

# Social Presence in the Online Social Work Classroom

## Final Report

June 2009

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## **Acknowledgement of Traditional Territory**

The University of Victoria is located on the traditional territory of the Coast Salish peoples. Students completing their degrees online may live on traditional territories across Turtle Island so we wish to acknowledge and express gratitude to the keepers of the land we all feel privileged to live and work on.

## Abstract

Social presence in the online social work classroom is a qualitative, exploratory study examining how students experience connection to their program, instructors and each other while completing their bachelor of social work degree online. The study was conducted over two years through multiple online surveys and a focus group with students who had completed part of all of their undergraduate degree online. Forty-two students participated in the study.

Social presence in the context of this report refers to the intellectual and affective sense of being connected to fellow classmates and instructors, the School of Social Work and the University of Victoria during their online learning experience.

Students reflected on experiences of connection to instructors and fellow classmates as well as times when they felt isolated and frustrated with their online experience. Themes that stood out were how workload, content and processes associated with online learning impact student's feeling of social presence. Students' feelings of social presence appeared to be positively correlated to their perceived relationship with their instructor and classmates. Students reporting feelings of disconnection were less satisfied with their learning experience than those students who felt connected. Utilizing student feedback regarding social presence has the potential to inform the structure and relationship building elements of online social work education in the undergraduate program. Further research into enhancement of social presence is recommended.

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## Terminology: Online and onsite

### *Online and onsite*

*Throughout this document we will use the terms online and onsite to describe how and where students receive their education. Online refers to students who attend classes by logging into course management software and onsite refers to students who physically come to a classroom. There are a number of terms used in the literature to describe these two learning approaches which may occur as part of direct quotes throughout this paper.*

### **1. Introduction**

From the moment a student first visits the UVic website to the day they apply to graduate online, they are engaged in a relationship that has meaning, depth and the opportunity to convey a sense of belonging. This sense of belonging has several names, one of which- social presence- is linked to feeling connected during online learning (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006). The story of how social presence unfolds for students in social work online classrooms is the aim of this study.

Students in onsite classrooms identify physical presence, face to face conversations, relationships with instructors and fellow students, group work, roles plays and guests as elements contributing to feelings of being connected to each other and the material being studied (Sher, 2008). Being comfortable asking questions, showing respect, trust and support during personal interactions both in and outside the classroom related to course work contribute to feeling connected (O’Sullivan, Hunt & Lippert, 2004). This feeling of being connected is referred to as social presence (Melrose & Bergeron, 2006:4). Social presence is “considered a key element in establishing strong communities of inquiring and connected learners” (ibid). Rovai (2002) concluded that schools should “provide students with increased affective support by promoting a strong sense of community” (p.12). Although onsite classroom social presence has been widely researched, there is less attention paid to online environments. A small but growing body of literature suggests strong online social presence is linked to student satisfaction with their learning

experience, improved retention of students in programs (ibid.) and “positive social and educational benefits” (Woods & Baker, 2004:7). The positive elements of social presence help prevent isolation, disconnection and lack of commitment within online learning communities (Rovai, 2002).

Social work education includes developing skills in both cognitive and affective domains. Understanding theories of relationships as well as engaging in the process of building relationships prepares students for entry into a profession that is based on personal connection to individuals and communities. Regardless of how and where a student chooses to learn the theory and practice of social work education, relationships are central.

The UVic School of SW offers an undergraduate degree using WebCT™ and Blackboard™ allowing students to complete their degree and continue to live and work in their home communities. Although this appears to be a very successful educational option for students to undertake, we found little has been written about online social work education to date. Social work educators using onsite instruction have expressed skepticism about the quality of online social work education primarily because of the lack of physical proximity between instructors and students and students themselves. Physical proximity is described as intimacy by Ketterer and Marsh (2006). They suggest that a causal link has been constructed to support the metaphor that “...distance education lacks intimacy and is therefore inferior”(ibid:1). There continues to be a debate surrounding the effectiveness of online social work education and, more broadly, professional practice education that this study does not address. The growing interest in multiple approaches to providing higher education to prepare students for professional practice<sup>1</sup> leads us to believe the education quality debate, although not directly addressed by this study, needs to start by asking students about their experiences. In this way, this social presence study may provide impetus for future research based on student perceptions.

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<sup>1</sup> Professional practice education refers to degrees offered through universities which lead to students becoming members of a professional association designed to monitor the member’s professional relationship with the public. Such associations typically have a code of conduct and their work is generally guided by legislation.

## 2. Researcher Information

The researchers are all members of the faculty and staff of the UVic School of Social Work. Their interest in this study is to inform the future design and delivery of online social work education. During the study the researchers utilized the services of a research assistant to handle data that may have some identifying link to students to reduce the likelihood of future conflicts of interest should a student apply to graduate school if one of the members of the research team was to sit on an admissions committee. The researchers all have a vested interest in the academic success of the program which meant that throughout the project we had to be aware of our biases and reactions to stories that present points of view that challenge current structures, processes and relationships.

## 3. Literature Review

A small literature review was conducted as part of the project.

Our initial interest in this topic came from reviewing *Online graduate study of health care learner's perceptions of instructional immediacy* by Melrose and Bergeron (2006).

Our first question was how the elements described in Melrose and Bergeron fit with social work education. The Melrose and Bergeron study was designed to examine instructor immediacy as a part of the education pedagogical process. Instructor immediacy (Mehrabian, 1976 in Baker, 2004) is a term used to describe face to face classroom behaviors of teacher that increased student connection to their instructor and learning materials. Moving the concept of instructor immediacy to online asynchronous environments and toward social work education led us to examine electronic and print resources related to social work education, continuing education (online), general online education (open and distance) and theories related to online learning.

In recent years virtual social work education has appeared in the literature. Paul Freddolino explored how social work distance education was changing and how much potential exists for future learning opportunities (2002); Wolfson, Magnuson and Marson (2005) took a close look at offering practice seminars online and Siebert, Siebert and



Spaulding-Givens evaluated teaching clinical social work skills online(2006). However, social work educators are far from unanimous in accepting online learning and authors such as Jane Maidment (2005) presented numerous tensions that continue to exist in her article *Teaching social work online: Dilemmas and debates*.

Madoc-Jones and Parrott further elaborated on use of virtual learning spaces in social work education posing important questions for consideration regarding the appropriateness of online learning for a relationship based profession (2005).

The debates around the appropriateness of fit of online social work education to the professional education a social worker requires centered primarily on the question of how are relationships built when you are not face to face. This question led us back to the concept of social presence and feeling connected in virtual environments and moving away from the question of the method of learning social work specifically. Our next phase of literature review moved to the areas of continuing education, open and distance learning, innovative higher learning and communications education.

*Monitoring online communication: Can the development of convergence and social presence indicate an interactive learning environment?* (Lobry de Bruy, 2004) in Distance Education, laid out some frameworks for evaluating what constitutes social presence and engagement of students. Traditional perspectives of the centered instructor and conventional assumptions about teaching/learning were challenged (Wood & Fassett :2003;Anagnostopoulo, Schrodtt & Witt:2006). New ideas of how to enhance online learning and build relationships and virtual learning communities increasingly appeared in the open and distance learning literature (Baker, 2004; Garber, 2004; Rovai, 2002) leading us to see how the reflections of students regarding social presence has emphasized the need for us to review our content, structure and process in social work online education.

