Chapter 4. *Social Presence*: Beyond "Feeling Real"

In this chapter, we examine the extent to which students experienced *social presence* during peer-review workshops, briefly introducing concepts from our previous survey data (Stewart et al., 2021) before focusing on this study's interview and case study data. *Social presence* is especially important for writing courses that aim to function as communities of inquiry because, as Kevin Roozen (2015) has argued, "writing can never be anything but a social and rhetorical act, connecting us to other people across time and space in an attempt to respond adequately to the needs of an audience" (p. 18). Because writing is social, learning about writing and practicing the craft of writing needs to be social, too. Applied to peer review, *social presence* facilitates the student-student interaction that leads to learning from and alongside peers. While the concept of *social presence* is an intuitive element of peer review, we believe the current theory and practices for studying *social presence* are insufficient for measuring and describing *social presence* in online writing courses.

This chapter first describes the history of *social presence* in CoI scholarship and then presents our own attempts to reconceptualize *social presence* for writing studies, which involves differentiating between *social perceptions*, *social learning*, *social comfort*, and *attitudes*. Ultimately, our examination of the interviews and case studies we conducted results in a call for future research to further theorize and operationalize this important component of a community of inquiry.

History and Theory of *Social Presence*

First defined as the "degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions" (Short et al., 1976, p. 65), the concept of *social presence* was extended to visualizing online classmates (Walther, 1992) and discerning whether interactions felt as though they were with a "real" person (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). The scholarship particularly focused on asynchronous communication because, in the 1990s, message boards and chat rooms were the primary mode of online interaction—hence the emphasis on whether participants were "real." In 1999, Garrison et al. drew upon this evolving theory to define *social presence* as "the ability of participants in the CoI to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89). As was the case for most online learning research at the time, the community into which Garrison et al.'s participants presented themselves existed as an asynchronous online discussion forum. Garrison et al. (1999) further theorized *social presence* as including three categories of behaviors that led to a sense of communicating with "real people" (p. 89): *open communication* (i.e., expressing agreement or

disagreement), *affective communication* (i.e., sharing personal stories), and *group cohesion* (i.e., referring to the class as "we"). In 2008, a team of CoI researchers created the CoI survey (Arbaugh et al., 2008), which operationalized the three *social presence* categories into nine Likert scale questions.

In the decades since, many scholars have critiqued (e.g., Annand, 2011, 2019) and/or reconceptualized (e.g., Christen et al., 2022; Wertz, 2022) *social presence*. Some of these reconceptualizations have stemmed from methodological concerns; as Karel Kreijns et al. (2014) noted, Garrison et al.'s (1999) original three "categories have only been derived theoretically, but never empirically verified" (p. 9). Other concerns have related to the assumptions that ground the CoI framework, such as the assumption that social interaction is necessary for all learning (Annand, 2019). We share these concerns and also worry that positioning a sense of "real people" (Garrison et al., 1999, p. 89) or having distinct impressions as the primary indicator of *social presence* is outdated, given today's technologies that enable both asynchronous audio-visual communication and synchronous interaction, not to mention the ability to produce and distribute digital communications across more complex social networks. We further believe that any conversation about "feeling real" needs to account for the power dynamics and social constructions that impact how course participants present themselves and are perceived by others (Retzinger, 2018). Consequently, we echo these scholars' critiques and build on their work to reconceptualize *social presence* for a writing studies context.

Table 4.1. Four Categories of Social Presence Survey Items

Category of Social Presence	**Survey Item**
Social learning	Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course.
	Online discussions helped me to develop as a writer.
	Interacting with classmates improved my writing.
Social perceptions	I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants.
Social comfort	I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.
	I felt comfortable participating in the course discussions.
	I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
	I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust.
	I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.
Attitudes	Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.

As illustrated in Table 4.1, our process for conceptualizing *social presence* began when we slightly modified the CoI survey (Arbaugh et al., 2008) to make it more specific to writing instruction (Stewart, 2019). This included adding one *social presence* item: "Interacting with classmates improved my writing." We also revised an existing item: "Online discussions helped me to develop a sense of collaboration" became "Online discussions helped me to develop as a writer." Then, replicating the methods of Sheila Carlon et al. (2012), we engaged in a quantitative analysis of the CoI survey items that resulted in regrouping the items into four categories (Stewart et al., 2021): *social learning*, *social perceptions*, *social comfort*, and *attitudes* about the potential for social interaction online.

In the present study, we attempted to apply the four categories in our qualitative analysis of the interview and case study data that we collected during our observation of peer-review workshops. We found some value in differentiating between *social learning* and *social perceptions*, but we found the other two categories problematic. Consequently, we call for more robust theorization of *social comfort* and a reconsideration of the *attitudes* we want to measure.

Social Learning

The concept of *social learning* is one of our major contributions to CoI scholarship because it is derived from the modifications that we made to the CoI survey. In addition to the question we added and the question we modified, our conception of *social learning* included a survey item about students gaining a sense of belonging in the course. One question we wanted to explore qualitatively was whether having a sense of belonging increased students' belief that they were engaging in *social learning*. The interview and case study data that we present in this chapter challenge that relationship—our student participants suggested that *social learning* doesn't always require the level of relationship implied by "sense of belonging."

