

Zooming In on Engagement: How Synchronous Meet-Ups Strengthen Presence, Belonging, and Learning in Fully Online Higher Education Courses Through Design

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of synchronous Zoom meet-ups in enhancing student engagement in fully online courses. Grounded in the Community of Inquiry framework, the study investigated how real-time video interactions supported social, cognitive, and teaching presence. Data were collected from undergraduate online courses that integrated two required Zoom sessions alongside asynchronous learning activities. Quantitative measures included course performance data and students' ratings of engagement while qualitative insights were drawn from student reflections via survey. Findings indicate that structured Zoom meet-ups fostered increased participation, greater connection with the instructor, and sense of belonging. Students reported that synchronous interactions with the instructor clarified expectations, increased belongingness, and supported deeper understanding of course assessments. However, challenges related to scheduling and additional time needed were reported.

Keywords: online engagement, Zoom meet-ups, presence

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Introduction

Online asynchronous courses offer flexibility and expanded access to higher education; however, maintaining student engagement remains a persistent challenge (Bergdahl, 2022; Hollister et al., 2022; Xia et al., 2022). Students in asynchronous environments often report feelings of isolation, limited interaction with peers and instructors, reduced motivation, and difficulties sustaining active participation in course activities. Recent research suggests that engagement in asynchronous learning is closely linked to the quality of interactions and the learning community established within the course (Deep et al., 2025). That is, when instructors establish clear connections and pathways of communication with students, these same students are more likely to engage with course content, engage with their peers more deeply, and sustain significant involvement in course assessments and goals.

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework posits that meaningful educational experiences emerge through the interaction of three interconnected elements: teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence (Garrison et al., 2000). Teaching presence refers to elements of course design that facilitate and direct both cognitive and social processes to recognize personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes. Social presence refers to the ability of learners to be able to project themselves as ‘real’ authentic people who engage in open communication and in establishing meaningful relationships. Finally, cognitive presence refers to the ability of the learner to construct meaning through reflection and critical inquiry. Research has demonstrated that these presences are associated with student learning and engagement in online courses. Consequently, when students experience presence in an online learning environment, they are more likely to engage with course activities and establish connections with other course colleagues.

In this study, we explored aspects of these three experiences, by setting up intentional, structured, required Zoom meetings. Incorporating “face-to-face” opportunities within these online courses may encourage and support connection and presence thereby increasing belongingness and engagement. For example, in these meet-ups students have the chance to express themselves meaningfully and actually “show” themselves as real people. They also can reflect and discuss course activities as well as begin to interact with other key course stakeholders (i.e., the course instructor). In this exploratory study, it was anticipated that these synchronous sessions would impact students’ feelings around presence. It was expected that students who participated in these meet-ups would report stronger feelings of engagement overall and report that they had opportunities to build a stronger relationship with the course instructor.

Method

This study included 159 undergraduate students (8 males, 151 females) from an urban university, who were asked to engage in two required “meet-ups” throughout a 15-week semester in two upper-division courses within their major. The participants identified as Asian (n = 48), Latino (n = 67), White (n = 26), Multiethnic (n = 8) or Black (n = 4). Other ethnic groups included American Indian, Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders, Other or Preferred not to say (n = 1 for each of these categories). In addition, participants were aged 17–22 (n = 81), 23–26 (n = 37), 27–30 (n = 20), 31–35 (n = 6), 36–40 (n = 9) and 41–60 (n = 6).

Meet-ups consisted of 15–20 minute Zoom sessions, students met in groups of 2–3 students and signed up based on their individual schedules. Meet-ups were structured to include

information regarding course requirements, “getting-to-know-you” questions, and opportunities for students to check-in regarding anything within the course. Students could also request to meet individually with the course instructor. There were two required meet-ups throughout the semester. Typically, the first meet-up was focused on welcoming the student, introducing course requirements, and establishing a connection with the course instructor and course peers. The second meet-up was more likely to be 1:1 sessions, with a sharper focus and purpose on major course assessments and examination questions. Most students engaged in the two required meet-ups ($n = 150$). 22 students noted that they requested a third meet-up. In addition, 12 students noted that they attended additional office hours beyond the meet-ups.

Students were asked to self-report on their engagement, helpfulness of these meet-ups, and their learning during meet-up sessions (responding to agreement with specific statements) using a five point likert-like scale (reporting on agreement with statements such as “The meet-ups helped me feel engaged with the course” and “I felt comfortable talking with the instructor in the meet-ups”). Students were asked to provide feedback/narrative comments on what they found to be the strengths of these meet-ups and areas of improvement. Overall course grades were also assessed.

Results

After controlling for gender, results indicated a significant positive correlation between students’ grades and course engagement ($r = .71$, $p < .01$). No differences were found for ethnicity or age.

Students strongly agreed that they found the meet-ups helpful for understanding course materials, engagement with the course, and connection with the instructor. They also strongly agreed that they learned about additional policies and course information as well as used their time to discuss course requirements (see Table 1). Students reported that they were not intimidated by these meet-up sessions (see Table 2).

