

Chapter 8

Towards More Productive Online Discussions: Social Presence and the Development of Interpersonal Relations

Benjamin Kehrwald
Massey University, New Zealand

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This chapter deals with a case study into social presence in text-based online learning at the postgraduate level. The case seeks to address questions related to the social dynamics of online learning environments through a study of learner experiences with social presence. The case highlights the role and function of social presence in the development of interpersonal relations and the effects of those relations on social processes in online learning environments. The findings identify a set of social-relational mechanisms and a progression of relational states which promote understanding of social processes in text-based online environments.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter seeks to both promote understanding of social presence in text-based online learning environments and respond to the apparent paradox in the experiences of online learners with the cultivation of rich, productive relationships in text-only environments. It contributes to the growing body of knowledge of technology-mediated social processes by referencing a wider study into social presence in text-based online learning environments. More specifically, this chapter highlights findings related

to the role and function of social presence and the progressive development of relations between social actors in text-based online learning environments. It addresses two key questions that confront online educators: (a) *How does social presence aid in the development of relations between actors in online learning environments?* and (b) *How is this beneficial to online discussion and interaction?* Finally, this chapter seeks to extend these findings to provide practical suggestions for online teaching which may improve the productivity of online discussions.

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BACKGROUND

Concomitant with the emergence of Web 2.0, recent research in online learning has focused less on learning about technology itself and focused more on what learners do to learn with and through technology. Of particular interest to educators is the study of interpersonal interaction (Beuchot & Bullen, 2005; LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004) and related social processes such as the development of relational connections (Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & Van Buuren, 2004), productive collaboration (Kobbe et al., 2007; Murphy, 2004) and the development of community in online environments (Bruckman, 2004; Preece, 2001; Schwen & Hara, 2004), including learner experiences with these processes (Kehrwald, 2008; Levy, 2006; Thorpe & Godwin, 2006).

Gunawardena (1995) points out that communicative failures in online environments occur much more often at the social than at the technical level. Despite the emergence of rich media communication tools, interactions between participants in online education are predominantly text-based. The relative leanness of the textual medium limits the sociability of these environments and creates conditions which make communication in this medium potentially difficult. These limiting conditions include the lack of contextual information; significant social and psychological distance between actors created by the media (Dron, 2007); and imbalances in the sender-receiver relationship due to a lack of synchronous two-way interaction (Riva, 2002).

Paradoxically, some participants in text-based online environments cite overwhelmingly positive experiences with online learning (Rheingold, 1993; Walther, 1992). They refer to connection, depth of interactive exchanges and quality of interaction which surpass their previous experiences with other delivery modes, including face-to-face education. They cite the quality of their technology mediated relationships as indications of the

power of this medium and its ability to connect people (Baym, 1998; Turkle, 1995). This experience suggests that technology mediated learning can be rich, rewarding, and indeed humane. The question that follows is: *How is this positive outcome possible given the apparent limitations of the textual medium?*

A growing body of literature suggests that part of the answer lies in understanding online social presence and its role in online learning environments (see Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Walther, 1992). Short, Williams and Christie (1976), the genitors of social presence theory, defined social presence as “the degree of salience of the other person in a mediated interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal interaction” (p. 65). Whilst the term social presence was originally used to describe the qualities of media and their respective abilities to create the illusion of non-mediation (Daft, Lengel, & Trevino, 1987; Short et al., 1976), users of virtual environments, including online learners, have appropriated the term to describe the combination of skills and abilities which allow them to achieve, in Short et al’s terms, salient interpersonal interactions. More contemporary and emergent definitions of social presence describe individuals’ abilities to perceive others through their mediated interactions (Collins & Murphy, 1997); the degree of “tangibility and proximity” of others within a communicative situation (McLeod, Baron, & Marti, 1997); participants’ abilities to project themselves both socially and emotionally in a community (Rourke et al., 2001) and an individual’s ability to demonstrate his or her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his or her availability for interpersonal transactions (Kehrwald, 2008). As a result of experience with and increased attention to online communication, the concept of social presence in online environments has come to be viewed as much complex than originally understood.

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