Social Perceptions

Our definition of *social perceptions* was derived from Kreijns et al. (2014), who offered a theoretical examination of the CoI survey items. Kreijns et al. (2014) first differentiated between "a person's perception" of classmates as real and a person's "ability to project oneself" into the online space (p. 7). We follow suit, focusing on perceptions of others in our definition of *social perceptions*; the idea of projecting one's self into the social space is covered by "social comfort" (see the following section). Kreijns et al. (2014) further argued that, once *social perceptions*[2] are formed, a social space can exist, and in that social space, classmates can

2. In Stewart et al. (2021), we followed Kreijns et al.'s (2014) lead and called this element "social presence per se." We subsequently renamed the element "social perceptions" to indicate that this is one of several components of social presence.

develop "affective work relationships, shared social identity, group cohesiveness, mutual trust, a sense of belonging, a sense of community, and an open atmosphere" (p. 11-12). In this conception, the first step toward *social presence* is to establish *social perceptions* of others. From there, relationships are formed that create the potential for *social learning*. As noted above, our project challenges this conception because the students in our study indicated that relationships may not be necessary for learning.

Social Comfort

During our initial reconception of *social presence* for writing studies (Stewart et al., 2021), we believed that *social comfort* was necessary alongside *social perceptions* for *social learning* to occur. Our definition derived from the work of Carlon et al. (2012), who performed a quantitative factor analysis of the CoI survey that resulted in two components of *social presence* (instead of three): *social experience* and *social comfort*. The *social comfort* factor included five survey items, four of which asked students to report on whether they felt "comfortable" interacting, participating, conversing, and disagreeing with peers online. The fifth item asked if the students felt their perspectives were acknowledged by others. When we replicated Carlon et al.'s (2012) study (see Stewart et al. (2021) for more details), the same five "social comfort" items grouped together. Consequently, we maintained *social comfort* as a component in our writing-studies-specific conception of *social presence*. In this current project, we attempted to examine *social comfort* qualitatively, through our interview and case study data. The experience has led us to conclude that the concept is insufficiently theorized, as we will describe in more detail later in this chapter.

Attitudes

The final category that emerged from our earlier study of *social presence* (Stewart et al., 2021) was *attitudes* about the potential for social interaction online. This category, maintained in Kreijns et al.'s (2014) conception of *social presence* as well as our own, is connected to a single CoI survey item: "Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction." During the drafting of this book, we attempted to code for *attitudes* in the student interview data, but we were unable to identify a discernable pattern that would lead to reportable findings. A key issue was that students described their *attitudes* towards online and hybrid learning in a variety of ways: sometimes they reflected on their current experience, but often they simultaneously speculated about their past or possible future experiences and/or speculated about how their classmates' *attitudes* about the potential for social interaction in online and hybrid learning might vary from their own. If future researchers aim to investigate *attitudes* as a component of *social presence*, we recommend a systematic analysis of past versus

current experiences with online learning. We also recommend that researchers parse the differences between students speculating on how they might feel about online communication being a successful medium for social interaction versus how they suspect their classmates feel. With that said, we're also not convinced that understanding *attitudes* about the potential for social interaction online is the best route for future research. It may be more valuable to broadly explore *attitudes* about interactivity and social learning: Do students value peer interaction? Do they want to learn from and alongside peers? Why? Understanding those *attitudes* may be more beneficial to faculty who are trying to create online interactive activities that feel meaningful to students.

Critiquing and Reconceptualizing *Social Presence* for Writing Studies

In what follows, we report on our attempts to qualitatively investigate *social learning*, *social perceptions*, *social comfort*, and *attitudes*, sharing what we learned from coding 20 student interviews as well as analyzing three case studies. We don't attempt to analyze the case studies according to the categories of *social presence* because we don't believe our current conception of *social presence* is robust enough for such an analysis. Instead, we weave examples from the case studies into our broader discussion of the interview data in an attempt to illustrate the complex ways students experience and encounter *social presence* in online and hybrid peer-review workshops. Our hope is that this chapter will inspire future research.

Social Learning

With the exception of Jake, whom we will discuss at the end of this section, the other 19 students stated in their interviews that they believed they experienced *social learning* as a result of interacting with their peers through peer review in their FYW course sections. Students frequently mentioned their specific peer reviewers when discussing what they had gained from the peer-review workshop. Jane, for instance, discussed benefiting from Jake's writing expertise, which she had noticed from earlier class discussions: "Yeah, so Jake, yeah, I haven't been in a group with him before. But based on the discussions that we have I knew that he's a really strong writer. So that was good for me to have that feedback." Courtney emphasized the reciprocal nature of peer review in exchanging documents with her peers, noting that "for the third essay, the comments were probably about equal to what I got" and that Ada responded to her writing needs: "I just needed a few extra ideas, and the student who first read my paper, she kind of helped me with that, and I also said I wanted to keep my topic on—I wanted to be focused throughout the whole paper, and she made sure to be aware of that."

Other students recalled specific comments made by peer reviewers that they learned from or drew upon in revising their work. Steven, for example, recalled,

"So JD actually made a really detailed comment about my paper, so he picked out my format that I'm supposed to use for MLA citation that I forgot about. And he also picked out different reasoning and statistics that I might be able to put in different paragraphs. I think that was really helpful." Joel expressed that he had been apprehensive about receiving harsh criticism but observed instead about his classmate's feedback, "I feel pretty good about it because it wasn't—she didn't really tear my essay apart, but it was helpful to see like, okay, I need to add a few paragraphs about this. It was helpful to get that feedback, and it was a very constructive—like constructive criticism."