#### **4. Overview of Program and History of Program**

When the University of Victoria School of Social Work was established in 1975, it charted a distinctly different direction than traditional social work education at the time. The School began with a mandate to expand the boundaries of social work education by creating a program of study specific to rural practice made accessible to students residing and working in rural and remote communities. There was a clear need in the province of British Columbia then as now for social workers to live and practice in rural and remote communities. Many practicing social workers lacked a BSW degree and, while they wished to obtain a professional education, they were unable to leave their communities because of family and work responsibilities.

In addition to its on-campus BSW program, the School offered a limited number of credit social work courses via distance education: the first of their kind in North America. Over the ensuing 33 years distance education has transformed the School's curriculum. Today some five hundred University of Victoria students complete their BSW selecting from on-campus and off-campus courses, with approximately 75% of enrollment in distance (online) courses. Students from across Canada take advantage of the flexibility offered in the School's programming for a variety of personal and professional reasons, including:

- *to access courses while raising a family and/or working in their home community*
- *to provide flexibility in their on-campus program*
- *to participate in a university program that they would otherwise not have access to because of the prohibitive cost of giving up careers, uprooting family members and relocating to a larger centre*
- *to exercise choice in accessing a progressive curriculum with anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist and Indigenous foci that may not be available to them locally.*
- 

We expect the demand for flexible, accessible education will increase, as the North American demographic shifts to reflect an older student population. The University's strategic plan states that over the coming decades population growth in the typical on-

campus 18- to 24-year-old cohort will cease in British Columbia, making it increasingly important to strategically promote distance and continuing education. It is the objective of the University of Victoria to support further development of distance and distributed learning as a way to increase access to higher education.

### **Current Approaches to Distance Education Program Delivery**

The current approach to curriculum development and delivery builds on our experience and continued commitment to flexible, accessible social work education. Advances in educational technology and the increased access to these innovations have had a positive impact on the online delivery of our BSW curriculum since the 2002 Accreditation.

These include:

- 1) **Use of course management systems.** In 2002 our school adopted the use of WebCT as a web-based platform for hosting its distance courses. This was a departure from the earlier e-mail-based delivery model that used listservs to manage and facilitate discussion. More recently the use of Blackboard and Moodle as our preferred web-based course management systems has provided a consistent look and structure to our online courses, as well as increased ease of use and interactivity, for both teacher-student and student-student communications.

The School utilizes the course management system to its fullest extent, and has developed a rich variety of assignments and assessment tools, including but not restricted to: online role plays, group exercises, presentations, discussions, video/audiotape interviews, etc.

- 2) **Introduction of Blended Learning.** The School of Social Work is broadening its programs by offering more of its established on-campus curriculum in a blended format, reducing classroom hours and utilizing a Moodle or Blackboard course site for ongoing whole-class and small-group discussion. The program is

designed to allow all students to take advantage of a mixed model of program delivery. While it is true that many students live away from the University of Victoria campus, all must complete SOCW 312, which has a mandatory face-to-face component. Attendance at the face-to-face component is accomplished by attending either the blended/on-campus version of this course or taking the online version that involves attending an intensive classroom component in either the summer or winter session.

### **University support and infrastructure**

The University has committed to supporting distance and online students as a means of increasing or broadening its recruitment. It recognizes the expertise that it already has, and has stated its intentions in the University Strategic Plan. This commitment is reflected in a growing infrastructure of distance/online and blended learning supports for both students and faculty, including Distance Education Services, the Learning and Teaching Centre, and UVic Online Learning Systems:

1) **Distance Education Services** The Schools in the Faculty of Human and Social Development have had an ongoing partnership with the Faculty of Continuing Studies in the development and delivery of online and distance learning. Distance Education Services (DES) is the primary support unit, offering services through funding provided by Continuing Studies, the University Libraries, Computing and Systems Services, the Learning and Teaching Centre, and the Office of the Vice-President Academic & Provost.

Distance Education Services provides the following support for the School of Social Work:

- Researches and field-tests new technologies for distance online teaching and learning, which informs our approach to online course development, delivery and support for faculty and students in distance courses.

- Works with faculty and administrative staff to incorporate the technologies in their distance online programs.

- Curriculum design and development assistance

DES is involved with each course development as a member of the project team

- Technology training for faculty, instructors, and administrative staff. DES provides one-on-one and group workshops and training sessions to help faculty and staff build their technology skills to use the Web effectively in distance courses.

- Technical support for distance online learning and teaching

Staff on the Onlinehelp Desk help students and faculty with course technology-related questions and problems. The Onlinehelp Desk is open from 8:30am–8pm, Monday–Thursday; 8:30–5pm, Friday; and 8am–12:30noon, Sunday

The Infoline Library. Library services for distance learning and teaching are provided through Infoline. Students can request books, articles, reference assistance and bibliographic instruction. Infoline staff also provide literature and database searches for faculty developing and teaching distance courses. The Infoline Librarian offers online tutorials to help learners develop their proficiency in searching for, and finding, material on their topic.

- Web-based tutorials to support technology use in distance online programs

DES develops and hosts web-based self-instructional tutorials for students and faculty on the tools and technologies used to deliver distance education online.

2) **The Learning and Teaching Centre** The Learning and Teaching Centre supports and enhances faculty and instructor teaching through increased awareness of current research and teaching strategies in higher education. They provide consultation

for academic units and individual instructors, and offer a range of presentations and workshops to introduce new educational technologies and methods to enhance teaching effectiveness.

3) **UVic Online Learning Systems.** The Learning Systems office supports teaching and learning on the UVic campus through the development and use of educational technologies, primarily for faculty who are moving traditional on-campus courses to a blended learning delivery. Their staff provide consulting and technical professional development opportunities in the use of current e-learning tools. In addition, Learning Systems will research, evaluate and disseminate knowledge about existing and emerging educational technologies.

### **School Supports**

Since 2003 we have established a .57 administrative position: Program Assistant – Online Learning Development and Support. This position is unique to our Faculty and provides additional technical support specific to students, faculty, and instructors in our school as well as course development project support. This position has been base-budgeted since 2006.

Additional support provided by the School of Social work includes:

- a) ongoing instructor availability via WebCT Webmail
- b) scheduled 'office hours', in which instructor is available for consultation by telephone
- c) WebCT support person available by telephone and email for technical or course material assistance.
- d) Faculty Advisor assigned to student
- e) Academic Advisor
- f) ongoing Instructor training in teaching and use of learning technologies

## **5. Sample**

The purposive sample for this small qualitative study (n=42) was drawn from past and present students in the UVic School of Social Work Bachelor of Social Work program who had completed some or all of their degree online between 2005 and 2008. A total of 38 students completed an online survey and four students participated in a focus group by teleconference. 32/42 students (76%) completed more than half of their coursework online with the remaining 10 students completing less than half on line (24%). In the sample group 60% of the students (n=25) had completed all their coursework online. Students were sent a link to a website where they responded anonymously to the six question survey (See Appendix B). All students completed the consent form approved by the UVic Ethics Committee through an electronic acknowledgement (See Appendix A). Only responses from students who had acknowledged consent were used in the data analysis. Five students reviewed the survey but choose not to participate.

