

Chapter 1.10

The Evolution and Influence of Social Presence Theory on Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The theory of social presence is perhaps the most popular construct used to describe and understand how people socially interact in online learning environments. However, despite its intuitive appeal, researchers and practitioners alike often define and conceptualize this popular construct differently. In fact, it is often hard to distinguish between whether someone is talking about social interaction, immediacy, intimacy, emotion, and/or connectedness when they talk about social presence. Therefore, this chapter outlines the evolution of the construct of social presence in an effort to understand better its relationship to online learning.

INTRODUCTION

People are social creatures (Brown & Duguid, 2002; Read & Miller, 1995). They learn and work in groups (Read & Miller, 1995). The Internet evolved out of an effort to connect computers and information and

therefore people. Since its early days, the Internet has grown exponentially (Madden, 2006). However, unlike the early days when only scientists used it, people use the Internet today in a variety of different ways, including communicating with friends, family, and co-workers. In addition to connecting with current friends and family, people also use the Internet to form new relationships (Madden & Lenhart, 2006). As a result, some researchers have begun to describe the Internet as a social medium (Baym, Zhang, & Lin, 2004; Walther & Parks, 2002).

However, just as the Internet can bring people together and be described as “social,” it can separate people and be described as isolating and impersonal (Kraut, et al., 1998; Morahan-Martin & Schumacher, 2003; Nie, 2001). Some researchers have reported cases of Internet addiction and dependence (Hiltz & Turoff, 1993), and others (Nie & Erbring, 2002) have found that the more time that people spend on the Internet, the less time they spend with people in face-to-face social situations. Further, van Dijk (2006) determined that the Internet invites certain types of people to withdraw into the computer. Whether the Internet is a social medium, therefore,

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remains a heated debate in many ways (Kraut et al., 1998; Nie, Hillygus, & Erbring, 2002). As states like Michigan begin to require high school students to take online courses to graduate (Watson, 2006), and online enrollments at the college level continue to grow (Allen & Seaman, 2006), the sociability—or isolation—of the Internet remains a nationwide concern.

The theory of social presence is perhaps the most popular construct used to describe and understand how people socially interact in online learning environments. However, despite its intuitive appeal, researchers and practitioners alike often define and conceptualize this popular construct differently. In fact, it is often hard to distinguish between whether someone is talking about social interaction, immediacy, intimacy, emotion, and/or connectedness when they talk about social presence. Therefore, the focus of this chapter is on outlining the evolution of the construct of social presence in an effort to understand better its relationship to online learning.

BACKGROUND

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, researchers began to study the effects of computer-mediated communication (CMC). Some concluded that CMC was inherently antisocial and impersonal (Walther, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994). While Hiltz & Turoff (1993) acknowledged that interpersonal relationships might be fostered through CMC, early research suggested—and convinced others—that CMC was better at task-oriented communication (Walther & Parks, 2002). These early CMC researchers turned to social presence theory to make sense of their findings.

Social Presence Theory

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) originally developed the theory of social presence to explain the effect telecommunications media can have on

communication. They defined social presence as the degree of salience (i.e., quality or state of being there) between two communicators using a communication medium. They posited that communication media differ in their degree of social presence and that these differences play an important role in how people interact (p. 65). They conceptualized social presence primarily as a quality of a communication medium that can determine the way people interact and communicate. From their perspective, people perceive some media as having a higher degree of social presence (e.g., video) and other media as having a lower degree of social presence (e.g., audio). More importantly, they believed that a medium with a high degree of social presence is seen as being sociable, warm, and personal, whereas a medium with a low degree of social presence is seen as less personal. CMC researchers later used this theory to explain that CMC was inherently impersonal because nonverbal and relational cues—common in face-to-face communication—are filtered out of CMC (Walther & Parks, 2002).

The Role of Context and Setting

Early researchers, though, studied CMC primarily in organizational or business settings; that is, early on, they conducted very little research on CMC in educational settings. Educational settings—specifically classroom settings—have different dynamics that researchers consider when studying CMC because no such thing as a typical CMC message exists (Herring, 2007). Much of the meaning and significance of CMC depends on its surrounding discourse (Herring, 2007), and the surrounding discourse in educational settings—specifically online educational settings—is very different from that in business settings (Gee, 2007).

Education is a social practice (Lafey, Lin, & Lin, 2006; Shea, Frederickson, Pickett, & Swan, 2001); consequently, any formal learning environment must be able to support the social practice

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