

Chapter 20

Bridging the Gap with Distance Education Students: Telepresence

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ABSTRACT

Presence, a sense of “being there,” is critical to the success of designing, teaching, and learning at a distance using both synchronous and asynchronous (blended) technologies. Until recently, presence has been defined and discussed in terms of behavioral or cognitive theory. Emotional aspects of presence have been largely ignored. A theory of presence must incorporate emotions and take into consideration their interaction with behavior and cognition. In order to create, convey, and/or experience a sense of presence, it is necessary to become familiar with and take into consideration the types, modes, determinants, and dimensions of presence. In addition, it is important to recognize that when others sense your existence, it may enhance your individual sense of presence and your differentiation of self and experience of self. Further, continuing to experience and practice with technologies, in groups and sharing with others, a sense of presence will most likely increase. Presence will also be affected by expectations based on prior experience; as expectations rise, it refines ways in which presence can be experienced. Throughout this process, trust and support are critical. The concept of presence has been conceptualized differently across various theoretical models. Different dimensions of the presence in the literature can be grouped in three main categories as (place) presence, social presence, and co-presence. Presence is explored in this chapter.

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual environments for teaching and learning in education have gained in popularity in recent years. In the case of presence-based education, all the used models are typified by the interaction of lecturers, students, material and methods. Modern distance learning involves technology. Technology in the form of virtual desks and campuses has had a bearing on the evolution of distance learning (Rodriguez, 2002).

A media-savvy generation of learners armed with laptops, smart phones, and tablets fluidly connect to each other through Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, and blogs. With the use of social media in communications streaming video and multimedia content are successfully engaging students in an active and collaborative learning. Technologies using emerging theories and paradigms emphasize experiential and collaborative learning. Telepresence that simulates a traditional face-to-face environment, no longer limits students and teachers to being in the same place. Participants at multiple sites are able to see, hear, and interact with each other in real time. (Theobald & Ittelson, 2012).

The purpose of this chapter is to contribute to the field's understanding of the presence by examining the relationship among three types of presences: place, social, and copresence. Moreover, it aims at using of the different types of presences in virtual worlds by using information and communication technologies.

CATEGORIES OF PRESENCE IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

Lombard and Ditton (1998) have defined presence as 'the perceptual illusion of non-mediation'. Here the sense of presence provides the user with an illusion that the experience is non-mediated. Romano *et al* say that it is possible to have a high level of presence in a virtual environment without

stimulating every sensory system of humans. Many current virtual environments successfully generate a sense of presence by stimulating only the visual and audio senses since constructing a fully immersive virtual environment is expensive (Romano *et al*, 1998).

Slater *et al* classifies presence into *personal* presence and *shared* presence. *Personal* presence is the sense of 'been there', and having a feeling of presence yourself. Personal presence has two manifestations: *subjective* presence that is about 'being there'. One can think of subjective presence as 'being a verbal and necessarily conscious articulation of a state of mind'. The other is *behavioral* presence, being in the environment, and exhibit behavior to support this. This can be seen as 'automatic, unplanned non conscious bodily responses' to stimuli. *Shared* presence is the feeling of presence in others in the virtual environment. It has two aspects: the sense of presence of other individuals in the virtual environment, and the sense of being part of a group and a process (Slater, Steed, McCarthy & Maringelli, 1998).

Presence is an important practice for an online course. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer described three types of presence. Presence is most closely related to student satisfaction and belief that a course is effective. Here are descriptions of the three presences and how they interact and work within the teaching and learning experiences of an online course:

- **Social Presence:** Social presence is "achieved in the community of inquiry model by faculty and students projecting their personal characteristics into the discussion so they become 'real people'" (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). It is imperative that the trust - building process is established at the social level so that content discussions can be open and substantive. It encourages expression of feelings, perspectives, and openness.

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