Chapter 10
Best Practices of Distance Dissertation Mentorship through Social Presence

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores online instructors' distance dissertation mentorship through social presence. Eight dissertation chairs were invited to answer in-depth interview questions in this case study. The theories and definitions of social presence, the effectiveness of social presence in online courses, and the strategies to improve social presence in online settings were reviewed. Major findings of this study reveal the critical role of social presence in dissertation mentoring, successful strategies to improve social presence in online dissertation courses, teachers' limited use of social media, emoticons, and University Mobile 3.0, the need for synchronous virtual interaction in online dissertation classes, and teachers' challenges of online dissertation mentorship. Finally, the study recommends future research directions.

INTRODUCTION

The role of an online instructor in computer mediated communication (CMC) has been manifested by Berge (1995) as pedagogical, social, managerial, and technical. Liu, Bonk, Magjuka, Lee, and Su (2005) examined instructors' perceptions of these four dimensions and found a strong emphasis on the pedagogical phase in which instructors take the roles of course designers, profession-inspirers, feedback-givers, and interaction-facilitators. Liu, et al. (2005) further illustrated that course designers design interactive learning experience, structure course materials, update learning materials, and share teaching

experience with colleagues; profession-inspirers promote professional dialogue among online learners, relate personal experiences and cases to the discipline, and point to professional organizations; feedback-givers provide timely, high quality, and formative feedback for continuous learning engagement; and interaction-facilitators facilitate peer interaction in online discussion through a wide range of strategies. An online dissertation chair takes similar roles that Liu et al. (2005) addressed. The dissertation chair's job is to guide students through the dissertation process by dissertation courses. Turner (2010, p.132) regarded the role of the mentor (i.e., dissertation chair) as "a relational one comprising director, cheerleader, coach, and disciplinarian" which is comparable to the course designer, the profession inspirer, the feedback giver, and the interaction facilitator. With these roles in practice, the online facilitator could contribute to students' learning outcomes, learning experiences, and classroom interactions immensely during their dissertation journeys.

The advantages of online mentoring over traditional classroom have been elucidated by Rhodes (2004) as free access without geographic and time constraints, removing first impression bias on demographics, reducing traveling costs, preserving written record of the correspondence; however, miscommunication, lack of program development, issues of privacy, confidentiality and safety, trading strong ties for weak ties in human relationship, and slower progression in communication are the challenges of online mentoring. In online dissertation classes, teachers cannot use visual cues, hand gestures, intonation, facial expression, and body language, so there is a lack of social presence and the flow of discussion or interaction tends to be slower than in the traditional classrooms. Students may feel a sense of ineffectiveness and isolation because the online instructors are not immediately accessible to answer their questions or to convey ideas related to their dissertations. As Seoane-Pardo and García-Peñalvo (2008, p.1120) indicated, "Loneliness and

de-motivation of e-learning users is probably the first cause of failure of online courses. To avoid this situation, e-learning initiatives must count on an effective human presence." They affirmed that "reducing human presence reduces learning results" (Seoane-Pardo & García-Peñalvo, 2008, p.1122).

Tu (2002a) also stressed the importance of social presence in online learning. He explained that social presence has an impact on online interaction, user satisfaction, depth of online discussion, online language learning, and critical thinking (Tu, 2002a). Baker (2010) further remarked that the combination of instructor's immediacy and presence is a significant predictor of student's affective learning, cognition, and motivation. How do teachers establish and maintain social presence in online dissertation courses? What is available in current online dissertation course platform to enhance teacher's social presence? What technology tools or social media can be incorporated to promote social presence? Are there any challenges for teachers to improve their social presence in dissertation courses? Since creating an effective e-learning environment to support and connect with students benefits their learning, it is important to examine the strategies leading to the best practices of distance dissertation mentorship through social presence. The purpose of this chapter was to investigate dissertation chairs' perceptions of the role of social presence in dissertation mentorship, the strategies and technology used in online dissertation courses, and the challenges facilitators face while mentoring.

BACKGROUND

The University

The university was founded 37 years ago. It is one of the largest private universities in the U.S. This university has launched the online program in 1989 to offer degrees on the undergraduate,

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