, by asking them to design tutorials on things they already knew how to do to help other participants?

- Always
- Often
- Sometimes
- Barely
- Never

13. Which of these procedures did you frequently include in your synchronous virtual encounters?

1. Provide feedback on areas of group progress.
2. Use activities that promote interactivity and communication.
3. Guide future content and tasks.
4. Include remedial activities based on frequent previous group errors.

**Conflict of interest:**

Author declares not to have any conflicts of interest.

**Authors' Contribution:**

The author has participated in the writing of the work and analysis of the documents.



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