## **6. Methodology/Method**

This qualitative study was conducted using a pragmatic methodology combining both interactive and critical social theories (Denscombe, 2007: 107-120; Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2006: 14). The methodology is based on the ideological assumption that knowledge is socially constructed within the environmental context at the group and individual level. Further examination of online relationships included exploration of elements of belonging, power and resistance. Our desire was to make meaning of the experience of social work students in ways that are harmonious with feminist, indigenous and anti-oppressive perspectives (School of Social Work Mission Statement, 2005) while recognizing that no research can be bias free. Our questions were open ended allowing for broad responses as well as suggestions from students.

The methods used to gather data were online surveys and a teleconference focus group to provide feedback on the preliminary findings. We used a constant comparative method of analysis (Descombe, 2007: 88-105 based on Glasser & Strauss, 1967) reading and re-reading the original responses, coding key words and phrases and examining the

ideological, social and experiential intersections that brought key themes to the surface (Carney, 1983 as quoted in Kirby, Greaves & Reid, 2006:218).

Responses were read at a literal level to establish an initial understanding of the content then at an interpretive level to look beyond words and phrases to descriptions of pivotal events and educational processes that students told us impacted their experience of social presence. Within these preliminary categories we looked for thinking/feeling responses since we wanted to focus on both intellectual and emotional experiences of students. Further critical reflection took place as we examined our own assumptions, biases and reactions to the content. We utilized the literature to formulate additional questions for secondary analysis with a small focus group. We further examined the data from an ideological/epistemological perspective considering issues of power and resistance consistent with the Tri-Council Recommendations for Qualitative Research (Canadian Institute for Health Research).

The survey site was set up to allow anonymous responses with no student information being tracked by the site. Students were invited to enter a draw for one of two iPods for completing the survey, with this information being collected by the research assistant and not attached in any way to the survey results that the researchers reviewed. Students then proceeded to provide written responses to the six survey questions that were held on a password protected site. The anonymous written responses were reviewed by the researchers and research assistant. We did not continue to collect data to the point of saturation (Glasser & Strauss, 1964) since this is a preliminary study only. Future studies may expand these findings by exploring the themes in greater depth.

The focus group members volunteered to participate in a one hour teleconference as a follow-up to the completing the survey. Students in the focus group had previously completed individual surveys. Two additional questions were asked during the focus group to further interrogate the key themes of instructor relationships with students and group work (Appendix C). The students in the focus group each answered each question and then engaged in open discussion. Prior to the focus group, the students gave verbal



consent (all had the consent form in their possession prior to the teleconference and those who previously had consented agreed to continuing consent). The meeting was audio taped and transcribed, coded for themes and added to the original data. (Appendix D- confidentiality form for transcription of data).

Codes	Student Range 1-33 (numbering started at 1 for each group)	Participant Group A=survey 1 B= survey 2 BN=survey 3 C= focus group	Question Range 1-7 survey 8-9 additional questions	Sample Full Code Student, group, question
<b>Example</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>B</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>5B7</b>

### 7. Validity and Reliability

We used triangulation, critical reflection, field notes and participant feedback to create a research environment where participants could see their stories accurately reflected in the data (Denscombe, 2006). We recognize that longer, deeper engagement with participants would have been desirable and this may be possible with future research based on this preliminary study. According to Kirby, Greaves & Reid (2006: 218) the credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability of qualitative research flows from the extensive use of participant voice in the findings as well disclosure of researcher bias throughout the report.

### 8. Data/ Findings

**The Research Question**

*What do recent distance education BSW graduates perceive were the elements of social presence in their online undergraduate social work program and how did these elements impact their learning?*

Students described numerous events in their learning experience that impacted their sense of feeling connected to each other and their instructor. There were mixed messages on the level of connection to the content, other students, instructors, School of Social Work and University of Victoria. Relationships with instructors played a role in the level of satisfaction and engagement students felt with their learning environment and the content of the courses they were taking. A clear message that came through in the data was that

students had different expectations of instructors regarding accessibility, virtual classroom management, instructional methods, response time and flexibility in meeting the individual needs of students who are often balancing complex personal and work lives. The findings are organized in groupings reflecting feeling connected, disconnected, structure, ideas for improvement and critical reflections.

## *Feeling Connected*

### **Instructors**

Students included direct references to their relationship with their instructor in the majority of their responses. This primary relationship appears to be the key to the student feeling of connection and disconnection.

*“With only 1 or 2 instructors have I felt really connected. This came through in their thoughtful, energetic effort to not only connect with me but also evident in their overall leadership and involvement 23B5”*

*“As a mother of three young children there were many instances that life situations collided with school obligations and I have to say all my instructors were very understanding and supportive 16B5”*

Students made some comparisons to their other learning experiences saying “ *I felt connected most to the only distance prof I ever talked to (15B2)*” and “*I got more support from instructors than expected (compared to other university settings) (8B5)*”. It also appeared that the expectations some students had of instructors did not seem excessive such as “*When instructor responded to request for information or feedback (5B2)*”, “*Instructor posted regularly (7B2)*” and “*Instructor checked in often and gave feedback (4B2)*”.

One student elaborated by saying “*For me, the two biggest surprises about online learning have been that I don't feel alone in cyberland, but rather feel connected to folks across the country and inspired and challenged by them (the depth of this connection varies depending on the group, but is there nonetheless). Secondly, I love the peer learning aspect of our online learning together -- overall group discussions have been a very positive experience. 31B8*”

Students commented positively on situations where it was clear the instructor was watching what was happening and would “... *step into difficult situation to guide discussion and respond to each individual in the group (17B3)*” or “*When the instructor made effort to give positive feedback (16B2)*” and “*When instructor made comments that indicated they had read paper and responded personally (11B2)*”. Personal contact with students was highly valued such as “*After difficult situation instructor followed up with me at home and debriefed (2A2)*”.

Instructors efforts to reach out to students during a crisis was mentioned by several students as contributing to feeling connected (13B2, 9B2, 8B2, 3A2, 8BN5 ).

I REALLY appreciated when some of my professors called me throughout the semester. It was always just to check in to make sure that I was doing ok, but it was appreciated! I also really liked how fast the professors were in returning my calls when I had questions regarding course work. 27B5

Those instructors who spend the time to provide thoughtful responses benefit my learning, clearly those who do not can make it feel like I am alone in my studies. I have had great learning through the online discussions with classmates. 13B7

### Students Supporting each other

Although most of the comments related to instructor/student interaction it was obvious that many students received and appreciated support from the classmates. When groups worked well, students reported feeling an increased sense of connection. Students described how groups and individuals connected outside of the virtual classroom “ *Group exchanged phone numbers and set up phone calls so we could literally voice our ideas (3A1), Fellow student offered to send fax of missing readings (1A1)* and “ *Doing assignments together (13B1)*”. Honesty and understanding were two factors mentioned by students who felt supported by their classmates. Examples are: “*Supportive group- understanding other’s life situation (17B1)*”, “*Honesty, taking a chance and offering potentially controversial perspectives (1A1)*”, and “*Everyone’s honesty regarding ethical dilemmas (14B1)*”.