Table 1
Self-Reported Agreement With Meet-Up Outcomes

Meet-Up Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree
I found the meet-ups to be helpful for my understanding of the course materials/requirements.	75%	24%
The meet-ups helped me feel engaged with the course.	73%	20%
The meet-ups helped me feel connected with the instructor.	82%	16%
I learned about additional policies or information about the course in the meet-ups.	68%	20%
I learned about the instructor’s teaching philosophy and areas of flexibility in these meet-ups.	81%	14%
I used my time in the meet-ups to discuss course requirements.	69%	14%
I felt comfortable in talking with the instructor in the meet-ups.	83%	13%

Table 2*Self-Reported Agreement With Meet-Up Negative Outcomes*

Meet-Up Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree
I felt intimidated by the meet-ups.	2%	11%
I did not feel that the meet-ups were helpful in understanding course materials/requirements.	2%	2%

Overall, these findings highlight that students felt presence in these meet-ups and that they self-reported greater engagement as linked to these meet-up sessions.

Reported Strengths of Meet-Ups

When asked to provide narrative feedback about their experiences with these meet-ups students provided robust comments. Across the participants there were 155 individual sets of comments. Using NVIVO, five themes were identified linked to students perceived strengths of these meet-up sessions.

1. Building Relationships/Connection/ Engagement With Professor

Students reported on increased social presence as a result of meet-up experiences. Specifically, they noted that these meet-ups provided an opportunity to build a relationship and establish connections with the course instructor. As one example, a student noted that, “I liked that I was able to connect with the professor one-on-one as this course was an asynchronous online class. I liked that we were able to talk about personal and academic topics.”

2. Clarification on Course Concerns

A second key theme that was found was that the meet-ups provided an opportunity to clarify course concerns (e.g., checking in regarding course elements). An exemplar of these theme included, “the strengths of the meet-ups were providing support to the assignments and touching base with the requirements to each assignment. Very helpful and understanding with course overload.”

3. Asking Questions and Discussing Course Requirements

A third significant theme that emerged from the narrative comments was the use of these meet-ups as a space to ask specific questions about the course. One student noted specifically that, “the strengths of the meet-ups was allowing students to ask questions, address any concerns, and discuss about class assignments with the instructor.”

4. Provision of Direct Assistance/Individualized Help

Students throughout the course also noted a need for individualized support (e.g., questions about accessibility, experiencing problems outside of the course). They used the scheduled meet-ups as an opportunity to obtain that support. As one example a student noted that, “I was able to ask my own questions that I had about assignments without feeling intimidated because the professor was the one that encouraged the question asking.”

5. Provision of Assignment Feedback

One final theme that emerged as a strength of these meet-ups was how they were utilized as a space to discuss instructor provided feedback on course assessments. One exemplar of this theme was, “some of the strengths was that it allowed me to have a better understanding of the assignments and feedback on them as well.”

Reported Improvements of Meet-Ups

Students were also asked for suggestions for improvement for their meet-up experiences and the overall structure of these meet-ups. The responses to this question were not as robust as the responses to the question about meet-up strengths (with many responses noted as N/A or none). That is, 90% of the comments were none or not applicable. Across the participants there were 132 individual sets of comments. Using NVIVO, four themes were identified.

1. Request for Additional Meet-Ups

One common improvement suggestion was the need for more than two required meet-ups. One student noted that, “maybe adding one or two more meet ups to discuss concerns about grades or assignments.”

2. More Time to Discuss Course Requirements/Concerns

Students also wanted more structured time to discuss course components. As an example comment, a student stated, “I just wish these meet-ups could be longer, 20 minutes is not enough to really connect with course colleagues! I understand that everyone's busy, which is unfortunate. I also wish the professor could go over the rubrics of assignments.”

3. Request for Longer Timeframe of Meet-Ups

Students also wanted more than 15-20 minutes with the course instructor and/or their course peers. As an exemplar a student noted that, “more time, rather than 15 min she should do about 30 min so we can address our concerns.”

4. Clarification About Content of Meet-Ups

A final theme was that students wanted more information about the meet-ups before they engaged in them. A student described this theme, “I believe having an announcement on what is going to be discussed in the meet up will help benefit students because they might feel anxious or scared since they don't know what to expect what's going to be talked about in the meet up.”

Comments About Structure of Meet-Ups

Across the sets of narrative comments, there was feedback provided about the specific structure of the meet-ups. Meaning that students appreciated that these sessions were not just open question/answer sessions. In other words, there were paced activities within the meet-up so that the full time was utilized. An illustrative comment included, “I think the strengths of the meet-ups were that the professor had an idea of what to talk about during the meet ups, opposed to

simply just having students meet and ask questions. I also like that there were multiple times available, so the Professor was flexible.”

Overall, these themes illustrate the robust nature of students’ perceptions around the value and import they placed on these synchronous meet-ups.

Conclusions

Findings demonstrate that these meet-ups play an important role in supporting student engagement and connection in asynchronous courses; increasing social and cognitive presence. Students reported connection with both the instructor and other peers and that these meet-ups supported a welcoming climate in their online course experience. Although it was anticipated that students would note the impact of meet-ups on their course learning, the narrative comments provided did not note this impact. The study also highlights the importance of student perceptions of these interactions and understanding of the purpose and organizational structure of these meetings. Overall, the findings suggest that Zoom meet-ups, when thoughtfully designed and structure, can serve as a mechanism for engaging online learners. Implications for practice include balancing structure with interaction, leveraging video presence to humanize instruction, and using synchronous sessions to complement rather than replicate asynchronous content. Future research should examine direct engagement (outside of student perceptions) and assess direct impacts on course grades and learning.

Declaration of Generative AI and AI-Assisted Technologies in the Writing Process

The author declares that no AI or AI-assisted technologies have been used to generate, refine, or correct the content in the manuscript. The ideas, design, procedures, findings, analyses, and discussion are originally written and derived from careful and systematic conduct of the research.

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