

Social Presence in Distance Learning

Brian Newberry

California State University, San Bernardino, USA

INTRODUCTION

Online learning can be seen as a form of distance education. Though online education is relatively new, distance education is not. According to Rumble (1986), the term distance education may have first been used as early as 1892 in a catalog of the University of Wisconsin. Distance education is, according to Verduin and Clark (1991): "...any formal approach to learning in which a majority of the instruction occurs while educator and learner are at a distance from one another" (p. 8). This emphasis on distance between learner and instructor or teacher is common, for instance, Berge and Collins (1995) define distance education as "the delivery of the educational process to receivers who are not in proximity to the person or persons managing or conducting the process" (p. 14).

These definitions cause one to envision learners working alone with their materials and completing assignments that are ultimately evaluated by a teacher also working alone, connected to their students by only the most tenuous of lines inscribed on the papers that they share. Indeed, prior to online learning, many forms of distance education were largely text based and relied on postal delivery of course materials to students, and to carry completed assignments to the instructor. This correspondence model, which primarily used mail as the primary delivery system, has been adapted to exploit perceived advantages of new media such as radio and televised systems for distance learning in both the United States and Australia (Lewis, Whitaker & Julian, 1995). However, while these models of distance learning used new media to transmit information to the learner, many still relied on postal delivery of materials from the student to the instructor. New communications technologies have changed this by making possible greater and more rapid interaction between participants in the online learning experience.

The role and importance of distance learning in American education has been increasing, perhaps

because of a greater acceptance of online learning, which may be due to an increased level of interaction that is now possible. The National Center for Education Statistics released a report in 1999 that makes this point: "... distance education appears to have become a common feature of many postsecondary education institutions and that, by their own accounts, it will become only more common in the future" (Lewis, Snow, Farris, Levin & Green, 1999, p. vi). Along with becoming more common, online learning is becoming an accepted part of a traditional education, as "what was once considered a special form of education using nontraditional delivery systems is now becoming an important concept in mainstream education" (McIsaac & Gunawardena, 2001, p. 403). It cannot be denied that one of the distinguishing differences of online learning compared to former models of distance learning is that online learning makes use of communication technologies that offer greater possibilities for interaction that can help bridge the barriers of time and space.

INTERACTION

Indeed, one of the main issues with which those who design and use online learning environments must deal is that of facilitating interaction and contact between instructor and student. Hall (1996) notes that one of three problems with which distance education has had to deal is "how to maintain sufficient student contact and ongoing interaction with those who provide intellectual guidance, timely assistance when needed, and adequate performance feedback" (p. 11). Clearly, interaction is a crucial part of learning, including online learning.

Moore (1989) discussed three types of interaction that should be understood in distance education. These are learner-content, learner-instructor, and learner-learner interaction. Learner-content interaction has long been a staple of distance learning.

Online learning environments are very adept at replicating the capabilities of other distance learning systems to present information in the form of text. Indeed, online learning technologies even offer additional means for presenting information in ways that support learner-content interaction such as streaming audio and video.

Obviously learner-content interaction is an integral part of distance learning, but then, so is learner-instructor interaction, which Moore (1989) notes is “regarded as essential by many educators, and as highly desirable by many learners” (p. 2) and “the frequency and intensity of the teacher’s influence on learners when there is learner-teacher interaction is much greater than when there is only learner-content interaction” (p. 3). In previous models of distance education, learner-instructor interaction was often slow and cumbersome as each party had to wait for postal delivery of materials. With new communication technologies, learner-instructor interaction can be almost instantaneous and very rich. The importance of this kind of interaction has been noted in studies, which have found that students look to instructors and tutors for “encouragement, support, and recognition” (Baynton 1992, p. 26).

Another possible source for support in an online class is from other students. This learner-learner interaction has been called “a new dimension of distance education” (Moore, 1989, p. 4). The importance of learner-learner interaction should not be overlooked. Not only can learner-learner interaction promote learning, this type of interaction can also promote student satisfaction by providing social and peer contacts that are a part of face-to-face education, but that are often missing in distance learning environments.

Online educators and researchers may find that understanding more about interaction in online classes is useful. Fulford and Zhang (1993) reported that perceptions of interaction were predictive of student satisfaction in a televised course (p. 14). Further, being aware of the types of interactions available to students may help distance educators to create more satisfying and effective learning environments when the course or course content is such that interaction is desirable.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

One way to understand interactions in online learning environments is through the use of a measurement arising out of social presence theory (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976), which takes into consideration the effects that communication media have on the perceptions that participants in an online communication experience have of each other. These perceptions are often explained as measure of how real participants feel to each other. Short et al. (1976) discuss social presence as a subjective quality of a medium that those in the communications environment experience. These perceptions of ‘realness’ were called “salience” by Short et al. (1976) who wrote:

We believe, however, that the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships is an important hypothetical construct that can usefully be applied more generally. We shall term this quality ‘social presence’. This critical concept needs further clarification. We regard social presence as being a quality of the communications medium. Although we would expect it to affect the way individuals perceive their discussions, and their relationships to the persons with whom they are communicating, it is important to emphasize that we are defining social presence as a quality of the medium itself. (p. 65)

In this way, social presence is a characteristic of the medium used, but it is felt and reported by those in the interaction as an impression of the affect of the communications media on their perceptions. Short et al. (1976) explained that social presence is not necessarily a measurable aspect of a communications medium, but instead it is a subjective quality of a medium that is experienced by communicators. “We conceive of social presence not as an objective quality of the medium, though it must surely be dependent upon the medium’s objective qualities, but as a subjective quality of the medium” (Short et al., 1976, p. 66). It is this subjective quality of social

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