## Pivotal Events Contributing to Feeling Connected

Students reflected on their on campus experience (Social Work 323- nine day mandatory face to face session) as making them feel connected to the University of Victoria, School, instructor and other students. Direct reference was made by nine participants (9B1, 5BN5, 16B1, 10B1, 17B2,1B5, 1B5, 1A6,3A1)

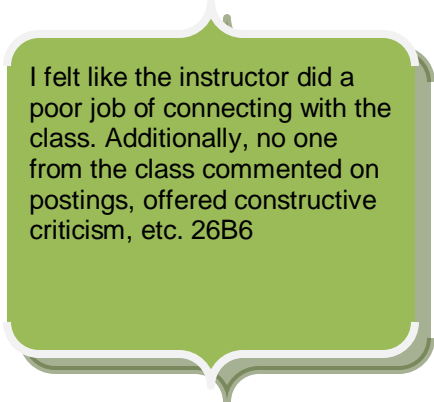
## Content and Structure

Students reflected positively on the way the course material was delivered. *“Online work was easy to follow (7B5)”* and *“How great it was set up! Everything about the online experience I felt was organized and set out in an easy to understand format! I have done other online courses at other institutions that weren't quite the same way! 27B8”*

## Feeling Disconnected

### Interaction Inconsistencies

Students reported there was inconsistency in the way instructors interacted in the online classroom and this lack of consistency and predictability led to feelings of disconnection and pulling back from the instructor/student relationship.



I felt like the instructor did a poor job of connecting with the class. Additionally, no one from the class commented on postings, offered constructive criticism, etc. 26B6

*“Instructor was inconsistent. I was not able to rely on the instructor for guidance . Instructor was defensive when questioned regarding instructions and course work (3B3)”*  
*“Variations in teaching styles surprising (14BN8)”* *“Disconnect when profs never respond to my posts. One responded to some students and not others (7B3)”*  
*“The instructors I struggled with were the ones least seen online (8B3)”*.  
*“Only heard from them about deadlines or grades (3A1)”*.  
*“Student didn't get a response from a prof for a few days then got one saying “read the assignment” (16B3)”*.  
*“When instructor does not respond to private blackboard emails (or not respond thoroughly) (6B3)”*.

Students themselves differed in their opinion of when instructors should intervene in discussions stating:

*“Let the group hash things out rather than the instructor jumping in (2B5)*

And

*“How fast some profs jump in! (12B5).”*

**Most of the time when I post it feels like I am just posting to comply. A lot of the time when I read other people’s posts, I am just reading to comply. It’s hard for me to get as involved as I would in the classroom, and it takes much longer to type and read than it does to talk, and that kills the fluidity of the conversation.  
24B6**

### **Technological Gaps**

Students commented on how technological issues and instructor use of technology affected their learning. Students were surprised that “... *video is not used (11B5)*” “*Would have liked to hear and see an instructor teach (11B5)*”. “*Instructors said they weren’t good with a computer nor familiar with the website GET TRAINING (emphasis in original) (7B5).*” “*Need more voice online (auditory learner) (14BN9).*” “*Instructors need to be competent in Blackboard (14BN8)*”.

### **Feeling Alone**

Many factors contributed to students feeling disconnected from their instructors and classmates. One student compared the experience to the onsite classroom “*Missed the immediacy of the classroom and instant feedback (1A5)*” and found other strategies for learning. “*Human connection was lost. I became a directed learner (1B4)*”; “*Human element was lost (1 course) (3B3)*” and “*Separated, alone, unconnected, disappointed that I learned little from students (4B4)*”.

### **Disconnection related to diversity**

Students pointed out situations where gender, racism and behavior made them feel disconnected from their learning. Students identifying as male expressed concern over

feeling disconnected from some communications particularly around feminist issues while participating in predominantly female classrooms. Conversations online appear to have included statements that stopped active, engaged learning such as “Racist, oppressive comments made online went unchallenged (12BN6)”; “Social boundaries need to be clearly stated. Instructors should step in and mediate (3B6)”; and “Personality clashes- hard to rely solely on technology for communication (3B3)”.

## Structure

### Group Work

Group projects can provide great connection and support, but only with the right people. The group project I participated in was fantastic and exciting. That said, most group work makes me want to pull my hair out.

(33B4)

Group work was described by the majority of respondents as a place of tension and unpredictability. Although experiences were presented as both positive and negative, inconsistency of group member contributions made students feel frustrated and disconnected. Some elements identified were posting timeliness and quality, frustration with group marks and depending on students you didn't know to do a thorough job, and concern over the depth of engagement with the materials.

### Posting timeliness and quality

*“During online discussion students posted late and the discussion didn't take off (2A3)”*

Students reflected their sense of disconnection when students were “...not responding; (posting) brief non-personal responses; no personal information sharing; using lingo (4B3)”. Working across “(t)ime zones and group work was difficult and frustrating. People didn't pull their weight (2B6)”. “Connections were lost in translation and time zones (2B1)”. “Never felt disconnected but it was difficult working “live” across time zones (9B3)”.

## **Frustration**

General frustration was shown through comments like “*Group work frustrating (8B3)*” and “*There is A LOT of group work and that can be very challenging/frustrating (1A4)*”. Some students stated strong resistance to group work such as “*I was not going to allow my mark to be compromised because they did not complete the work (8B3)*”; “*Students post the most ridiculous things just to say they posted- waste of my time (6B5)* and “*At times I was fearful and angry that someone else’s effort/understanding slowed the group or resulted in a lower grade (1A4)*”. There were suggestions that there is “*(l)ess emphasis on group work (5BN6)*” and that the group process needed to be tied to the principles of social work practice and “*...could have been deeper (2A4)*”.

