

# Social Presence

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## INTRODUCTION

Learning is a social process (Harasim, 2002; Swan & Shea, 2005; Tu, 2000). Discourse plays a key role in the social process of learning (Harasim, 2002). Therefore, it is extremely important that we understand how students and teachers socially interact in online courses where asynchronous computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the major form of discourse. Theories of social presence help explain how students and teachers interact and learn online.

## BACKGROUND

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) are credited with developing the initial theory of social presence. Short et al. developed their theory of social presence to explain the effects a communication medium can have on the way people communicate. Working from previous research in psychology and communication (i.e., Argyle and Dean's concept of intimacy and Wiener and Mehrabian's concept of immediacy), Short et al. defined social presence as the degree of salience (i.e., quality or state of being there) between two communicators using a communication medium. They conceptualized social presence as a critical attribute of a communication medium that can determine the way people interact and communicate. Further, they posited that people perceive some communication media as having a higher degree of social presence (e.g., video) than other communication media (e.g., audio).

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, as the popularity of CMC grew, communication researchers began to apply the theory of social presence developed by Short et al. to CMC. Many of these early researchers came to the conclusion that CMC was antisocial and impersonal because social context cues were filtered out (see Walther, 1992).

In the mid 1990s, researchers with experience using CMC for educational purposes began to question whether the attributes of a communication medium

determined its social presence (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Swan, 2003b; Walther, 1996). They argued that a user's personal perceptions of presence mattered more than the medium's capabilities. They also illustrated that contrary to previous research, CMC can be very social and personal (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) and even hyperpersonal (Walther, 1996).

## MAIN FOCUS: SOCIAL PRESENCE

### Definitions of Social Presence

There is not a clear, agreed upon, definition of social presence (Rettie, 2003; Tu, 2002). Instead, researchers continue to redefine it (Picciano, 2002). For instance, Gunawardena (1995) defined social presence as the degree to which people are *perceived* as "real" in CMC. Garrison et al. (2000), on the other hand, defined social presence as the ability of students "to *project* themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people" (p. 94). Tu and McIsaac (2002) defined social presence as "the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction of being connected by CMC" to another person (p. 140). Finally, Picciano (2002) defined social presence as student's perceptions of being in and belonging in an online course. Nearly everyone who writes about social presence continues to define it just a little differently; therefore making it very difficult for both researchers and practitioners to come to any firm conclusions about the nature of social presence.

### Measuring Social Presence

Just as social presence is difficult to define, it is even harder to measure. There is little agreement on how to measure social presence (Hughes, Ventura, & Dando, 2007; Lin, 2004; Stein & Wanstreet, 2003). In fact, very few researchers have operationalized social presence into observable and measurable parts. The surveys and

coding schemes developed by Gunawardena (1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), Rourke et al. (2001), and Tu (2002b) have influenced the majority of research on social presence (e.g., Baskin & Henderson, 2005; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Hughes, Ventura, & Dando, 2007; Lin, 2004; Lomicka & Lord, 2007; Na Ubun & Kimble, 2004; Richardson & Swan, 2003; So, 2005; So & Brush, 2007; Stacey, 2002; Swan, 2002, 2003a; Swan & Shih, 2005; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004).

Gunawardena (1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) and Tu (2002) created surveys to measure social presence based on past literature in the field. Whereas Gunawardena (1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) and Tu (2002) focused primarily on surveying and interviewing students about their *perceptions* of CMC and social presence, Rourke et al. (2001) focused on identifying observable behaviors used by students to project themselves as “real” people. More specifically, Rourke et al. identified three categories and twelve indicators of social presence from their previous work, other literature in the field, and experience reading online transcripts (see Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001); the categories and indicators of social presence are listed in Table 1.

Tu and McIsaac (2002) later argued though—as the result of a mixed methods study they conducted—that social presence is more complicated than previously thought. As a result, they identified additional dimensions and variables of social presence (see Table 2).

Because of differences like these, Russo and Benson (2005) argue that there is a need for a multi-method approach and instrument to measure social presence. However, most researchers seem content to use (or adapt) the instruments and coding schemes created by Gunawardena and Zittle (1997), Rourke et al. (2001), or Tu (2002).

## Effects of Social Presence

Despite the differences in definitions and methodology, researchers of social presence have come to similar conclusions about the nature of social presence in online learning environments. The following section highlights a few of the main findings.

Researchers have found a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction in online learning environments (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Russo & Benson, 2005; Swan & Shih, 2005).

For instance, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that students who were identified as having high social presence online were highly satisfied with their instructor; further, Richardson and Swan found a link between student satisfaction with their instructor and perceived learning. While Russo and Benson (2005), like Richardson and Swan, found a relationship between student satisfaction with learning and instructor presence, they interestingly found a stronger relationship between student satisfaction and the perceived presence

Table 1. Categories and Indicators of Social Presence

Categories	Indicators
Affective	Expression of emotions Use of humor Self-Disclosure
Interactive	Continuing a thread Quoting from other messages Referring explicitly to other messages Asking questions Complimenting, expressing appreciation, expressing agreement
Cohesive	Vocatives Addresses or refers to the group using inclusive pronouns Phatics / Salutations

Note. Adapted from Rourke et al. (2001).

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