While all but one of the students stated that they experienced *social learning*, the majority (14 out of 20, or 70 percent) also named at least one factor that hindered *social learning*. Ten students mentioned that they preferred to have their texts reviewed by non-classmates. Peter commented that, in the future, he "would ask for help, but probably not from another student"; for example, he might ask his wife for feedback. Joel explained that, while he preferred instructor feedback, he believed peer feedback was also helpful: "I'd much rather have the teacher review it as she did. … But if we are going to do both, I don't see any problem with it. I mean, it's going to be helpful either way." Eight students disagreed with Joel's sentiment that peer feedback would "be helpful either way," instead describing ways in which peer feedback was unhelpful. For example, Daniel explained that the classmate giving him feedback "was fixing a lot of little things, like being nitpicky in grammar, punctuation, all that ….Some of the things that she told me to do were the things my instructor told me not to do."

For others, the issue wasn't that the feedback was unhelpful but that the workshop felt perfunctory (n=7). Some students articulated that they provided feedback quickly or superficially to earn points. Jordan said, "I feel like when we peer review things, it's kind of like we're all just kind of writing something random to get the points for the assignment ….We have to write two reviews for two other students, and I feel like most of us are just like doing it and writing something random and not really doing it in depth." Other students, like Isaiah, explained that providing feedback could seem less perfunctory if he knew his classmate: "It's more of just an assignment if you don't know the person. You just want to do the peer review for the grade, but if you do know the person then you're more likely to feel engaged in it, if that makes sense."

Most of the students in our study simultaneously said that they both did and did not experience *social learning*, which corroborates our findings in Chapter 3: *exploration* and *integration* are *possible* in a peer-review workshop, but *resolution* isn't a guaranteed result of peer interaction, and it isn't uncommon for students to learn from some interactions but not others. For these reasons, *resolution* (and *social learning*) is difficult to observe and measure. To offer some context for this difficulty, we share the story of Jake, who developed strong *social perceptions* of his peers within the classroom but didn't appear to experience *social learning* as a result.

Case Study Example 1: Inauthentic Audience for Sarah's Student, Jake

Jake was a fifth-year biomedical engineering student who was accustomed to writing research essays and had asked Sarah for permission to work on an essay for a senior-level class, which she granted. His peer review group members included John, a first-year psychology and criminology student who was writing an essay about Edward Snowden, and Jane, a first-year graphic design student who wrote about sleep deprivation.

When asked how he felt about giving peer feedback, Jake's assessment was positive given his confidence as an older, more experienced student. He replied, "I enjoy it because I like discussing other people's work. I obviously think I'm very qualified to give my feedback, but it's—I enjoy it. I do." He also spoke of his rapport with one of his peer review group members, explaining, "Right, so John, the other guy in the group, he and I had been in groups before. We had actually been in a group where we kind of did a collaborative synthesis paper. So, I'm familiar with him." And he noted of his class as a whole, "Yeah, we all get along. It's a good environment."

The complication for Jake was that he was a fifth-year student in a first-year course, sharing a senior thesis essay for peer review. A lot of Jake's frustrations were explained in a reflection that he included at the end of his essay:

> This paper with its associated research has been quite the ordeal this semester. As you are aware, this paper is a draft for my senior thesis project. Part of the difficulty in writing this paper is that I have received input on it from many different sources of authority, each with their own ideas on how the paper should be written. The sources of these ideas range from the head of the research group, to my peers, to the professors responsible for the paper's grading. Having so many different people to report to has resulted in a frozen approach to writing and editing the paper. With so many people telling me the correct way to write the paper and with each way being contradictory to the others, I have not had the confidence to revise and edit the paper. I do not believe this paper to be exemplary of my best writing, but rather a reflection of an adherence to a rubric intertwined with counsel from a handful of individuals.

Given Jake's positionality as a fifth-year student writing his senior thesis, he had additional audiences to consider than just his FYW peer reviewers and instructor, which complicated his revising process. As we discussed in Chapter 3, most of Jake's revisions were surface-level and included word choice/sentence rephrasing. Most of his meaning-level revisions were in response to finishing his analysis (e.g., adding graphs and writing a discussion/conclusion) and not necessarily in response to any feedback from his classmates. Jake, despite having

developed *social perceptions* of his workshop group, didn't believe he experienced *social learning* through peer review. Jake's situation as a fifth-year student is unique, but that's the point—many students have unique situations of which teachers aren't aware and which they can't anticipate. As such, theorizations of *social presence* in writing studies need to account for factors that impact how students perceive and subsequently interact with (and do or do not learn from) their peers. For these reasons, we differentiate between *social learning* and *social perceptions*.

