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## The role of including a social activity in an online surgery course

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### Abstract

For the past six years, online blended learning has been a standard feature at Qassim College of Medicine. Keeping students interested in e-learning and facilitating online courses has always been difficult, especially in light of students' widespread use of social media. Methodology; 336 students enrolled in Surgery courses in 2019 and 2021 were exposed to social networking, which included open discussions, posting comments, and the use of multimedia features to increase their commitment to the course and level of engagement. Results; the social networking component was quite popular among students who; posted their daily activities, clinical training sessions, and pictures, accompanied by many comments and discussions. All survey respondents said it increased their level of engagement in e-learning, 87% said it helped them learn online, and 13% said it had a negative impact on their time. Conclusions: The findings support the potential of social networks to improve student engagement in courses. However, there was a need to improve social networks for use in education and to manage the time aspect for the benefit of the students.

**Keywords:** social activity, online, surgery course

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### Introduction

For the past century, it has been assumed that school is the primary site of learning. However, school is no longer regarded as the sole source of learning, a trend aided by the widespread use of computer networks (Collins & Halverson, 2009; Ito *et al.*, 2009; Thomas & Brown, 2011) [4, 8, 27].

Online interactions in a hybrid medium of instruction can be completed synchronously with real-time meeting sessions or asynchronously with students interacting at different times (Siegelman, 2019) [19].

An increasing body of evidence suggests that in-person learning motivates students, fosters a sense of community, and provides much-needed encouragement (Singh *et al.*, 2021) [20]. This also enables instructors to detect nonverbal cues and make appropriate changes in content and teaching methodology (Paul & Jefferson, 2019) [14].

A proliferation of ICT-supported learning and teaching has recently provided various educational opportunities to both online and face-to-face students in higher education (Stacey & Wiesenber, 2007; Szeto, 2011) [21, 24]. Moreover In the changing higher education landscape, blended synchronous approaches to learning and teaching are gaining traction. (Szeto, 2014) [25].

Social factors, which refer to how participants in asynchronous learning networks (ALN) interact with one another, must be considered in the design and development of computer-mediated courses (Wegerif, 1998) [34]. The current popularity and growth of Web-based social networking tools is prompting many educators within organizations and institutions, including higher education, all over the world to consider ways in which these tools could enhance online learning (Salaway, 2008; Weekes, 2008; Young, 2007) [18, 33, 37].

As the twenty-first century progresses, technological advancements afford students and facilitators the opportunity to improve social presence in distance education courses. By utilizing these new technologies, we can increase our ability to communicate with classmates and other professionals all over the world (Kristopher & Abbie, 2009) [11].

"Online learners who have a stronger sense of community and perceive greater cognitive learning should feel less isolated and have greater satisfaction with their academic programs, potentially resulting in fewer dropouts," writes Rovai (2002) [16]. Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) [30] found that "social presence could be promoted in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting by employing strategies that encourage interaction". Other research has found that a learning community not only improves the persistence of students enrolled in online programs, but it also improves information exchange, learning support, group commitment, collaboration, and learning satisfaction (Dede, 1996; Stein & Glazer, 2003; Wellman, 1999) [6, 23, 36].

An online learning community typically includes a technical platform, learning tasks, and student social interaction (Carabajal, La Pointe & Gunawardena, 2003; Tu & Corry, 2002) [2, 28].

The social dimension refers to the participants' ability to maintain a level of mutual caring and understanding through regular interaction. Members of a student group develop a sense of belonging, socio-emotional bonds, and positive relationships during the online learning process (Wang, 2005) [32]. As a result, the purpose of this

study was to investigate students' perceptions and satisfaction with the inclusion of social activities in the online course.

### Methodology

To investigate social and affective interaction among students in online learning programs, 320 students (190 males and 130 females) enrolled in the Surgery course from 2019 to 2021 were exposed to social networking activities referred to as students' own activities during the course. In this regard, students could participate in open discussions, leave comments, and use multimedia features to increase their commitment to the course and engagement.

We encouraged students to use this site where they could initiate activities, post readings, post their social activities and express their opinions freely.

Following the completion of the online course, we conducted a survey among the students. Our goal was to investigate "students'" perceptions of and satisfaction with the presence of social activities in the online course.

### Results

The social networking component was well-liked by the students. They shared their daily activities, clinical training sessions, and photos, along with numerous comments and discussions.

Following the completion of the course, a questionnaire with six questions was posted on the website (Table 1). The items were scored on a scale of one to five, with one indicating "Definitely Agree" and five indicating "Definitely Disagree."

Fifty-five percent of 292 students (91.25%) completed the questionnaire, with 117 out of 130 (90%) females and 175 out of 190 (92.1%) males participating.

When asked, "Have social forums aided your participation in e-Learning and online educational material?"

Approximately 73% of students agreed, with 13% disagreeing. Not Sure was chosen by the remaining students.

240 students (82.2%) said online social activities helped them learn online and were not time consuming, while 30 students (10.3%) said they were.

