

Chapter 88

Prove You Are Not a Dog: Fostering Social Presence in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Learning online can be isolating for students. Some students may prefer to be anonymous—on the outset, at least—until they feel comfortable participating in the course. Many instructors value interaction between students or between the student and the instructor, and without a sense of “presence” in the online classroom, some students will be reticent to participate. It is thus incumbent on instructors and instructional designers to create courses that foster interaction between users to develop this sense of being “a real person” online. This chapter examines the concept of social presence, articulates reasons high social presence is a desirable feature in an online course, and provides examples instructors and designers might draw upon for developing social presence in their own courses.

INTRODUCTION

In 1993, *The New Yorker* published a now-famous cartoon drawn by Peter Steiner (Fleishman, 2000). The cartoon pictures two dogs, one of them sitting in front of a computer, and commenting to the other, *On the Internet, nobody knows you’re a dog*. This was a significant moment in the history of the Internet, because it demonstrated that the concept of the Internet had become so present in culture that it could serve as the punchline for a joke. Online anonymity was something that could be joked about, and even celebrated (Christopherson, 2007; Jones, 2012).

For online instructors and instructional designers, however, this anonymity may not be something to celebrate. Online educators and designers often strive for a level of interaction between learners (Anderson, 2008a; Lowenthal & Mulder, 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson, 2017; Northup, 2009; Zheng & Smaldino, 2009; Whiteside, 2017). Interaction implies at least some level of self-disclosure from the

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-6684-7540-9.ch088

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participants. Online learners may thus need to be encouraged to give up at least a bit of their anonymity by sharing their thoughts and drawing upon their personal histories and individual backgrounds as they interact together.

Personal characteristic such as gender expression, ethnicity, or age would, of course, be readily observable in a face-to-face course. Instructors in online settings, however, may not be able to discern many personal characteristics through their online interactions with students (Ko & Rossen, 2010). By the nature of the medium, online students have a level of personal anonymity that face-to-face students simply do not have. While Christopherson (2007) indicated that anonymity in online spaces can have both negative and positive aspects for communication, instructors will likely prefer to have more knowledge about their students! And while many students will be forthcoming, some may prove more reticent and less likely to share about themselves naturally, due to their personal preferences, cultural background, and social styles (e.g., independent vs. dependent, competitive vs. collaborative, or avoidant vs. participative) (Stavredes, 2011). It is along these lines that Dabbagh (2007) argued,

online learners must understand and value the learning opportunities afforded by collaborative and communication technologies in order to engage actively and constructively in learning (p. 220). In other words, some students may need to be coaxed into interaction.

“Interaction” in an online course may not be as straightforward as in a face-to-face learning environment (Hirumi, 2002; Ko & Rossen, 2010; Stavredes, 2011). There are sometimes different norms and practices in the online classroom than the face-to-face classroom (Ko & Rossen, 2010). However, Anderson (2003) argued that educators have always desired that their students interact—regardless of the medium of the course—and Hoskins (2012) went so far as to posit,

social interaction [in educational settings] seems to be a basic need, and technology may sometimes substitute for human interaction to the point where we sometimes attribute human characteristics to technologic devices (53).

Similarly, Herrington, Reeves, and Oliver (2010) have indicated that collaborative construction of knowledge plays an essential role in authentic online learning. Add to this the fact that meaningful interactions can reduce isolation and anonymity in online courses that might otherwise result in student dissatisfaction, poor performance, and dropping out (Hirumi, 2002), and it is clear to see that student interaction is desirable in online learning.

WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESENCE?

How can instructors and instructional designers help move students in online courses from anonymity toward interaction? To enter into meaningful interactions in the online classroom, learners must develop social presence. Song and Yuan (2015) have distinguished between “interaction” and “presence” in an online environment, suggesting that “presence” is a sense of “being” online that manifests through interactions between individuals (p. 732). They noted that simply interacting online does not automatically result in presence (i.e., an individual does not necessarily feel part of the group simply because

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