Social Perceptions

Differentiating between *social learning* and *social perceptions* allows us to examine the relationship between them. CoI scholarship has suggested that this relationship is sequential: before they're able to engage in *social learning*, students need to establish *social perceptions*. In a CoI, these perceptions are supposed to help students "communicate purposefully in a trusting environment" (Garrison, 2011, p. 34). Our analysis of our student interview data revealed that the majority of students in this study (18 out of 20, or 90 percent) described having some kind of social perception of their peers, which generally was a result of being physically together (n=8), and/or virtually together (n=6), or being familiar with their classmates' topics (n=11). However, half of the students in this study additionally argued that they didn't want or need to know their peers (n=10) in order to learn alongside them. After presenting the interview data, we share an example from our case studies that illustrates the impact of pre-existing relationships on students' *social perceptions*.

Physical and Virtual Togetherness

The students in hybrid course sections described working with their peers in the physical classroom, suggesting that the physical space impacted their perceptions of classmates. John explained, "I sit next to Jake all the time, and I worked with him on the synthesis." Sam noted, "In class we would have assignments with people in our group." The students in the hybrid sections also described gaining an impression of their classmates through their virtual interactions. For example, when asked if she knew her peer review partners in advance of the peer-review workshop, Jane said, "Yeah, we have our, like, class discussions online, and then based on that I can kind of tell or, like, can learn some stuff about people." Jane's classmate, Jake, said the same thing about her: "I'm familiar with [Jane] in online discussions, but we've never really spoken in person until today."

For the students in fully online course sections, the virtual interactions functioned similarly, giving them a sense of their fellow learners. Peter, a student in an online section, explained, "We do a discussion post a week, and then a response to a discussion post later in the week. … We kind of have some interaction there and I've read their discussion posts for 11 weeks or whatever." Emily, another

student in an online section, was a bit more enthusiastic about the discussions, saying, "They're really sort of cool. And it's open to conversation and it's more casual than the other assignments."

While some students generally described having *social perceptions* of their peers because of physical and/or virtual togetherness, others specifically talked about being familiar with their peers' writing project topics. For example, when asked if he was familiar with his peer review group members, Daniel said, "Yeah, a little bit because we've kind of done this throughout the semester.… It's all just one topic we're working on the whole semester. So, I think we've all read each other's work a little bit." Catherine similarly described reading her classmates' work over the course of the semester, saying, "You kind of get an idea of the questions that they pose in the inquiry essay and then you see how they just argued or take a stance on that position paper." Emily similarly explained, "After reading a lot of their responses on the discussion I learned a little bit about them, and about what they like, and how they write, and the things that inspire them." Geoff concurred, "I feel like I do understand the way they write, like the way they type." Students developed *social perceptions* of one another as writers through reading each other's writing. Related to Chapter 3 on *cognitive presence*, these *social perceptions* may have facilitated *resolution* via *learning from peers' writing*.

While most of the students' interactions were required elements of their course sections, we also observed a few instances of non-required peer interaction. For example, in the hybrid course section Percy taught, the peer review took place asynchronously. However, his student Steven took it upon himself to talk with his classmate JD about the feedback, mostly because he sits next to JD in class. When asked if he interacted with his peer review group outside of the workshop, Steven explained, "I actually did yesterday. I talked to JD about it, but it was more just like, 'Hey I saw your comment and it was really helpful.'" JD said the same thing in his interview, explaining, "With Steven, I actually got his paper to review. It was actually really helpful because you can come after class and talk about what they said. So, it wasn't even limited to what I said online, we could also meet up after and you could give feedback about it.… So, I thought that was another awesome thing I could do; meet him in person and he's like, 'Oh, hey, I saw what you wrote,' and I just gave further feedback about it, which was nice."

To our surprise, a few of the students in online course sections—those who were enrolled in a secondary school dual enrollment program—also described unrequired instances of physical togetherness. Joel explained, "We have the option to take the [dual enrollment] version, and just since there was only one online college writing class, the people who signed up for that one basically all got put together in it." Ada further explained that she and her dual enrollment classmates would complete their online coursework together in a computer lab at their high school, noting, "We're in there with each other all day, and that's just all we talk about all the time, is just, like, what's our classes and what's going on in them."

Across the data, students described developing *social perceptions* of peers as a result of physical and/or virtual togetherness and reading peers' writing. However, that impression didn't necessarily lead to the kind of "relationship" between peers that is implied in CoI scholarship. As Courtney explained, "I feel like we got to know each other a little bit through the discussion board, but I don't know. I kind of don't because the discussion boards are more to me on our topic about writing and stuff, so we don't get to actually know the student as a person, necessarily, as much as a student, you know?" Courtney's distinction between knowing her classmates as "students" versus as "people" was echoed throughout the dataset, so much so that we began to use Courtney's terms to differentiate between gaining a *social perception* of peers as students versus as people.

Peers as Students vs. People

Traditional CoI scholarship (Garrison, 2017; Garrison et al., 1999) has advanced a conception of *social presence* that seems in line with what Courtney in our study described as getting "to actually know the student as a person"—this version of *social presence* involves sharing personal stories (*interpersonal communication*), developing a trusting environment (*affective communication*), and viewing the class as a united group (*group cohesion*). For Courtney, knowing a classmate "as a person" was different from knowing them "as a student," and we believe a writing-studies specific understanding of *social presence* needs to account for that difference. The students in our study not only differentiated between knowing each other as people versus as students, but they also argued that they didn't want or need to know their peers "as people" in order to be successful in the course. This was particularly prominent when students responded to the interview question, "How would you describe your relationships with your peers in this class?"[3]

Most students responded to this question with something along the lines of "I think they're just my classmates" (Steven), or "I wouldn't really say I have a relationship with my peers in this class. We're both in the class but that's about the extent of it" (Peter). As Hannah put it, her relationship with peers was "very neutral."

