

Chapter 25

Maximizing Multicultural Online Learning Experiences with the Social Presence Model, Course Examples, and Specific Strategies

Aimee L. Whiteside

University of Wisconsin - Stout, USA

Amy E. Garrett Dikkers

University of North Carolina at Wilmington, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter presents Whiteside's (2007) Social Presence Model, course examples, and specific strategies and explains how such factors help facilitators maximize interactions in multicultural, online learning environments. The model provides a framework rooted in socio-cultural learning, linguistic nuances, learning communities, prior experiences, and instructor investment. The chapter also illustrates how the Social Presence Model, coupled with examples from a Human Rights Education case study and research-based strategies, can make significant differences in online interactions.

INTRODUCTION

Years ago, May and Short (2003) urged online facilitators to embrace a more fruitful, constructive, and transformative metaphor for online

learning opportunities rather than be consumed by the technological angst and time pressures often associated with online education. The *gardening in cyberspace* metaphor invoked by these authors allows individuals to focus on the unique milieu from which facilitators can reconsider and transform the online learning experience. May

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and Short suggest, “The practices of good gardening—positioning, conditioning soil, watering, and controlling weeds and pests—all serve as useful analogues to good online pedagogical practices, addressing individual differences, motivating the student, providing feedback, and avoiding information overload” (p. 673). This metaphor provides online facilitators with a healthy perspective from which they can cultivate meaningful learning experiences.

This chapter couples this transformative metaphor with Whiteside’s (2007) Social Presence Model, course examples, and specific strategies to help academics, practitioners in industry, students, and other professionals around the world maximize their online interactions. This model provides a simple framework rooted in the social aspects of learning, linguistic nuances, and the importance of developing learning communities. The course examples presented in this chapter extend from three iterations of a one-semester higher education course entitled *Human Rights Education*. The overall objective of this chapter, in turn, is to provide a framework supported by case study examples and additional strategies that illustrates how simple it is to make significant advances in online interactions and relationships among participants.

IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL PRESENCE ONLINE

The social dimensions of learning have long been discussed in the educational literature across time (Dewey, 1910, 1916; Bandura, 1973, 1977, 1986; Wenger, 1998). Educational theorist and practitioner Etienne Wenger (1998) notes, “We are social beings...this fact is a central aspect of learning” (p. 4). Likewise, *social presence* can contribute to learners’ construction of knowledge and help them engage more in their learning process.

Historically, the concept of social presence emerged in the late 1960s and early 1970s where

Mehrabian (1969) and Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) examined social presence from a social psychological perspective within the area of telecommunication. These researchers found social presence to be “the degree to which a person is perceived as a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (qtd. in Polhemus, Shih, & Swan, 2001, p. 5). Then as various interactive and other communication media evolved over time into options such as teleconferencing, interactive television, and online learning environments, a flurry of additional yet similar definitions for social presence emerged. These definitions helped to position social presence as the resulting phenomenon within a particular technological medium.

In contrast, contemporary researchers find that social presence has emerged as a concept much larger than any individual medium (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Tu, 2002; Whiteside, Hughes, & McLeod, 2005; Whiteside, 2007). These researchers see social presence as an affectively-charged connectedness that motivates participants to take an active role in their own and their peers’ construction of knowledge and meaning-making processes (Whiteside, 2007; Whiteside, Hughes, & McLeod, 2005). This category extends beyond isolated individual perceptions, behaviors, and attitudes in a cross-cultural communication medium. Thus, this category addresses trust, interaction, and group dynamics in emerging learning environments.

Today, contemporary social presence research has branched into a number of exciting, related directions including

- Blended learning (Garrison & Kanuka, 2004; Jusoff & Khodabandelou, 2009; Whiteside, 2007; Whiteside, Hughes, & McLeod, 2005)
- Collaborative learning (Kerhwal, 2007)
- Community building (Shen & Khalifa, 2008; Ubon & Kimble, 2003; Vesely, Bloom, & Sherlock, 2007)

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