## **Ideas for Improvement**

Students offered ideas for improvement which centered on voice connections overwhelmingly as well as less emphasis on text based learning:

*More mixed learning....photos, conference calls (once a week, once every two weeks with your class group and teacher), on-campus time (as with socw 323 DE), on-line conferences (Skype?). Just DE is very limiting for the learning experience, especially when social work is about building relationships.(25B9)*

*For me, accessibility to an instructor is crucial to my learning. I understand online classes offer flexibility to all students and instructors, but I don't think it's an excuse to do any less. Are their ways in which to incorporate more voice conversation into the online classroom? I know for myself that I am more of an auditory learner, I would imagine there are others. Also, in spoken dialogue I find we're better able to exchange our ideas and share what's on our mind, rather than simply posting over-analyzed blurbs that in all honesty, the majority of students will skim over. I'm sorry for ranting, I've just had a difficult time with distance ed.(19B9)*

- *Meeting or talking to each other (students) via telephone /messenger ((13B1)*
- *Incorporate more time for profs to do private/personal blackboard email to increase guidance and support to students (6B6)*
- *Less reading (smaller packs) fewer good articles(original emphasis). Too much time spent of different perspectives (8B6)*
- *Online work is time consuming and labor intensive (1B5)*

- *DE is more work than on-campus. This should be corrected (12B5)*
- *Place to talk to fellow students privately without teachers (5B1)*

Make it more 'mandatory' that all instructors call all students at the beginning of the semester and perhaps part way through as well. The instructors that did this opened the door for me to call them back and made for a more open learning environment! 27B9

### ***Critical Reflections***

- *Didn't realize I had such dedication and determination and could accomplish my dream BSW online! (14B5)*
- *Challenged to move out of comfort zone and problem solve (3B4)*
- *The depth of support I received from people I had never met completely amazed me”(3A5)*
- *Felt privileged to hear other's knowledge and perspectives and experiences (1A4)*

While others provided a view that captured the tensions:

- *I found you had more insight into fellow students thoughts and projects than in on campus classes however I found there can be a lot lost in translation( through postings) on the computer and time zones impacted who and when you could connect (17B4)*



## 9. Discussion

Well, it's a lot like life. There are parts that are enjoyable and exciting, and parts that frustrate the hell out of you. Whatever comes up, I deal with it in a manner that I think is appropriate for a social work student. Both positive and negative experiences can forward the learning process, so I try to get as much out of it as I can. 33B7

### *Instructor, Instructor*

The key theme in the study is that the instructor is the glue in online social work education. The instructor is more than a teacher. The instructor is UVic. Student satisfaction with the individual course, School of Social Work and UVic appears to be linked to relationships with instructors. The course management software is the most consistent face in the student's learning experience and the instructors voices are the embodiment of the school and university. Where an onsite student is surrounded by physical buildings, students, support staff and a vibrant infrastructure, the online student comes to UVic through a standard course management platform where all courses look the same, course packs look the same but instructors vary considerably. There is no lush green lawn and bunnies welcoming students to the building each time they come to class, just a gray button that says log in that doesn't always work. A student online doesn't walk into a classroom to friendly faces and chatter, they see a list of their courses with icons indicating new postings to be read and email to be answered and the possibility of an assignment icon indicating a due date approaching. The voice of fellow students and the instructor (through postings and emails) hold the key to connectivity for the online student for the majority of their studies. Recognizing we cannot replicate the onsite experience is easy. What appears to be challenging is defining how to construct an engaging UVic experience to students online. Students reported how hearing the voice of their instructor made them feel more connected and when they saw the instructor's words on the discussion/email message they remembered the intonation and warmth. Humour and small pieces of personal information about the instructor made students feel

more connected (reciprocal relationship) but students didn't want to feel their instructor's personal life was taking away from their attention to their duties.

Pivotal events that students described as examples of social presence and connection were usually related to action on the part of the instructor, although the face to face residency component of the distance program (9 days) was repeatedly mentioned as a high point in the degree (a structural feature of the program). Pivotal events also occurred between and amongst students but frequently the instructor was the catalyst in creating the atmosphere, opportunity and/or facilitating connections between and amongst students.

Students were clear that they expected the instructors to know what they were doing, be present frequently and significantly online, provide feedback on a regular basis and take the initiative to connect personally with each student. Students saw instructors through a consumer lens- the student had paid for a service and expected a high level of quality. At no point did a student imply that instructors appeared to have a weak background in their subject area, only the delivery of the materials, online presence and responsiveness.

Online instruction skills may be new to many instructors whose own educational experience was most likely in a traditional university onsite setting. Stepping from the onsite classroom to the online classroom is not only about learning to use a computer- it is also learning a new set of teaching strategies. Students in this study have placed a spotlight on what they expect of their instructors and how positive relationships with instructors can increase social presence and add to overall satisfaction in learning.

There was an implied responsibility of instructors to be available whenever the student "came" to class (parallel to arriving in your traditional classroom and expecting your instructor to be there). Unfortunately in an asynchronous environment students and instructors show up at all hours seven days a week, so the expectation of quick responses (less than 24 hours) may be unrealistic. Students were surprised when they learned some instructors only taught one class a week and had other jobs. Instructors contributed to the

confusion over expectations as well by having a wide range of online behaviors. Some instructors are online constantly and answer email from their mobile devices 24/7 leading students to draw conclusions that this is what they can expect from a “good” instructor.

### *Shifting Paradigms*

#### **What is a University Education supposed to look like?**

We were curious about assumptions and beliefs students held around what university education should be. Students made comparisons to the onsite classroom. It was impossible to deconstruct the multiple ways students know and understand the “education” process that for the majority of students was delivered through face to face methods in elementary and secondary schools. Students felt the loss of physical connection and commented there was no place to gain an understanding of how to build connections in the online environment (1C2). This gap was noted by students as part of the essential preparation for instructors students think should happen so the instructor can do a better job of facilitating relationship building. Normative values appeared to be assigned to the onsite classroom and the online classroom was compared to a gold standard that was not defined nor questioned. Some students felt they did not get the education they had paid for- indicating a lack of satisfaction. Group work (and group grades) were problematic (3C4). Students reflected confusion about how our school’s commitment to anti-oppressive social work practice did not appear to translate into the structure and relationships within the online classroom.

#### **Suspension of beliefs about what social work education should be**

Social presence took on a more deeply nuanced definition as we explored the ideological elements of social work education. Social work students expect to learn how to connect meaningfully to individuals and groups as part of their education. In an onsite classroom, these skills would be practiced with classmates through a variety of activities. To learn practice skills, a degree of personal connection and trust needs to exist. Social presence in the onsite classroom can unfold through non-verbal and verbal communication building a connected trusting environment in which students learn. Social presence as

part of the larger flow of interpersonal connection in the online classroom cannot be as clearly teased out for examination. The data in this study show when strong interpersonal connections are present students report feeling more engaged in their learning and satisfied. When students are not connected to the instructor and their classmates the quality of learning appears to be less satisfying. To make the situation more complex, each student's experience was uniquely nuanced by their own social location and reasons for choosing to complete their degree online. There were two factors that students linked to a positive experience. The first was the reason they selected to do their degree online and the second was the proportion of classes they had completed online. Students who identified that they would have been unable to obtain a degree in a traditional setting provided more positive comments than students who indicated a strong preference for onsite classes. Students who identified as having done less than 75% of their classes online indicated that they felt less connected in the online learning environment. Students who had to take online courses to complete their degree requirements because onsite classes were not available reported frustration and a lack of satisfaction.

### **Not measuring up**

Students differ considerably in their expectations of their experience, but articulated when the experience didn't meet their expectations. Students who identified having previous post secondary experience provided comparisons and contrasts. Students who were geographically isolated were pleased to have the chance to complete their degree online but in some cases had hoped for camaraderie with fellow classmates that did not materialize. From this we extrapolated that the online experience was not understood by all students possibly due to assumptions, expectations and/or mixed messages coming from the university, school, instructors and fellow students.