Some students went on to point out that they didn't want or need to develop relationships beyond the neutral classmate. John said,

> I feel like I have not as good of a relationship with everyone that I did in high school. In college, you're a lot more independent. So especially with it being a hybrid class, I don't know everyone that well, and—because I only see them for an hour a week, hour and a half a week. That's fine with me. Because I have my own, like, kind of life outside of school. So, it doesn't really affect me.

3. This interview question was developed as part of our fall 2017–2018 survey project and then replicated in the fall 2019 study. Our use of the term "relationship" comes from Short et al.'s (1976) definition of social presence, which informed Garrison's (2009) definition of the term.

John's point seems to be that, unlike in high school where his classmates were also his friend group, in college his classmates were just classmates, and he was perfectly comfortable with that. Jordan similarly explained that, because there was an age gap between her and her classmates, she wouldn't expect or want to form relationships with them: "I feel like because I'm like the oldest person in the class, like, I don't really necessarily, like, want to, like, try and, like, find out who the people are in my class necessarily. So, it's just like strictly class—that's it."

Catherine made the same claim but also noted that relationships *can* form in class: "I wouldn't say that I have a super close relationship.… If anything, the relationship I have from the class are a few people that I met for orientation or a few people that I knew went to school in my area, … or a person that I sat next to and asked them a question about something we're doing in class." Catherine suggested that the neutral classmate might become a friend, but this happens outside of the formal classroom interaction—at orientation or building upon prior friendships or created through a side conversation with the person next to you in class. Catherine further explained that she didn't mind when relationships didn't form because they aren't necessary for learning in a first-year writing class:

> I, personally, I don't mind it that much, just because the class isn't so dependent on your relationship with other people. For my business class, for example, we're doing a major group project and okay, in that case, I do want to know a little bit about who I'm working with. Are they going to get their work done on time? Can I trust—well who can I trust to [do] this on time, who can I trust with this? So, generally, that is a little more important in a class where I would have a group project, I would say. For an English class, or a math class that's more lecture style, I would say, it's not as important to me.

These data illustrate the student participants pushing back on the interviewers' implication that they should or do have a "relationship" with classmates. They seemed to want to interact with classmates, but they questioned the degree to which that interaction needed to involve a "relationship." Geoff explained this well: "I'm not really like super close with any of them. But, like, it's more of, like, just a class-kind-of-relationship. We all, like, understand what we need to do and kind of just bounce off one another for ideas and whatnot." Or, as John explained, "Even though I know stuff about them I don't really know them, which is fine with me. Cause I'm just, you know, in the class to take it and learn something."

Although most of the students indicated that interacting with classmates didn't mean they knew—or needed to know—them "as people," there were three students who had a different perspective and articulated a desire for the types of relationships advocated by CoI scholarship. For example, Daniel, a student in an online course section, explained that "due to the fact that it's entirely online, you know, we don't really talk to each other. At least, I don't. We're not close at

all." He further characterized the forums as "forced discussion" that felt "robotic." Daniel expressed disappointment at these inauthentic relationships, suggesting that knowing his classmates (as people, not just as students) would enhance his learning experience.

Our analysis of our case study classrooms revealed another relevant example. Ada, from Sofia's class, deeply valued her classmates "as people," but only because she knew them from high school. Below, we contrast her experience with that of her classmate Courtney, who provided us with the "student versus people" vocabulary.

Case Study Example 2: Pre-Existing Relationships in Sofia's Class

Ada was a high school student completing her coursework in a computer classroom alongside her fellow dual-enrollment peers. Courtney was a second-year nursing student taking Sofia's fully online FYW course alongside several face-to-face courses on a college campus; she noted that she, too, would often complete her coursework in a computer lab, but she didn't describe interacting with other writing students in the lab.

When asked how she would describe her relationship with peers, Ada said, "I'd say that we are a lot closer than normal college students, just because we are all [dual enrollment] students and we all know each other." Ada also noted that the experience of physically completing their dual enrollment coursework in the same computer lab created close relationships between [dual enrollment] students, saying, "We all know each other, and we've just kind of stayed in the same classes our whole lives. Like, we've all been in advanced classes, and we all took the [dual enrollment] classes, and we are all just in our own little bubble. So, it was fun doing it, and, yeah, they're all just super close and super nice." When asked if she tended to talk with her dual enrollment peers "about what you were going to post for the discussion," Ada said, "Yeah, we would always do that. Like, there was a website one, and we were like, do you put an academic website, or just a normal website? And so, we were all debating, and I ended up putting Twitter or something."

Ada also mentioned Courtney by name in the interview. The interviewer asked if Ada found herself "commenting more on the people that you knew in real life," and Ada said, "Yes." She further explained that "there was one girl [Courtney], who would comment first every time," and Ada and her high school classmates "would always be like, someone else post, because we don't know what to put on her comments and blah blah blah, and so we would just all work together." Ada demonstrated that she had a *social perception* of Courtney but also illustrated that she actively worked to not interact with Courtney, preferring instead to reply to peers who were in her dual enrollment group whom she worked with in-person.

