Chapter 7

# Social Presence and Cultural Identity:
## Exploring Culturally Responsive Instructional Design in the Online Environment

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## ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the impact of cultural identity on social presence in online courses, as well as culturally-responsive instructional design frameworks that work to increase social presence and reduce distance for culturally diverse online learners. Social presence, which is a student's sense of being and belonging in a course, is naturally reduced in the online environment. Cultural differences, such as language, context, communication styles, etc., have been shown to further reduce a student's sense of belonging and increase feelings of isolation. Instructors, as course designers and facilitators, must understand the impact of culture on their students' sense of social presence, and use culturally-responsive instructional design strategies and methods to provide an inclusive, flexible, online learning environment.*

# INTRODUCTION

Past research has found that social presence – the ability of an individual to present as a salient person and develop a sense of belonging – directly impacts cognitive engagement (Garrison, 1997; Gunawardena, 1995), is crucial to establishing an online learning community (Fabro & Garrison, 1998), and reduced social presence can produce feelings of social isolation, which has been linked to attrition in academic courses (Tinto, 1987, with even greater attrition being found in online courses (Ali & Smith, 2015). While social presence has been shown as a powerful factor impacting student success, students from minority cultures (i.e., students who are from another socio-cultural and/or geographic area or background than the majority of learners in a particular course or institution) may be at greater risk for experiencing feelings of isolation and reduced social presence. As postured by Karen Brock Enger (2006), "[s]tudents from minority cultures are particularly vulnerable to feeling isolated from the majority culture on many campuses. Online education has the potential for mitigating this problem…" (pg. 7).

However, is online education fulfilling that potential? Students from minority cultures include international students, whose unique cultural identity, language, and background may negatively impact their experience online courses. To explain, online course design and content often assume that students will be native language speakers and have a shared socio-cultural background. Even in highly interactive online learning environments, international learners in U.S.-based online courses have shown feelings of marginalization and isolation from the American learning group (Shattuck, 2005). Miscommunication due to language barriers and/or cultural differences can also affect participation and inclusion (Reeder, Macfadyen, & Chase, 2004). Questions still remain about whether culturally-flexible online learning environments can be created that respect the cultural diversity of learners and also provide cultural adaptability of learning materials (McLoughlin & Oliver, 2000), but seeking answers to those questions seems paramount to ensuring equal learning opportunities for all online students.

Combining the increased possibility for isolation in online classes with a call for culturally-responsive academic instruction is an important reason to examine culturally-responsive instructional design practices that serve to reduce isolation and distance and increase social presence. Past research supports the idea that teaching strategies and class content that respect students' cultural backgrounds and engage diverse students can be more effective (Olneck, 1995; Ogbu, 1995). This chapter aims to: highlight the importance of social presence in the online classroom, demonstrate the direct connection between course design and online presence/interaction, describe ways social presence can be impacted by cultural identity and differences, and theorize culturally-responsive instructional design strategies and methods to enhance

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