Online learning is enigmatic and students are seeking clarity from their instructor so they can enter into their studies with a foundation of knowing what to expect and having these expectations met (security, predictability, consistency, transparency). It appears that these elements allow students to read the terrain which may have been done by non-verbal communication and tone in an onsite environment. In particular students new to

online learning need assistance to figure out how to interact and build relationships effectively rather than expect students will somehow absorb this knowledge from being in the environment.

## *Technology*

### **Role of Technology- the ties that bind and walls that separate**

An inconsistency appeared when we considered the seemingly benign, yet potent impact of technology and how students content with living and working in multiple locations that are removed from their classmates, yet being expected to form meaningful relationships and collaborative processes throughout their courses. However, there appeared to be an expectation that using the software would equate to instructors also understanding how to teach online which is does not necessarily follow especially if the role of the instructor has moved from the traditional provider of the educational experience to a co-producer of knowledge. Embracing a new teaching paradigm may include interactive learning experience design (Park, 2008) and discovery learning spaces (Hai-Jew, 2008).

### **Online and onsite- will the twain meet?**

Students online grappled with the notion of equivalency of their studies to coursework delivered in the onsite classroom stating that they think they work harder than onsite students. Park (2008) challenges us to re-think the student as a producer not consumer of knowledge (p. 359) which is consistent with the intention of many of the learning activities, however it appears the students are not clear about the fundamental shift in their role as co-producer of knowledge. Park also re-positions the instructor as a component of the course content- an interpreter who can add nuanced information (or not) to the curriculum. The student can engage with the curriculum without the instructor's input which is impossible in the traditional classroom. This new alignment of student-instructor presents a paradigm shift which has the potential to be used to augment

social work skills through gaining a deeper understanding of multiple ways of knowing, working across differing perspectives and coalition building. It does disrupt traditional higher education instructional processes meaning both student and instructor require support to build skills in this area. Park suggests a new term- “inter active learning instructor” to better reflect the complex nature of their work (p. 360).

## **Paradox of technology**

Although most students use instant messaging, cell phones and social networking tools in their personal life they did not necessarily transfer their online relationship building skills to the online classroom. It appears that they become passive recipients of technology who do not readily transfer their knowledge across electronic domains. Students identified struggling with connectivity, programs and information transfer. Simple suggestions made by instructors like using Firefox as a browser appeared to have a lasting impact on the student perception of instructor caring. Small actions magnified exponentially in the online environment.

It is possible that there are barriers that are not identified by students in accessing their web platforms to complete their learning tasks (eg. Busy networks, excessive time to download information, technological updates requiring re-starting their computer etc.) This is likened to running into barriers while driving to campus for a class- detours, snow, an accident. Fleckenstein (2008:163-164) points out that students in a virtual classroom are in multiple places at once, “..computer setup, body, room, building. Physical space is inextricable from virtual place.” Social work students completing coursework in a virtual classroom hosted through UVic are also in multiple locations across the world with all the inherent complexities of a physical space as well as those of computer mediated communication. It appears that students and instructors lack information about how the complex virtual/physical spaces we each inhabit push and pull at us far more than we realize. During the teleconference focus group students found out that some of their instructors are busy social workers who have taken on a one day a week teaching commitment. The students were very surprised, thinking that all

instructors held full time appointments as faculty and therefore should be available to support students as needed. Similar dissonance may be present within instructor groups about students' reality.

The majority of virtual connectivity was done through course management software and emails sent through the UVic email system. There is no internal site where students feel like they are part of the greater UVic community or the School of Social Work so miss opportunities to attend enriching public events, career counseling and general activities.

### ***Relationships***

#### **Getting the story straight- Security, consistency, predictability and responsiveness**

Themes of security, consistency, predictability and responsiveness played out throughout and across students' learning experiences. Instructors are the key portal for connectivity and set the standard for how work is done. There are wide variations in the teaching approaches used. Students report frustration with the lack of consistency in instructor feedback as well as lack of trust in some group work desiring more instructor guidance to keep work on track. On the other hand, students reported that some instructors showed sensitivity to individual needs and reported high levels of satisfaction when instructors provided personal touches like phone calls.

Students identified their own learning preferences and it appeared that most students would have liked more clarity and confirmation of expectations early in the term. They reported that when an instructor was on top of the course, they felt confident that problems would be addressed and the course would run smoothly. A sense of trust developed that made the online work flow for students make sense. This confidence also appeared to allow students to connect with each other at a deeper level of engagement. When students described their experiences they spoke in full course units indicating that the feeling of a good experience was attached to the whole experience of a course- not just certain elements within the course. Although we were not able in this study to

determine which situations created a disillusionment that led students to say an experience was positive or negative, overwhelmingly the key factor students linked positive experiences was the instructor.

## **Ideology: What is behind social presence?**

### **Belonging**

The notion of belonging to a university community and being able to participate in the full experience appears to be an amorphous concept that students want but cannot accurately describe. When provided with an opportunity to discuss their dissatisfaction with their online group experiences, they struggled to define what was missing but they knew there was something more that should be within their grasp. When they experienced a good group process, they could express how they felt but didn't exactly know why in the given situation that appeared similar to other group experiences- but had a substantively richer, more satisfying feel. Fleckenstein presents the virtual classroom space as co-produced and fluidly holistic- a sum of its parts that cannot be broken down and analyzed in constituent pieces (pp. 153-155). This fits well with some students' perceptions of a group that felt good versus one that fell flat.

### **Power**

Power in an online social work classroom environment appeared to unfold in several ways. Presence in a traditional classroom is visual and students are credited with learning merely by being in the room, but in this survey students identified that they had been able to be in a traditional classroom and not talk but still be given marks for "attendance/participation" where in the virtual classroom presence meant placing words on a discussion board (usually denoted as "substantial, meaningful, concise, relevant"- source curriculum social work 2008). Students saw that as making courses more work than being on-campus. There was a tyranny of the word (making each student say something relevant about every question) and would have far exceeded the hours allotted to on campus classes had this been a requirement in onsite classrooms. The second way



power unfolds is in how the instructor interacts- frequency, intensity, personal engagement, warmth, dedication to learning the technology. Students reported a wide variety of instructional styles that were experienced as being aloof and unapproachable (2C2).

## Resistance

Resistance in the online classroom appeared in the form of behavior more often than expressed emotion. Students who were overwhelmed in some way did not show up for weeks or when they did, their postings were minimal. Instructors appeared to use the same behaviors and although their words were neutral, students read emotional responses into their postings such as “check the course outline” was interpreted as “rude and not helpful (3C2)” based on the length of time the student had to wait for that response. Group work was also a place of resistance. Clearly the purpose of group work is to encourage relationships to develop amongst group members and skills of collaboration to grow. Students reported tensions in many group projects based on members not showing up, carrying their load and resulting in the group achieving an overall lower grade. Grades were still perceived as very important to students.