In contrast, when Courtney was asked if she felt like she "knew those students" who participated in peer review alongside her, she responded, "I mean, maybe a little bit, but definitely not as much as in-person classes." She went on to

make her distinction between knowing the "student as a person" versus knowing them "as a student." Unlike Ada, who seemed uncomfortable responding to peers she didn't know personally, Courtney found this enjoyable. When asked how she felt about giving feedback to her peers, Courtney responded, "I like it. I thought it was fun." When asked how she felt about receiving feedback, she again responded positively: "I thought it was very helpful, and I really … tried to take what they said really into consideration."

Courtney's experience seems well-aligned with the other students in this study who were satisfied working with their classmates by receiving and giving feedback without having a relationship or knowing them "as a person." Ada offered a different story. Her positionality as a high school student in a dual credit program impacted her interest in interacting with non-dual credit peers because Ada was physically together with classmates with whom she had preexisting relationships and, therefore, already established *social perceptions*.

The interviews and case studies suggest that having a "social perception" of a classmate can have a range of meanings. Further, "relationships" aren't a given and, perhaps, not even a requirement for learning in FYW courses (although they may be desirable for some students). This finding has implications for how *social presence* is theorized in writing studies as well as how it is measured. In our interviews, asking students to describe their "relationships" with their classmates created confusion by assuming that (a) students *do* have relationships with their peers and (b) researchers, instructors, and students all have a shared understanding of the term. Theorizations of *social presence* in writing studies also need to recognize that perceiving classmates as "real people" is not the same as "feeling real," which is also not the same as developing trust or a sense of belonging or experiencing safety and comfort online.

Social Comfort

In our previous research (Stewart et al., 2021), we sought to account for the idea of projecting one's self into the social space through the concept of *social comfort*. The term came from Carlon et al. (2012), who used "social comfort" to group five survey items together from the CoI survey. When we previously replicated Carlon et al.'s study, the same five items grouped together (Stewart et al., 2021). However, our attempts to code the qualitative data in this book's study for examples of *social comfort* led us to realize that the concept is insufficiently theorized.

When we revisited the original CoI survey and the preceding research that informed that survey's development, we were reminded that the items we (Stewart et al, 2021) and Carlon et al. (2012) associated with *social comfort* are related to what the original CoI researchers called "open communication" and "group cohesion" (Garrison et al., 1999). Garrison et al.'s (1999) initial definitions of those elements focused on establishing a sense of trust and acceptance. It was the CoI survey designers (Arbaugh et al., 2008) who chose the word "comfortable" to

measure that phenomenon. Kreijns et al. (2014) questioned this decision, arguing that *social comfort* emphasizes "feelings of comfort about the interaction … and not so much the interaction itself" (p. 9). They concluded that "the overall friendliness of online collaborative learning … is not a real dimension of social presence" (p. 9). In our earlier research (Stewart et al., 2021), we rejected Kreijns et al.'s (2014) removal of *social comfort* from the *social presence* construct because we believed that the extent to which students felt "comfortable" was different from *social perceptions* and might impact *social learning*.

We still hold the same belief, but as we analyzed the data for this book, we were repeatedly reminded that "feelings of comfort" and "overall friendliness" are heavily impacted by power dynamics that influence how students perceive their peers and project themselves into the online space (Brennan et al., 2022; Mittelmeier & Rienties, 2024). Our analysis of our case study data revealed a relevant example: in an interview, Snow discussed the impact of cultural and linguistic diversity on her experience with peer review.

Case Study Example 3: Cultural and Linguistic Diversity in Quinn's Course Section

Snow, an international student in Quinn's course section, gave an overall positive assessment of peer review, stating that she would want to have peer review the next time she wrote a text for a class. However, she also described facing barriers to *social learning* that she attributed to linguistic and cultural differences.

In the interview, Snow discussed her experience of encountering unfamiliar wording in her peers' writing, saying, "The words in other students' essay, some of them are new words to me, and I need to translate." In addition to these linguistic challenges, Snow noted how cultural differences affected her reading of uniquely American topics, such as Geoff's project about American football. As Snow explained, "Like, I know football is a very important sports for America. I think China sport is not as important as that in America. So, it is also a cultural differences. So maybe I can understand what her write, but it's a little difficult for me to understand such emotion about football because of my background of growing in China." These cultural differences were also apparent when Catherine, in feedback on Snow's paper, explained to Snow that she didn't understand the relevance of skin whitening products in Asia. Catherine suggested that Snow provide more context and historical background because the concept was new to her.

In her interview, Snow further noted that cultural differences impacted her peers' suggestions for improving her writing, saying, "They posted their comments, and they also say, 'I think you better blah blah blah,' but a little confused to me. Because I think maybe it's a cultural differences because our opinions and the voice of being so different. So, I can understand why they are so confused about some sentence I say. So, this is one of the problem." Snow suggested that her classmates may have misread or misunderstood her essay because "our opinions and the voice" were so different, which resulted in peer comments that Snow herself found confusing. Snow also indicated that these confusions were exacerbated

by the digital format of the peer-review workshop in the hybrid course section since she felt it cumbersome to ask follow-up questions in the Google Docs file, explaining, "So if you ask them about their comments, you should first ask them and you should also wait for them to reply you because it will take time and also because you are not face to face." According to Snow, posing questions also posed a risk of further miscommunication, noting, "If you ask them about their comments, it is possible that they're also confused about your questions. So, I think it's a trouble."

