

Chapter 78

Social Presence in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Studies have focused on social presence and its meaning in both traditional face-to-face classroom settings as well as an online learning environment. Technology usage is increasing in classrooms, making opportunities for learning available to many more people than in prior years. The theme of social presence continues to be studied as an important element in fostering student learning and growth. In particular, the focus is on the meaning of social presence, how to develop it as an instructor or learner in the learning community, and how social presence can positively impact all members of the learning community. The main questions that this chapter addresses are: Why study social presence? What is the meaning of social presence? What is the research behind social presence? How does an individual cultivate and project social presence in a learning environment?

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, online education has been growing rapidly, with online courses becoming prevalent in higher education. In 2009, a survey showed that Web access had increased, with 79% of adults and 93% of teenagers online (Hostetter & Busch, 2013, p. 79). According to the study done by Carol Hostetter (2013), “universities are receiving greater demands for online offerings, and many students are becoming used to having interactive experiences through the Internet” (Hostetter & Busch, 2013). As a former graduate student, the accessibility of online programs for obtaining advanced degrees was the deciding factor in pursuing a Master’s Degree. With many professionals interested in furthering their education, but with limited time to attend classes in a physical space and specific time, the availability of diverse online offerings extends the possibilities for furthering one’s education on a schedule and location that is more convenient and now attainable. More than 70% of higher education institutions offer online courses, and over 95% of the institutions with 5,000 or more students deliver courses online (Allen & Seaman,

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2015). Aslanian and Clinefelter (2012) regard online education as higher education's latest "disruptive innovation", which forces colleges and universities to change the way they deliver courses. Pedagogical and technological innovations allow to create and deliver online education effectively and efficiently, which leads to the transformation of higher education (Garrison, 2011). There are diverse offerings available through these programs, evidenced by the number of advertisements received through email and sent to educational organizations, showing that educational institutions are investing the time to make furthering one's education possible, in a more convenient format through online learning communities.

Due to the increase in online education, a shift in research has occurred to focus on the elements of "social presence" and "presence" in the traditional classroom setting as well as in the online learning environment (Cobb, 2009). Determining how to develop an individual's "social presence" within the learning environment is key to promoting a more engaging and supportive educational experience, in which students become more motivated and can attain more success (Richardson, 2015). Regardless of where the "learning" occurs, in the classroom or virtually, it is crucial to create a learning community. A learning community is the means through which all group members, educators, and students will feel a connection to the course and are perceived as "real" in the learning environment (Whiteside, 2015). Some ways in which this can be felt are through course introductions, where students create an online profile and introduce themselves to classmates, interact with discussion topics, or even perhaps use of video to record welcome messages, a few of the methods personally experienced in online learning environments.

Social presence has increasingly become an area of research to determine the importance and best practices for developing an individual's presence in the learning environment, and the impact it has on student learning potential and the relationships between educators and learners. Creating a supportive learning environment is key for students' success, regardless of instruction occurring in a traditional classroom setting or by means of virtual learning. Participants' ability to interact comfortably in any learning environment relies on the instructor's ability to establish their own social presence and foster a supportive environment for the learners. These elements are critical for the start of any course (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000). Research has shown that a lack of social presence has a negative impact on student achievement (Richardson, 2003). Thus, as an inference, in online learning environments, where the physical presence is lacking, the negative effects would likely be greater because of the absence of typical elements of socialization that occur in traditional learning environments.

Therefore the development of a "teacher presence," forming a knowledge base of student needs and backgrounds, and making oneself available to students regardless of the type of learning environment are crucial for several reasons. In order for students to be able to achieve their fullest learning potential and to be more actively engaged in learning, a positive and supportive teacher-student relationship must be created and maintained, both in and out of the classroom. In addition to the social presence the instructor develops, students also need to create their own social presence, as a means of connecting and interacting with peers.

WHY RESEARCH SOCIAL PRESENCE

With the addition of new emerging technologies, Web 2.0 tools, and other software there are many variations on how, when, and where people can learn. The possibility for virtual learning experiences and options are increasing. The use of technology for communication and collaboration expands the ability to pursue one's education. It is now possible to obtain degrees, certifications, trainings, and more

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