

Chapter 12

Instructor–Driven Strategies for Establishing and Sustaining Social Presence

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to provide readers with strategies and techniques to enhance social interaction/presence within the online learning environment. A discussion of current definitions and the importance of social media will be discussed, as well as examples for use in the online classroom. Proven effective and interactive instructional components (i.e., instructor response time, video lecturing, and pedagogical considerations) are included as best practices and quality assurance guidelines. Topics in this chapter include types of social media tools available, examples of appropriate use in higher education, and recommended strategies to assist faculty in identifying the best tool to match the pedagogical goal. With a wide variety of experiences and knowledge regarding the topic, the authors provide unique perspectives including: teaching in the online environment, instructional design, oversight of online programs, technology training/user services, quality assurance, and faculty/student support.

INTRODUCTION

In a face-to-face course, students are gathered together in one physical location with the instructor. It could be said that students experience a general sense of comfort from being near others. It could

be further stated this sense of comfort develops as a result of being with peers who share similar experiences, common bonds, and/or desires. For whatever reason students take comfort being with others; people, by and large, are social beings.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9582-5.ch012

Establishing a social presence in an online course helps meet the needs of students who may experience feelings of isolation when learning from a distance. The use of social media can help initiate a social presence, and, with proper usage, maintain the social presence throughout the course. Social media can be defined as any medium that enables connectivity and interaction among users and communities (Haenlein, 2010). Many formalized social media platforms exist, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, among many others. With mobile devices being almost ubiquitous in society, the ease of participating in social interactions is as easy as a few taps on a smartphone. Instructors should take this opportunity to incorporate student expectations and experiences with the implementation of social media directly into the classroom.

Faculty have varying experiences with devices and social media tools. Instructional design plays a crucial role in the effective use of these tools. Faculty should avoid using a tool just because it is “cool” or the newest trend. With this in mind, proven effective and interactive instructional components (instructor response time, video lecturing, and pedagogical considerations) are included in the chapter to encourage instructors not only to incorporate, but to properly use these tools in their online classroom to promote social presence and constructivist pedagogy. Not only student-to-student engagement, but, also student-to-faculty interaction will be considered. With the increase in ownership, or easy access to mobile technology among students, instructors now have the means to take advantage of the many opportunities/tools available.

Technology continues to evolve with new types of devices. New ways of interacting are constantly appearing on the scene. The method by which people interact with each other continues to change, evidenced most prominently in younger generations, though even baby-boomers and older generations make use of these tools. Significant

amounts of interaction can occur in the electronic environment. As a result, new cultures of social interaction have appeared, along with new social meeting and sharing places.

Like many tools, proper use can take some training, and inappropriate use can easily turn a good thing bad. Effective use can significantly enhance the learning environment while ineffective use can lead to many unintended and poor outcomes.

Social presence plays a crucial role in fostering student-teacher interaction in the online environment. The purpose of this chapter will be to provide readers with strategies and techniques to enhance the social interaction/presence within the online learning environment. Ideas for incorporating social media tools (wikis, blogs, Twitter, Facebook, digital media, etc.), will provide instructors with various channels for engaging students. Best practices will be discussed to assist faculty in identifying the best tool to match the pedagogical goal. It should be noted, though, that not all of the strategies mentioned in this chapter will work for all instructors in every class.

BACKGROUND

Social presence has many definitions but literature and recent research shows the lack of a consistent definition. Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), often considered the genitors of social presence theory, define social presence as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p.65). Tu (2000, 2001) states that in the online environment, social presence rests upon three dimensions: social context (task orientation, privacy, topics, social relationships and social process), online communication, and interactivity. In general, important aspects of social presence, as they relate to the current discussion, include sense of community, awareness of others in an

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