If we attempt to apply the concept of *social presence* to Snow's experience, we could argue that she developed some *social perceptions* of her peer review partners (because she became acquainted with Geoff's paper topic of American football), although we'd likely argue that her perception seems closer to knowing peers "as students" than "as people." If we look back to the data from Chapter 3, which shows correlations between almost all of the feedback Snow received and the revisions she made to the draft, then we could also argue that she experienced *social learning*. However, her interview told a different story—she argued that linguistic and cultural differences made it difficult for her to provide feedback to her peers, described the feedback she received as confusing, and stated that the digital activity design hindered her ability to ask questions. We believe something like "social comfort" would help us account for those elements, but we don't think "comfort" is the right word. Consequently, we call for a more robust theorization of this aspect of *social presence* in writing studies. As a starting point, we recommend future researchers put CoI in direct conversation with scholarship about racial, linguistic, and gender identity, (dis)ability, sexuality, and other forms of intersectionality (e.g., Inoue, 2014; Martinez, 2020; Matsuda, 2006; West-Puckett et al., 2023).

Attitudes

The final category that emerged from our earlier research on *social presence* (Stewart et al., 2021) was *attitudes*, which traditional CoI research has defined as the "potential for social interaction online" (Arbaugh, et al., 2008). Our attempts to code for when and why students had a positive or negative attitude about that potential were unsuccessful, in part because students often speculated on how they or their classmates might feel in different contexts. However, the students consistently and resoundingly agreed that a lack of interaction in either hybrid or online classrooms was problematic. We share that data here because, while we may not be able to report on how students felt about the *potential* for social interaction online, we can report that most of the students in hybrid and online course sections in this study believed their interaction was insufficient. If nothing else, this shows that students *desire* interaction, even if they don't think they need or want the "relationship" that CoI scholarship assumes results from that interaction.

More than half of the students (n=11) reported that the interaction in their hybrid or online course section was insufficient. Some students in hybrid sections lamented the brevity of their class time. For example, Sam said, "We only have it once a week and it's such a short period of time," and Isaiah noted, "You're only seeing them one time a week. Unless they were in your peer review group, you probably would never speak to them." Other students in hybrid sections suggested that the time they did have together wasn't well spent. In describing her in-class peer review in which students worked individually on Google Docs files, Catherine explained, "We're not talking while we're doing it, so we might as well be in different rooms doing it anyways. Like the—one of my draft peer reviewers was on the other side of the room and I was reading his essay, but I wasn't talking to him about it at all, so he might as well not even be in the same room." Jane made a similar comment, noting that "we don't always do interactive stuff" when meeting as a class.

Hannah described a similar experience and wondered if the online component of the hybrid course section was decreasing class participation:

> In class, there is very little interaction, and I think our teacher has started noticing that. I don't know if he likes it. Like, I think he realizes why it is, but he does seem like he wants more participation. And no one's giving it because most of our assignments are online, and we can do it ourselves.… So, I do think it's kind of hindering, like, actual participation in class.

Hannah suggested that, because most of the coursework was completed independently, in-class participation had decreased. She sensed that her instructor would like more interaction in class—which implied that he may have been trying to solicit student interaction and participation—but she and her classmates weren't engaging because, as she put it, "most of our assignments are online, and we can do it ourselves." It seems that this class established a pattern in which interactivity wasn't necessary for completing coursework, despite students like Hannah understanding the benefits of "actual participation in class."

When the students in online course sections expressed in their interviews a desire for more interactivity, they generally described weekly discussion forums that felt perfunctory. As Joel described it, "We do a discussion board every week or every other week, but other than that, that's the only interaction I had with any of those other students." In some cases, the students said there was zero interaction beyond peer review. For example, when asked, "Did you interact with your peers in other ways beyond peer review," Jordan responded, "No, not at all."

Unlike students' opinions about developing relationships with peers—in which they suggested that knowing peers as people wasn't necessary—there was a sense of frustration and resignation when they described not interacting. This suggests that some kind of student interaction—some kind of *social presence*—is necessary and desirable. But, unlike the near universal consensus over the subcategories for *teaching presence* and *cognitive presence*, current CoI

scholarship doesn't offer a sufficient conceptualization of *social presence* for us to offer a definitive list of categories that instructors and researchers can focus on when facilitating or studying it. Differentiating between "social perceptions" and "social learning" does seem useful. But we need more research to understand if *social perceptions* are necessary for *social learning* and why *social learning* doesn't necessarily result from students developing *social perceptions* of peers. We also suspect that a more robust theorization of the CoI concepts of "social comfort" and "attitudes" will provide more insight into how *social presence* can facilitate community-based inquiry in online writing courses.