When asked to rate their experiences, 100% of those polled said it encouraged their participation in e-learning.

Some students stated that one of the disadvantages of the social activity on the e-learning site was "that they felt embarrassed" because any activity they engaged in on the site would reveal their names to all of the students.

This is why they asked that their names be removed from the website. Others have claimed that online activity leads to sloth and possibly physical inactivity. Others said it was useful because they could quickly find and share information. The activities ensured that the course was enjoyable and fun.

### Discussion

The social aspects of learning are well known to be beneficial. The delivery of project-based learning courses via online platforms is a growing trend that can provide opportunities for teamwork experiences that differ from those associated with face-to-face courses (Saghafian & O'Neill, 2018) <sup>[17]</sup> and allow students to collaborate across institutions and national borders (Usher & Barak, 2020) <sup>[29]</sup>.

Students enrolled in online programs, on the other hand, continue to feel lonely and isolated. To address this, participants must learn more about one another; trust and a social dimension can then be incorporated into online learning environments (Olsson, 2014) <sup>[13]</sup>.

According to Kear, Chetwynd, and Jefferis (2014) <sup>[9]</sup>, it is preferable to learn about others through their posts: You can learn everything you need to know about a person through the messages they post.

During the course, we discovered that the social networking component was very popular among students. The students documented their daily activities, clinical training sessions, and photographs, which were accompanied by numerous comments and discussions. This is consistent with Kim, Kwon, and Cho. (2011) <sup>[10]</sup> and Richardson and Swans (2003) findings that online learning studies have discovered associations between perceptions of social presence and satisfaction with the learning experience.

According to Greyling, Kara, Makka, and VanNiekerk (2008) <sup>[7]</sup>, it is critical that students visit the online course component on a regular basis. Creating a social dimension in the online course environment was one of the strategies used in the current study to achieve this goal. Teaching with technology can easily be associated with cold and impersonal teaching-learning environments. As a result, every week, an effort was made to create a warm, personalized, inviting, visual, and informative environment. The goal was to make the online course component a visually appealing and rewarding information portal that students would visit at least once a week. A sociable learning environment includes social affordances that can help to initiate, encourage, and sustain the socio-emotional dimension of social interaction (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2019) <sup>[35]</sup>.

To maintain an online social presence, the lecturing team had to do the following:

1. Every week, update the course's home page with concise and informative text and visuals that are related to an important learning outcome for that week.
2. Encourage students to use the discussion forum to debate course-related issues.
3. Participate in discussions.
4. Consistently moderate student comments on the discussion board.

Respond to student posts as soon as possible (within 48 hours) Greyling and co. (2008) [7].

The practices described above are, for the most part, similar to those used in our course.

In our study, some students stated that one of the disadvantages of the social activity on the e-learning site was "that they felt embarrassed" because whenever they engaged in an activity, their names were visible to all the students, which is why, after completing the course, they requested that their names be hidden on the site. This finding is consistent with that of (Berlanga, Bitter-Rijkema, Brouns, Sloep, and Fetter (2011) [1], Chen and Marcus (2012) [3], and Mesch and Beker 2010) [12]. According to these authors, several students expressed concerns about privacy, which is becoming an increasingly important issue in online environments. However, studies have found both positive and negative effects of personal profiles and photos on online activities. Cress (2005) discovered that for some members of online groups (those who were more individually oriented), personal profiles (consisting of photos and short descriptions of the students) had a positive effect on group interaction and a negative effect for others (those who were more group-oriented). In contrast, Tanis and Postmes (2007) [26] found that member photos and names had a negative effect on participants' satisfaction with the online interactions. Walther, Slovacek, and Tidwell (2001) [31] found that member photos had a positive effect on the activities for newly formed groups of learners who were set to work together for a short time, but a negative effect for groups working on a more long-term basis. Personal profiles, according to the researchers in all of these studies, can reduce some participants' sense of solidarity. According to Kear *et al.* (2014) [9], personal profiles and images were important to some students in terms of increasing social presence, but not to all. This is, to a large extent, consistent with our viewpoint.

"Students really know how to use social networking platforms to spread new ideas and think collectively, so bringing this dimension into learning, and combining it with face-to-face interaction, can generate a lot of excitement," according to Stanford Report Staff (2012) [22]. This was also demonstrated by our results.

### Conclusion

The study's findings confirm the power of social networks in increasing student engagement in classes. However, there are some drawbacks to this, which highlight the importance of improving the functions of social networks in an educational context and managing time for the benefit of students.

**Table 1**

<b>1: Strongly Agree 2: Agree 3: Not Sure 4: Disagree 5: Strongly Disagree</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
1. Do social forums help you engage in online and educational material?					
2. Do you take advantage of educational forums and online presence, in a way that supports your learning and engagement to the course?					
3. Do you think that social networking forums are a waste of time?					
4. Do you think that there is a need for online social forums for students?					
5. How would you rate the experience? With zero indicating Worst and 10 indicating Best.					
6. Insert your suggestions here or comments regarding, positive or negative aspects.					

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