## ***What does this mean for Social Work education?***

Students stated that they want to feel their learning is connected to developing practice skills as well as being a member of the UVic community. The HSD faculty (of which social work is a part) says that “acceptance that one’s professional abilities, personal integrity and the attitudes one demonstrates in relationships with other persons are the measure of professional conduct” ([www.hsd.uvc.ca](http://www.hsd.uvc.ca)). Students who are completing their learning online should be able to identify how each activity contributes to their practice as they progress through the program. Some areas identified by students are showing respect and assuming responsibility by being active online and in group activities (the converse is not showing up and participating is seen as disrespectful- not neutral); being mindful of boundaries (both instructor-student; student-student); using “listening skills” in writing, posting and assignments; being organized and thorough and showing

compassion and support to each other. It appears that activities and assignments need to be clear about when certain activities are meant to build skills- students don't necessarily extrapolate the connection to skill acquisition.

One of the strengths of the online classroom is the sheer volume of words a student has to contribute and the depth of discussion about the concepts and application. In fact, Baglione and Nastanski (2007) present a study that supports the superiority of online discussion to classroom discussion. They point out that in the traditional classroom students are expected to memorize the content of the classroom in real time while students online can review discussions throughout the course which contributes to a deeper understanding of the material (p. 142). However, there appears to be resistance amongst instructors who prefer the classroom environment because they receive immediate physical feedback from the students (p.149). Students in the study confirmed they felt they had worked with the readings and theories in more depth online and found they were using the approaches in their day to day lives readily. They reported having conversations with friends and family based on their online learning and because many are also working in a social justice field as they complete their degree, the application of the concepts was immediate.

There is the opportunity to pay attention to the components of community building that will significantly contribute to the social work student's understanding of what it takes to build lasting, respectful inter-personal relationships. The emphasis on routine, structure, giving clear directions and expectations can be directly associated with practice skills. The development of personal relationships devoid of non-verbal cues is more challenging on some levels than face to face relationship building however, it does separate out the ability to deconstruct the elements of communication.

### **Will attention to these issues increase social presence?**

“If the structure of the learning experience assures that students are able to feel as if they belong to a valuable and worthwhile endeavor and that they are connected to each other, it may be possible to reduce feelings of alienation and increase sense of community within the context of a virtual classroom. (Rovai, 2005, p. 106)

There is support in the literature on distance learning around the link between cognitive and affective learning being positively influenced by increased social presence (Barker, 2004). The question for us extends into the domain of applied learning for social work practice when a student completes their entire degree online. Little has been researched about social work practice and the outcomes for individuals receiving service. At present the onsite classroom is assumed to produce skilled, competent social workers, but we do not have any way of measuring what factors significantly affect students during their education. It appears that online education captures a clearer record of student engagement with content and relationships so may indeed result in a better grasp of the material. If grasping the material is causal in social work preparation then we may have a shift toward more distance social work learning in the future.

## **10. Limitations**

Methodological limitations of a survey meant that we privileged anonymity over extended contact and closeness to participants therefore the results should only be interpreted at a study level which may not be reflective of all student experiences. The power differential of asking students to talk about their program is obvious and although we attempted to mitigate the potential for students to feel exposed, there is no way to completely eliminate the possibility that students chose to temper their responses. Therefore assumptions about trends within the student experience cannot be fully supported by this study.

The sample was opportunistic. Although it was drawn from students over two years, graduate students who we hoped would participate did not respond when set letters of invitation and emails. It is impossible to determine if they received our communication or decided they did not wish to participate. The main connection to students was through the social work listserv system, internal emails and the student rep program for distance students.

It appeared that the primary survey site (A) and process for obtaining access to the site was too complex. Eight students visited the site, but the process of obtaining a password resulted in only three completing the survey. The second survey site (B) was easier to

use and was the point of collection for the majority of responses (n=35). Maintaining anonymity in electronic data collection most likely deterred students at the outset.

The sample size is small considering the number of students who have graduated from our online program. We acknowledge this is not an exhaustive study.

The sample is predominantly populated by individuals who identify as female. Those who identify themselves as male or choose not to specify a gender may not be represented in this study since gender identity was not requested. When students chose to identify in the course of a question they used their identity to assist us to understand how this impacted their sense of belonging.

The researchers acknowledge our own biases, assumptions and limitations as interpreters of the data. Although there were several students who assisted us to review preliminary findings and whose reflections have further informed this report, students were not equal participants in this study.

The focus on social work education and the specific program designed and supported by our school may make the results less transferable to other programs and groups of students.

## **11. Conclusion and Implications**

The purpose of this study was to explore student experiences of social presence in the online learning environment. The forty-two students who participated provided us with an intimate view of their learning during their Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of Victoria. Their comments and reflections point out the shift that is taking place in our understanding of being connected to one another as learners in a virtual environment, as well as defining the roles and responsibilities of the key players in the online classroom. Through the application of a pragmatic methodology including constructivist and critical theory, we identified elements of content, structure, process, power and resistance that contribute and detract from student feelings of being socially present in their learning environment online. The implications of this exploration and analysis are three fold. The first implication is that we need to look more closely at the role positive social presence has in the online classroom and strengthen our

understanding of how to construct educational opportunities that foster connection, engagement and relationships. The second implication centers on how social presence and connectivity has a particularly important role in the virtual social work classroom in the preparation of future human service professionals. Instructors who model collaborative, responsive relationships with students are doing more than managing the delivery of content and students expect consistency and excellence that extends into process, values and beliefs. The third is workload expectations for both students and instructors in the online environment. Critical evaluation of the structural elements of online learning is required to determine the optimal class size to provide the kind of individual and group support desired by students.

A similar study should be conducted of the online instructors to determine if similar themes appear.

This study will be presented to the faculty and staff of the School of Social Work to initiate conversations regarding action related to this report. We believe there are a number of important issues to discuss and act on in the near future.

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# Appendices

# Appendix A

## **Participant Consent Form**

### **Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education**

You are invited to participate in a study entitled **Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education** that is being conducted by Nancy Pike, Dora Leigh Bjornson, Roberta Taylor and Barb Whittington, University of Victoria School of Social Work.

Nancy Pike, Senior Practicum Coordinator; Dora Leigh Bjornson, Distance Education Program Director ; Roberta Taylor and Barb Whittington, Regular Faculty , may be contacted if you have further questions via the email addresses and telephone numbers listed on Page 3 of this form.

### ***Purpose and Objectives***

The objective of the research is to explore students' perceptions of their online experience and to determine elements of online social presence that could be developed or enhanced in the future to improve the students' education experience.

### ***Importance of this Research***

Research of this type is important because online distance education through virtual classrooms has not been explored on the basis of the social work students' perception of social presence (feeling of community). There is a gap in the social work education research as well as a desire for increased understanding by faculty on how to connect meaningfully to students in an online environment.

### ***Participant Selection***

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are an student who has applied to graduate from the BSW program after completing your entire program through our online distance education program and you do not live in the Greater Victoria area, so your on campus exposure has been limited to the two week residency requirement for the course SOCW 323: Anti-Oppressive Social Work Knowledge and Practice. Your

learning experience was successful (you have applied to graduate). Generally, course evaluations suggest that students are experiencing positive levels of social presence in the virtual classroom, and we wish to explore your experience of this aspect of your undergraduate education.