Conclusion and Recommendations

While the students in hybrid and online course sections in this study discussed a desire for more interaction, they also articulated that interacting with peers didn't necessitate relationships or knowing their peers "as people." Given this, we recommend that future research explore and more precisely define and account for how "relationships" and "comfort" are operationalized in CoI literature. We use the word "relationship" in this study because it mirrors the way Short et al. (1976) initially defined *social presence*, and we use "comfort" because it mirrors J. Ben Arbaugh et al.'s (2008) operationalization of *social presence* in the CoI survey. The students in this study seemed to be interpreting the word "relationship" to suggest a kind of intimacy they didn't believe was necessarily for *social learning*, which leads us to call for a more thorough theorization of "comfort" as a component of *social presence*. Students also regularly demonstrated that they simultaneously experienced positive and negative *social perceptions* that both supported and hindered *social learning*, highlighting that *social presence* isn't a zero-sum game.

The examples we pulled from our case studies illustrate some of the diversity in students' experiences of *social presence* in their hybrid and online writing classrooms. Their experiences reinforce the importance of thinking critically about *social presence*. Thinking uncritically about *social presence* and assuming a particular or even "right" version of a student's presence when designing an online learning experience may work against students learning with their classmates. This is where writing studies conversations about power, language, and culture can inform both CoI and OWI discourse (Retzinger, 2018) as instructors work to create a space where students have the social and cognitive skills to develop interactive behaviors with each other in order to co-construct knowledge.

Based on our analysis of *social presence*, we offer two recommendations.

Recommendation 1: Offer Students Opportunities to Collaborate While Accounting for Diversity

Instructors should consider power relationships and linguistic and cultural diversity as they relate to designing and evaluating collaborative learning. Garrison

(2017) recognized the importance of this focus, noting that the goal of a community of inquiry is to "challenge inherent confirmation bias and the dangers of ideological certainty" through dialogue and reflection (p. 52). Jenna Mittelmeier and Bart Rienties (2024) have extended this work by calling for more research on the social inequities that result from power dynamics and sociocultural differences. Similarly, Carolyn Brennan et al. (2022) have advocated for a "critical transformative community of inquiry (CTCoI) model" that centers "equity in online courses" (p. 1). There is need for more work in this direction, specifically examining the impact of power dynamics and linguistic identity on the ways students participate in learning environments that aim to challenge ideological certainty. We also need studies that question which ideological certainties are *not* challenged in those learning environments. As Retzinger (2018) has argued, there is a need for *social presence* in writing studies that considers not only immediacy but also identity.

Snow's experience in Quinn's course section illustrates one example of how students would be better served by peer review that is designed to support linguistic and cultural diversity and that involves peers in co-constructing knowledge about that diversity. We recommend that instructors prepare students to benefit from peer review with all of their classmates—regardless of experience, subject knowledge, language, culture, or identity—by emphasizing insights to be gained from diverse readers.

We also recommend that instructors engage students in discussions about cultural and linguistic diversity in general and the myth of standard language in particular when introducing and demonstrating how to respond to peers' writing. Instructors can incorporate the work of scholars such as Paul Kei Matsuda (2006) and Vershawn Ashanti Young (2020) into the curriculum prior to peer review to emphasize that there isn't one right or best way to compose a text. The importance of having these conversations *prior* to peer review is corroborated by Carrie Yea-huey Chang's (2016) review of 20 years of research in second language peer review, which found training to be one of the best predictors of effective peer review. Likewise, Dan Melzer (2020) has recommended that instructors devote more time "to designing peer response and training students to respond to each other" by "designing scripts to guide student response, creating some degree of accountability for peer responses, and … devoting substantial time to training students in responding to their peers" (p. 28). This kind of training may have helped Snow and her classmates provide more useful feedback and could have created clearer pathways for them to ask questions when they received confusing feedback.

We relatedly recommend that instructors offer opportunities for students to communicate directly with each other so that they're able to discuss feedback following peer review—or to debrief following another collaborative activity. To facilitate this communication, instructors can help students learn one another's names early in the term, including pronunciation (e.g., phonetic spelling when

fully online) and pronouns. In a hybrid course, instructors can include both asynchronous components, for students who need additional time beyond the synchronous class peer-review workshop (Wang, 2014), and synchronous components, so that students have a chance to ask follow-up questions and receive immediate responses.

Recommendation 2: Redefine and Reconceptualize "Social Comfort"

Our analysis of *social presence* suggests that the students in this study valued peer interaction, but past conceptualization of the term isn't sufficient to describe FYW students' experience of *social presence*. Put simply, our findings illustrate that *social presence* is more complicated than "feeling real." One critical next step for research on *social presence* is to better account for power relationships and linguistic and cultural diversity in online and hybrid writing classrooms. As Retzinger (2018) has argued, instructors need to foster an online pedagogy "grounded in critical/cultural awareness" (p. 84).

One potential direction for this research is to critique "social comfort" in the CoI literature (Arbaugh at al., 2008), which has emphasized students' level of comfort as they interact with their peers. The conception of *social comfort* as a goal elides the fact that productive discourse across cultures, languages, or positionalities might indeed be uncomfortable and, by necessity, challenge existing power relations. As an alternative to focusing on comfort, future research should account for the ways that systemic inequity impacts students' ability to "project" themselves into the social space and might explore how student positionality and social commonality enhance or hinder *social perceptions* of peers. Some consideration of *attitudes* may also be warranted, as *attitudes* are likely to impact students' willingness to engage and their perceptions of that engagement. However, we recommend future research move away from a focus on *attitudes* about the potential for *social learning* online and focus more on how current *attitudes* about interacting with peers affect the other aspects of *social presence*.