

The Centrality of Social Presence in Online Teaching and Learning

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Social presence refers to the extent to which persons are perceived to be “real,” and able to be authentically “known,” and truly “connected” to others in mediated communication. For online teaching and learning environments, scholars agree that it is a particularly powerful concept because of its seemingly central influence on teaching and learning “success.” Specifically, social presence has been both conceptually and empirically linked to the quality of the online learning, including levels of student participation, satisfaction and student engagement. This paper opens with a discussion of the place of “social presence” in its larger conceptual and theoretical context, namely, constructivism and the “Community of Inquiry” model. Then it briefly explores the evolution of definitions of “social presence,” and discusses its identified components of, and cues in, emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion. Finally concrete ideas and examples for effectively building social presence into online teaching and learning experiences are explored. The paper closes with a discussion of real world challenges, tensions and dilemmas that arise when balancing the nurturing of online communities with high academic rigor.

Conceptual and Theoretical Context

Perhaps the place to start is with an acknowledgement that the concept of “social presence” is deeply rooted in the experiential and the subjective, and thus may inherently be amorphous. It is derivative of the more general notions of human presence, human connection, and immediacy, which are “necessarily relational” and convey a “relationship of caring and responsibility” (LaMendola, 2010, p. 109). In social presence as an online phenomena, we will see that awareness of the other and perceived proximal closeness, whether physical, emotional, philosophical, will still be key. Importantly for contrast, we will note here that the opposite of presence is absence, meaning distant, not attentive, preoccupied, or missing.

Community of Inquiry Model. This model suggests that three elements interact in complex ways to create the online community learning experience for students (Garrison, 2007). The first is social presence as defined earlier and the subject of this paper. The second is the notion of teaching presence, which refers to the structure and processes for learning, including creation of plan for learning, direct teaching of content and facilitation of group discussion. Cognitive presence refers to the more nuanced ways that students are led to deeper or higher levels of learning through strategies that help students explore, integrate, critically reflect on, clarify, analyze, and come to resolution about new knowledge (Darabi, Arrastia, Nelson, Cornille, & Liang, 2011). Current research is attempting to clarify the relationship among these three forces

(Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010, p. 32); Shea & Bidjerano, 2010) and optimum balance. For example, what is the influence of teaching presence on social and cognitive presence, or, is social presence a “necessary precursor” to cognitive presence?

Constructivism. Kehrwald (2008) argues that online learning provides an “excellent venue for teaching and learning approaches derived from constructivist epistemology,” which says that learning is a combination of the mental processes of an individual as well as more “social activities.” Bottom line: we construct knowledge and meaning through activity and experience. He notes that the importance of “connectivity” and “interpersonal interaction” between and among participants in online learning logically sets up ripe opportunities for “mutual modification of attitudes, skills, beliefs” (p. 90).

Definitional Evolution

Social presence in online or other mediated environments refers to an individual’s ability to demonstrate her or his state of being in a virtual space and, as Kehrwald (2008) puts it, to signal to others her or his “availability” for interpersonal transactions. Because communication exchanges in online environments are essentially mediated by technology of some kind, social presence may represent the degree to which experiences *seem* unmediated. In the early literature on social presence, social psychologists used the phrase “degree of salience” (or significance) of the other person

in mediated communication and the capacity of the medium to transmit or convey non-verbal information (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976). Later scholars have noted the increasing focus on relational aspects of social presence, for example, the perceived “tangibility” and “proximity” of others. Now increasingly a focus on social presence in relations to the affective connections that exist in mediated communication (Lowenthal, in press; Kehrwald, 2008). Definitions are also suggested by looking at measures of social presence. Reviews of these measures (Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & van Buuren, 2011; Cobb, 2009) suggest social presence relates to comfort levels with respect to communication, perceptions of the sense of community, the acknowledgement of other’s points of view, and the absence of impersonal discussions. No matter how defined, however, in online environments, social presence is said to be “performative,” that it is conveyed by visible activities such as posting, commenting, responding, and participation in group and community activities, as we will see below.

Building and Maintaining Social Presence

Course Design. Aragon (2003) offers a plethora of excellent suggestions for enhancing social presences from a course design perspective. He encourages, for example, several strategies I have successfully employed, including the development of video welcome and overview messages, and encourages students to offer personal profiles with pictures. He encourages the use of collaborative learning activities including group projects or other assignments that get students to search for content

and share it. Indeed this type of activity is central to my online course where I use “search, summarize and share” assignments regularly. Students go to the internet and find compelling article or websites on a certain themes and post them for their peers to view and comment on. They also create group wiki pages on one course topic and then view and critique each other’s work. Instructors, according to Aragon, should themselves contribute to discussion boards frequently and thoughtfully, including sharing personal stories and experiences. I vary my posting patterns across the semester in an attempt to find balance between over-involvement and under-involvement.

Components and Their Cues. Social presence has been behaviorally described as relating to a “constellation of cues” in three general categories (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976, p. 157). Here they are, along with ways that students and instructors can build, convey or detect these dimensions of social presence in an online environment, including in discussion boards, announcements, emails, and where relevant, in content and lessons themselves. My own approach to posting reflects an intentional effort to boost these cues of social presence, as detailed by Lowenthal (in press) and others.

- **Affective responses** such as the expression of emotion, humor and self-disclosure as seen in the use of “paralanguage” such as emoticons, exaggerated punctuations, unique spellings; the explicit use of feeling words like love, furious, anxious, perplexed; the expression of values, beliefs and attitudes;

teasing, cajoling or understatement; or any expression of vulnerability or risk-taking.

- **Open and interactive communication**, such as asking probing questions; expressing agreement or disagreement with others; giving affirmations or praise or encouragement; offering advice on specific situations; directly referring to other's comments or quoting other's posts; or offering self-reflections,
- **Cohesive responses**, which are responses that contribute to connecting and sustaining relationships such as referring to others by name; offering personal greetings; referring to group as "us," "we" or "us;" explicitly inviting feedback; or sharing interesting tangential information or experiences.

Assessing Success. Online instructors can informally assess the level of social presence in their courses by posing a series of questions to themselves or even to students. To what extent was communication characterized by the cues discussed above? To what extent did students offer hints to their identities beyond "student"? What were levels of sharing around their personal histories (their culture, education, experience)? How much did you get to know the unique personality of individual students (their attitudes, demeanor, and sense of humor)? How much sharing was there around their personal circumstances (location, family situation, professional contexts)? To what extent did student talk about what they were learning from each

other? Did you as an instructor offer or create opportunities for social presence to thrive?

Challenges, Tensions and Dilemmas. The most obvious tension is the need to set high academic standards and yet maintain a milieu of a nurturing, relaxed and accepting community of learners. So expectations for participation are high and students are held accountable for these even though I as instructor may be trying to decrease distance and share power with them. So issues of power and authority must be balanced with the values of community and co-construction. The other challenge is even more obvious. Social presence is a perception of distance or lack thereof; the reality is that no matter what, there is “space” between the participants. In that space, all exchanges are subject to cognitive and emotional interpretations and meaning-making by we humans, whose motivations and personal contexts are complicated and certainly not fully known or likely even knowable. We do the best we can to reject isolationism and egocentricity in online learning environments, and instead embrace meaningful interaction and shared intellectual community.

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