

Chapter 61

Social Presence and Student Engagement in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Effective online learning practices should incorporate an active social presence that provides space and technological support for students and instructors to engage in social activities, which are an integral part of the learning process. The focus of this chapter is the description of social presence, the forms in which it occurs, and how social presence enhances student engagement in the learning process, whether online or face-to-face. Based on various studies related to this topic, the authors argue that social presence has a significant impact on student engagement, especially in online classes. Finally, this chapter examines how social presence affects student engagement and offers various strategies for instructors to enhance social presence and student engagement in online learning.

INTRODUCTION

The role of social presence in online learning can be linked to the larger social context which includes motivation, group unity, verbal and non-verbal communication, and social equality—all being all of which are very difficult to achieve and maintain in the absence of social presence. It is important to examine social presence in online learning because we need to ensure that despite it being online, it is close to a representation of what would be in a face-to-face class. Resnick, Levine & Teasley (1991) observed that in most psychological theory, the social and the cognitive have engaged only peripherally, standing in a kind of figure-ground relationship to one another rather than truly interacting. They propose undoing the figure-ground relationship between cognitive and social processes and emphasize human cognition that is so responsive to the cultural context that ways through which people actively shape each other's ways of knowledge and thought must be found.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-2584-4.ch061

According to Vygotsky (1978) the constructivist theory relates to everything an individual knows is personally constructed, and their experienced events. People also build their knowledge based on what they have heard, seen or been told by others, orally, in writing, in pictures, and in gestures. All of these moments collectively have an influence on the constructive process by providing information, pointing things out to one another, asking questions, and arguing with and elaborating on each other's ideas. By stressing the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge, sociocultural approaches view semiotic tools or cultural amplifiers as personal and social resources, and hence, mediating the link between the social and the individual construction of meaning (Vygotsky, 1978).

Student Engagement

Student engagement is defined as the interest and motivation students have in their own learning of course content. Student engagement depends primarily on a number of factors, including an instructor's personal connection with students and creation of an active online environment (Mandernach, 2009). Using their instrument to measure student engagement, Handelsman, Briggs, Sullivan and Towler, (2005) found that student engagement consisted of four dimensions for students in traditional face-to-face classrooms. These dimensions were:

1. Skills engagement,
2. Participation/interaction engagement,
3. Emotional engagement, and
4. Performance engagement.

Similarly, however, Richardson and Newby (2006) contended that student engagement was affected by the number of online courses that students took as well as the degree to which students took responsibility for their own learning. In face-to-face courses there is a feeling of constant engagement through regular class meetings, for example, where teachers and learners interact with one another in one location for a specified period of time. These interactions exist in three ways: student-instructor interactions, student-student interactions and student-content interactions (Anderson & Garrison, 1998). Student-student interaction is critical for learning designs based upon constructivist learning theories (Anderson, 2008).

Student-instructor interaction, on the other hand, has the highest perceived value amongst students, thus commanding a high market value. Most forms of student-content interaction can be recorded and displayed asynchronously to substitute for student-student interaction by time or technology bound students. In campus settings, the courses consists of lectures, discussions, and group work- all in various combinations being done with the intention of fostering reliable engagement with the course material and with one another on a regular basis. Online learning, however, alters the dynamics of time and space in the educational process. Instructors and learners don't share any one physical location or one period of time, as interaction is spread across many spaces. Instead, the virtual community itself serves as the standard for shared time and space (Anagnostopoulos, Basmadjian, & McCrory, 2005). In courses conducted exclusively online, this is the only shared time and space instructor and learners will experience

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