

Chapter 63

Fostering Social Presence on Virtual Learning Teams

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ABSTRACT

Social presence is a key factor in student satisfaction and success in online courses and a marker for whether one has an online learning experience that is engaged, vibrant, and connected, or simply perfunctory. An action-oriented research project was conducted to determine how to foster social presence on the virtual learning teams in the Master of Arts programs in the School of Education and Technology at Royal Roads University. The study findings show that in order to support the development of social presence, the commitment and participation of multiple stakeholders is required. The results of this study suggest a common organizational understanding of social presence, clear delineation of student and faculty roles and responsibilities in its development, intentional program design, and a learning management system that specifically lends to interpersonal relationship building must all be present in order to foster the development of social presence.

INTRODUCTION

Royal Roads University (RRU), located in Victoria, British Columbia, offers programs that are primarily delivered in a blended model which combines virtual learning with traditional classroom methods; over 70% of students participate in virtual teams at RRU and up to 50% of assignments may involve group projects or team-based work (see <http://www.royalroads.ca/about-royal-roads>). Sponsored by Student Services at RRU and conducted between November 2016 and March 2017, an action research project was designed to better understand social presence on virtual learning teams and how to foster its development.

This study shows the value and necessity of social presence at RRU, with 100% of faculty and staff survey respondents strongly agreeing or agreeing that a strong social presence is critical to the level of engagement of students in virtual courses, and 93% of students strongly agreeing or agreeing that a strong social presence is critical to their level of connection in virtual courses. The findings showed some variance in the thoughts and opinions as to what constitutes the core components of social presence,

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however eight common descriptors were mentioned by all three groups of respondents, which could be considered the beginnings of a working definition amongst the group. It was clear that both students and instructors have the responsibility to develop their own social presence, while instructors have the additional task of initiating and role modeling that presence in their teaching. Additionally, the analysis showed that instructors carry the responsibility of creating a rich learning environment with systems and processes in place to develop social presence; the qualitative data revealed this could be accomplished in part with intentional learning design and effective technological platforms and virtual learning spaces.

This chapter provides a review of the social presence literature that pertains to its history and definitions, the roles and responsibilities that instructors and students have in its development, and how intentional learning design and the use of technology and virtual spaces can support the development of social presence. This chapter also provides an outline of the research context, methods, and participants which framed the inquiry, and details the findings and conclusions that resulted from the data analysis. Finally, four recommendations for fostering social presence on virtual learning teams are offered.

BACKGROUND

Social presence is a central concept in online learning (Lowenthal, 2010); the process of establishing and maintaining a social presence applies not only to learner participants but also to all participants in the online learning environment, including facilitators and subject matter experts (Kehrwald, 2007; Yuan & Kim, 2014). However, despite the growing body of literature on the topic, there is not a singular definition of social presence. Drawing its roots from computer-mediated communication (CMC), social presence was first introduced by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) and was defined as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of interpersonal relationships” (p.65). Almost two decades later, Gunawardena (1995) situated social presence into the educational context and found that social presence had more to do with how people used and adapted to CMC, rather than just the qualities of the communication medium itself. Definitions of social presence have subtle differences that depend on the viewpoint of the researchers. Tu and McIsaac (2002) defined social presence as “the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction to another intellectual entity in the CMC environment” (p. 146) while that same year Picciano (2002) defined social presence as “a student’s sense of being in and belonging in a course and the ability to interact with other students and an instructor” (p. 22). Biocca and Harms (2002) described social presence as “moment-to-moment awareness of co-presence of a mediated body and the sense of accessibility of the other being’s psychological, emotional, and intentional states” (p. 10) while in 2007 Rovai defined social presence as the students’ ability to engage socially with an online learning community. From a relational perspective, social presence is defined as “an individual’s ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions” (Kehrwald, 2008, p. 94). More recently, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2014) described social presence as the strategies people use and the activities people engage in—using various asynchronous and synchronous communication tools—to minimize transactional distance and help students and faculty feel more involved, engaged, and real in online courses.

There is no doubt that research supports the importance of and connection between social presence and virtual learning teams. It has been shown that social presence can influence students’ participation and motivation to participate (Swan & Shih, 2005; Tao, 2009; Tu & McIsaac, 2002), help establish a sense of community (Tu & McIsaac, 2002), lead to the development of a community of learners (Rourke,

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