

# Chapter 86

## Social Presence: Communications in Distance Dissertation Courses

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### ABSTRACT

*Over the years, the advance of technology has changed the ways of instructions in higher education, and new communication trends as well as innovative pedagogy evolved to be reconciled with new technology trends in distance education. What are the major challenges of communication in distance education? This chapter explores how dissertation chairs perceive social presence in online dissertation courses, and what challenges these online instructors have in distance dissertation mentorship. In this study, the authors interviewed eight experienced dissertation chairs to explore their insights and opinions on the effectiveness of social presence in distance dissertation mentorship as well as to examine the controversies hidden in online instructions. Major issues and problems in applying social presence theories in dissertation mentorship emerged from the interview results. Solutions and recommendations are provided to tackle the problems. Future research directions are indicated as well.*

### INTRODUCTION

The evolution of technology from Web 1.0 (read-only Web) to Web 2.0 (read-write Web) and to future Web 3.0 (read-write-execute Web) has altered the ways of communication between instructors and students in distance education. How do dissertation chairs (or mentors) communicate or interact with doctoral learners (or mentees) in online dissertation classes? What teaching prac-

tices best facilitate teacher-student interaction in online dissertation classes? What technology tools could enhance students' performance in online dissertation course? What strategies should online teachers use to achieve students' learning goals and course satisfaction? What are current distance education trends that might influence the interaction between dissertation chairs and doctoral learners?

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Beldarrain (2006, p.139) specified that current trends of distance education revealed “a shift in pedagogical perspectives and theoretical frameworks, with student interaction at the heart of learner-centered constructivist environments.” Zawacki-Richter (2010) who reviewed 695 articles in distance education journals between 2000 and 2008, also pinpointed that current research trends in distance education focus on interaction and communication patterns in computer-mediated communication (CMC), instructional designs, learner characteristics, and educational technology. Since the integration of new technologies to foster student interaction and collaboration has been the current distance education trend, improving communication and technology in online instruction will make it possible for teachers to achieve the best practices of online instruction, to satisfy students’ needs, and to reach ultimate goal of online instruction and learning. The advantages of online learning are the ability to work independently at own pace and time, not limited to one physical location/travel expense, and low social/peer pressure consequences; however, the disadvantages of online learning are technology problems, the need to be self-motivated, poor course design, and lack of social presence (Daniels, 2011). Since lack of social presence is one of the features of distance dissertation courses, the purposes of this chapter were to explore dissertation chairs’ perceptions of the role of social presence in online communication, and to find out what challenges they have in the interaction with doctoral learners in distance dissertation mentorship.

## BACKGROUND

### Social Presence: Theories and Definitions

Many researchers have devoted tremendous efforts to investigate social presence in the past

three decades (e.g., Aragon, 2003; Baker, 2010; Baker & Edwards, 2011; Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, Stoner, 2001; Caspi, & Blau, 2008; Cobb, 2009; Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009; DuVall, Powell, Hodge, & Ellis, 2007; Graham, Cagilitay, Lim, Craner, & Duffy, 2001; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hostetter & Monique, 2006; Joyce, & Brown, 2009; Kehrwald, 2007, 2008; Kuyath, & Winter, 2006; Lowenthal, 2009; Mykota, & Duncan, 2007; Reio & Crim, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Shore, 2007; Short et al., 1976; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu, 2000a, 2000b, 2002; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Tu, McIsaac, Sujo-Montes, & Armfield, 2012; Tu, Yen, Blocher, & Chan, 2012; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). The theme of social presence was first described in Asimov’s (1957) science fiction, *The Naked Sun*, in which he illustrated a planet named Solaria where robots are strictly taught to avoid personal contact, and communication is done by ‘viewing’ instead of ‘seeing’ in person. In the story, the robot Daneel explained to the earthman Baley that Agent Gruer visited them by ‘trimensional image’ which allows people to feel as if they were present and to give the appearance of being present.

In 1976, Short, Williams, and Christie defined social presence in their book *The Social Psychology of Telecommunications* as follows.

*We believe, however, that the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships is an important hypothetical construct that can usefully be applied more generally. We shall term this quality ‘Social Presence’. This critical concept needs further clarification. We regard Social Presence as being a quality of the communications medium. Although we would expect it to affect the way individuals perceive their discussions, and their relationships to the persons with whom they are communicating, it is important to emphasize that we are defining Social Presence as a quality of the medium itself (p.65).*

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