# Chapter 73

# Students' Perceptions of Teaching and Social Presence:
## A Comparative Analysis of Face-to-Face and Online Learning Environments

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## ABSTRACT

*Online learning has grown dramatically over the past few years and has become an integral part of most of the higher education institutions' overall strategy. While this explosive growth has created exciting opportunities for both institutions and students, high dropout rates in online learning environments continues to be a major concern for all institutions. Research has identified lack of social and teacher presence in online courses as major factors leading to student attrition. While it is easy to establish these presences in traditional classrooms, developing them in an online environment could be challenging due to absence of any face-to-face contact. The purpose of this preliminary study is to compare students' perceptions of social and teacher presences in online and traditional classroom. Thirty-four students enrolled in an online section and 29 students enrolled in a face-to-face section of an undergraduate course participated in the study. The results indicate that students' perceived stronger teacher and social presences in the online section compared to the face-to-face section. Implications of these results for practice and research are discussed.*

## INTRODUCTION

In the past decade online education has experienced dramatic growth. According to a recent report from Sloan Consortium (Allen & Seaman, 2011) there are currently more than 6.1 million students enrolled in at least one online course. The growth rate for online enrollments (10%) has exceeded the growth in the overall higher education student population (less than 1%) in the United States. The report estimates that

31% of students enrolled in higher education take at least one online course. To address the increasing demand of online education, it is estimated that about 90% of higher education institutions offer some form of online education. Online education has now become an integral part of long-term strategy for over 65% of higher education institutions. Online learning is no longer considered a new phenomenon and has become an important part of our education system (Capra, 2011).

Online courses offer numerous advantages to students such as convenience, flexibility and access to education. Due to their busy lifestyles, students are looking for convenience for when to read, when to complete the assignments, when to watch videos, part time workers are on "stand by" for hours and many students have two jobs- the need for time is absolutely essential. Smith et al (2012) argued that students are in a "pressure cooker" environment where they have a lot to do and juggle. Given the lifestyle demands it is no surprise that the flexibility and convenience of the online learning format appeals to students. Recent studies have also documented that the quality of online education is similar to face-to-face programs. In fact, in their 2009 report based on a meta-analysis and review of thousands of studies related to online learning, the U.S. Department of Education concluded that, in general, online learning is more effective than face-to-face learning (U.S Department of Education, 2009)

While the growth of online education has presented many opportunities for institutions and students, it has also raised some concerns regarding high student attrition rates in online courses and programs. In general, online courses and programs have higher drop out rates compared to face-to-face courses (Angelino, Williams, & Natvig, 2007; Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). Patterson and McFadden (2009) found dropout rates to be six to seven times higher in online programs compared to face-to-face programs. As an increasing number of institutions continue to provide online courses in an effort to enhance students' access to learning opportunities, student persistence and retention in online courses have become critically important issues.

Some researchers argue that feelings of isolation and disconnectedness in online courses are major reasons for high student attrition rates in online courses (Bolinger & Inan, 2012; Rovai & Wighting, 2005; Trello, 2007). The physical and psychological distance between instructors and students in online courses can create this feeling of alienation and disconnectedness. Compared to traditional face-to-face courses, students' perceive a lack of social presence and interactions in online courses. Students who manage to persist in online courses report a higher level of sense of connectedness and presences (Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2005). Studies have found that students' sense of social presence and instructor presence in online courses influence their overall perceptions of learning and students who perceive a lack of social interactions and instructor presence are more likely to withdraw and fail (Capra, 2011; Rovai & Wighting; Trello, 2007).

While considerable research has been done to identify factors and interventions that are associated with student persistence and retention in face-to -face programs, very few studies have examined different factors within the online classroom that can influence students' retention in online courses and programs (Boston, Ice & Gibson, 2011; Hart, 2012; Ivankova & Stick, 2005; Liu, Gomez & Yen, 2009). Studies examining student attrition in online courses and programs have consistently identified lack of connectedness and instructor presence as factors leading to student alienation and drop out from online courses. These elements within an online course are important in facilitating student persistence and retention, yet few studies have compared students' perceptions of these elements in different learning formats (Akyol, Garrison, & Ozden, 2009). Akyol. Garrison and Ozden (2009) compared students' perceptions of the development of a community in a blended and a fully online course and found that sense of social and teacher presence was much higher in the blended course probably due to face-to-face interactions.

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