### ***What is involved***

If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your involvement will include participating in a one hour focus group while you are attending convocation in Victoria or completion of a survey online (which will take approximately the same amount of time). You will be given access to a website where the preliminary findings will be posted for your comments, which we anticipate will take you an additional 1-2 hours. The duration of the project will be from September 2007 to June 2009.

### ***Inconvenience***

Participation in this study may cause some inconvenience to you, specifically the time it takes for you to participate in either the focus group or online survey. We will endeavor to stay within the stated timeframes to minimize the inconvenience recognizing that you may leave at any time if necessary.

### **Risks**

There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. However, as we cannot predict how discussion of your online learning experiences will affect you, the investigators who are experienced counselors will be available to debrief with you after the focus group or online survey (in person or by telephone).

### **Benefits**

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include your ability to contribute to the development of knowledge in the area of online learning and influencing the future approaches instructors use to increase social presence in virtual classrooms.

### **Voluntary Participation**

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your data will be removed and all records of your participation will be destroyed.

### **Researcher's Relationship with Participants**

The researchers may have a previous relationship to potential participants as an instructor or administrative staff who has assisted you during your degree. To help prevent this relationship from influencing your decision to participate, the following steps to prevent coercion have been taken: any researcher who could potentially be asked to review applications for the MSW program at UVic (to which you may apply) will not conduct the focus group, and will only view the raw data after it has been coded with all identifying details removed.

### ***Anonymity***

In terms of protecting your anonymity, we will use pseudonyms and carefully remove other personal information that could potentially identify you. However, due to the nature of a focus group, your anonymity cannot be assured. Other members of the focus group may know who made specific comments. We will ask for a confidentiality agreement to be signed by all participants.

### **Confidentiality**

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the data will be protected by keeping data in a password protected electronic file; locking audio tapes in a secure drawer in a locked office and limiting access to the data to the co-investigators and the research assistant. The raw data will be retained for a period of five years and then destroyed .

### **Dissemination of Results**

It is anticipated that the results of this study will be shared with others in the following ways. Public presentations, written articles and reports and workshops for faculty and staff within the University community.

### **Disposal of Data**

Data from this study will be disposed of after five years. Electronic data will be erased and paper copies will be shredded. Data will be stored at the School of Social Work in a locked drawer within a locked office as well as on a password protected computer.

### **Contacts**

Nancy Pike	<a href="mailto:npike@uvic.ca">npike@uvic.ca</a>	(250) 721-8039
Dora Leigh Bjornson	<a href="mailto:bjornson@uvic.ca">bjornson@uvic.ca</a>	(250) 721-8953
Roberta Taylor	<a href="mailto:retaylor@uvic.ca">retaylor@uvic.ca</a>	(250) 721-8046
Barbara Whittington	<a href="mailto:bwhittin@uvic.ca">bwhittin@uvic.ca</a>	(250) 721-8044

In addition, you may verify the ethical approval of this study, or raise any concerns you might have, by contacting the Human Research Ethics Office at the University of Victoria (250-472-4545 or ethics@uvic.ca).

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researchers.

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*Name of Participant*                      *Signature*                      *Date*

*A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.*

**WE INTEND TO PUBLISH THE FINDINGS ON A WEBSITE AND ASK FOR FEEDBACK FROM PARTICIPANTS. CONTINUING CONSENT IS IMPLIED EACH TIME YOU ACCESS THE WEBSITE AND PARTICIPATE IN THE RESEARCH BY PROVIDING YOUR COMMENT. PLEASE KEEP A COPY OF THIS LETTER FOR YOUR REFERENCE SHOULD YOU CHOOSE TO PROVIDE ELECTRONIC FEEDBACK DURING THE PROJECT.**

# Appendix B

## **Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education Survey**

### **What is Social Presence?**

The term “social presence” refers to the degree to which learners are able to perceive and project themselves socially and emotionally as participants in a learning community. Strong social presence in an online environment is related to the feeling of being connected to others, and correlates with increased learning effectiveness and student satisfaction.

### **Research Question:**

What do recent distance education BSW graduates perceive were the elements of social presence in their online undergraduate social work program and how did these elements impact their learning?

### **Sub-questions:**

1. Please give us an example of one or more situations when you felt connected to and/or supported by your fellow students.
  - Can you provide detail so we can identify elements of that support?
2. Please give us an example of one or more situations when you felt connected to and/or supported by your instructor.
  - Can you provide detail so we can identify elements of that support?
3. Please give us an example of one or more situations when you felt disconnected and/or unsupported by your fellow students and/or instructor.
  - Can you provide detail so we can identify elements of that support?
4. How did these experiences impact your learning?
5. Please describe anything that was unexpected or surprised you during your learning experience?
6. What suggestions do you have for changes?

# Appendix C

## **Additional Questions for Focus Group:**

- 1. Please elaborate on your instructors and how they contributed to your experiences of connection to your online learning.**
- 2. Please comment on your personal experiences as a member of an online learning group specifically around how your membership contributed to your sense of connection to your online learning.**
- 3. Any additional comments?**

# Appendix D

## Confidentiality Agreement

### Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education

1. The Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education research project hereby confirms that it will disclose certain of its confidential and proprietary information to their interview transcriptionist, \_\_\_\_\_>

**Confidential information** shall include all data, materials, products, technology, computer programs, specifications, manuals, software and other information disclosed or submitted, orally, in writing, or by any other media to Nancy Pike, Dora Leigh Bjornson, Roberta Taylor, Barb Whittington or the interview transcriptionist by the focus group(s) or the online respondents to project questions and/or surveys.

2. Obligations of Transcriptionist
  - a. \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agrees that the confidential Social Presence in Undergraduate Social Work Online Distance Education research study data is to be used solely for the purposes of said study. Said confidential information should only be disclosed to employees of said research study with a specific need to know. \_\_\_\_\_ hereby agrees not to disclose, publish or otherwise reveal any of the Confidential Information received from \_\_\_\_\_, research assistants or other participants of the project to any other party whatsoever except with the specific prior written authorization of \_\_\_\_\_.
  - b. Materials containing confidential information must be stored in a safe location as to avoid third persons unrelated to the project to access said materials. Confidential Information shall not be duplicated by \_\_\_\_\_ except for the purposes of this Agreement.

3. Completion of Work

Upon completion of the work and at the request of the researchers, \_\_\_\_\_ shall return all confidential information received in written or tangible form, including copies, or reproductions or other media containing such confidential information, within ten (10) days of such request.

At the researchers' option any copies of confidential documents or other media developed by \_\_\_\_\_ and remaining in his/her possession after the completion of his/her work need to be destroyed so as to protect the confidentiality of said information. \_\_\_\_\_ shall provide a written certificate to the researchers regarding destruction within ten (10) days thereafter.

With his/her signature, \_\_\_\_\_, shall hereby adhere to the terms of this agreement.

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Signature and Date