Chapter 63
Toward An Effective Virtual Learning Environment:
From a Social Presence Perspective

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present an Effective Virtual Learning Model and answer the research questions, What is the perception of social presence on virtual learning? What role does social presence play in student engagement in virtual learning? and, What are the social presence factors influencing the effective learning environment? The method used to answer the pending research questions was the integrative literature review utilizing a six-step format. Authors conducted a literature review search utilizing the descriptors of virtual learning and social presence. From there articles were identified, selected, and synthesized according to the research questions. This research was informed by the Community of Inquiry Framework as the theoretical foundation from which the results were concluded. Based on results of emerging themes, the authors present the Effective Virtual Learning Model as a foundational basis for theory, research, and more importantly, practice.

BACKGROUND

The concept of learning in a virtual environment has gained vast attention in recent years (Allmendinger, 2010; Shea & Bidjerano, 2012Taghizadeh & Vaezi, 2011), and is the focus of many recently published articles. Allmendinger (2010) indicated "Computer supported collaborative learning give rise to new challenges in terms of mutually constructing meaning, establishing and maintaining the users motivation, as well as structuring social interaction in learning situations" (p. 41). Taghizadeh and Vaezi (2011) called for a deeper understanding of the potential of education and elearning. They further explored elearning in terms of transforming the current state of education and

claim that strategic development is necessary for transforming education. To do this, a strong foundation based on theory will be required.

Shea and Bidjerano (2012) found that "between the years of 2008 and 2009, over one million students took courses offered online for the first time" (p. 316), this brought the total number of online students to over 5.5 million in the United States alone. This growth exceeded the growth of normal traditional courses by a rate of 20%, and the U.S. Department of Education reported that over 11, 200 college level programs are being delivered fully online (Shea & Bidjerano, 2012). Condon (2012) argued that technological advancements are rapidly increasing and are becoming obsolete even before they get to the market place, thereby making online access more available. An increasing number of universities are offering online courses to a global audience (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009), however, these offerings do not come without problems. Research on the topic of social presence (Weinel, Bannert, Zumbach, Hoppe, & Malzahn, 2011) and sense of community (Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011) may serve to inform effective online collaborations which lead to social presence and online learning (Ke F., 2010). Effective virtual communities serve to provide an exchange of knowledge and deep learning (Ke F., 2010). Shea and Bidjerano (2012) explained that "there is a longstanding belief that distance education requires a greater degree of self-directedness and self-reliance and it seems probable that learners in asynchronous, largely text-based online courses face challenges requiring persistence and determination" (p. 316). These shortcomings of online course offerings have been a source of concern for all stakeholders involved (Franceschi, Lee, Zanakis, & Hinds, 2009).

Social presence is a measure of the feeling of community that learners experience in an online environment (Tu, & McIsaac, 2010). It is argued as the most important perception that occurs in an online environment. Social presence or the

lack there of, may serve as an indicator of online course offering success as well as serve to create "the conditions of inquiry and quality interaction; in online learning contexts where learners feel secure to openly communicate with each other and develop a sense of community" (Taghizadeh & Vaezi, 2011, p. 121). Furthermore, social presence may be a predictor of course satisfaction (Weinel, Bannert, Zumbach, Hoppe, & Malzahn, 2011), and a determinant of successful communication in a virtual setting (Allmendinger, 2010). Furthermore, several gaps in research have been found, for example, there is a lack of empirically based information as to how, or what aspects of virtual learning, facilitate learning (Traphagan, et al., 2010) and guarantee student engagement (Bulu, 2012). The intent of this research is to explore what components are necessary in an effective virtual learning environment to ensure student success. Therefore, the purpose of this review of literature is to explore through literature what components need to be present in order to facilitate student engagement and learning in an effective learning virtual environment through the lens of social presence.

The difficulty in obtaining student engagement in a virtual learning environment and social presence are the guiding factors related to the review of literature. We have identified three fundamental research questions that have been found to be important to our literature review process and will serve to guide this review of literature.

Research Questions

The following questions guided this review of literature:

1. What is the perception of social presence on virtual learning?
2. What role does social presence play in student engagement in virtual learning?
3. What social presence factors influence an effective virtual environment?

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