

Chapter 6

A Mixed Methods Examination of Instructor Social Presence in Accelerated Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Social Presence theory seeks to explain how people present themselves as being “there” and “real” while using a communication medium. Most studies on social presence focus on how students present themselves and/or are perceived as being “there” and “real” in computer-mediated environments. However, to date, very few studies have focused on how instructors establish and maintain their own social presence in online learning environments. The following study explored the phenomenon of instructor social presence in accelerated online courses. The results suggest that the construct of presence is more complicated than previously thought and that future studies should employ multiple methods to further explore the concept of instructor social presence.

INTRODUCTION

Many people, faculty included, remain skeptical of online learning (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). While most of the critics of online learning focus on whether or not students learn as much in online courses as face-to-face courses, there is a deep seated fear that online learning will eventually replace the “teacher” and that students will end up taking teacherless courses online (Shank, 2008; Wilson & Christopher, 2008). Proponents of online learning, however, have been arguing for some time that there is a successful instructor behind

every high quality online course (Dunlap, 2005; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). High quality online courses are designed and taught by real people. However, this is often overlooked because the role of an instructor changes in online courses (Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001, 2003). Online instructors are often no longer at the center of every interaction. Instead, they often find themselves intentionally acting more as a moderator or facilitator of learning (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005)--becoming more of a “guide-on-the-side.” This approach, though, can become problematic when students

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begin to question an instructor's presence in the online classroom (Smith & Taveras, 2005).

Previous research on online learning has shown that students can feel isolated and alone in the online classroom (Kilgore & Lowenthal, 2015; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Students need to get a firm sense that they are not alone and that there are other real people in the class with them; that is, students need to get a sense of social presence. Research on social presence has illustrated the importance of being perceived as being "there" and "real" in the online classroom (Lowenthal, 2009). For instance, researchers have shown that there is a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003; So & Brush, 2008), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Richardson & Swan, 2003) to name a few. However, despite the growing body of research on social presence, very little research has focused specifically on the unique role of instructors and the arguably even greater need for instructors to establish their own social presence in the online classroom. Immediately establishing an instructor's presence can be challenging because it takes time to develop presence—especially in completely text-based environments (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Venable, 2011; Walther, 1996). Establishing social presence then becomes even more challenging in accelerated online courses that are offered in abbreviated formats (e.g., an 8-week as opposed to 16-week format). As more and more institutions begin to offer accelerated online courses—whether during the fall and spring semesters or only during the summer—instructors and instructional designers need to better understand how instructors establish their own instructor social presence in accelerated online courses. Given this, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of instructor social presence in accelerated online courses.

BACKGROUND

The theory of social presence was developed in the 1970s by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). Short et al. were interested in how media influences how people communicate. They posited that some media have a higher social presence than others. However, they completed most of their work long before the rise of computer-mediated communication. Text-based computer-mediated communication (e.g., email and threaded discussion forums) did not begin to be used on a regular basis until the 1980s for business and then the 1990s for education (see Lowenthal, 2009). And while early research by Gunawardena and others (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) began to explore the concept of social presence and text-based computer-mediated communication, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) work on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework is what ultimately pushed the concept of social presence in the forefront of the research and practice of online learning. Garrison et al. posited that a meaningful educational experience consists of three presences—social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence—that result in a community of inquiry.

Garrison's early work suggests that the CoI was ultimately an attempt to describe any learner-centered "constructivist" learning experience—not simply, those learning experiences that happen solely online (see Garrison, 1989; Garrison & Shale, 1990). The CoI clearly places the learner at the center of the educational experience. And while the CoI highlights the importance of teaching, through the inclusion of teaching presence as one of three core parts of a meaningful educational experience, Garrison and his colleagues did not see the act of teaching being done solely by instructors—which they explain is why it is called teaching presence and not teacher presence (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

They defined teaching presence as,

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