Chapter 39

Social Presence in an Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT

Limited studies on social presence in online learning do not lend themselves to understanding its effects on student learning. Research indicates a heightened need for examining the relationship between social presence and perceived learning and satisfaction as well as retention in online courses. Incorporating social presence into online courses might promote better learning. Further research on learning in an online environment is necessary to guide educators in delivering the best educational environment.

INTRODUCTION

Social Presence in an Online Learning Environment

As learning is a social and human activity (Vygotsky, 1986), the ability of individuals to communicate and work together in groups is a vital interest of online educators. Social presence has emerged as an important factor in the field of distance education as online learning is sometimes considered as a medium for social isolation and thus a detriment to group interaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Wheeler, 2005, 2009). Social presence refers to an individual's perception of the quantity and quality of interpersonal communication in an online learning environment. Perceptions of low social presence are linked to feelings of disconnectedness and poorer group interactions; on the other hand, high social presence enhances group engagement and learning (Wheeler, 2005). Individual perceptions then are an important consideration for designers and instructors when making decisions about the selection of technologies and pedagogies employed in course design.

Two-way communication is crucial for a successful educational transaction to occur (Garrison, 1996). The ability to express and share ideas among learners and with the instructor promotes collaboration and deepens the learning experi-

ence. Ostensibly, deep and meaningful learning is the central goal of higher education and in the corporate learning context. More specifically, it is important to understand how social presence can make the nature of online learning more interactive, appealing, engaging, and intrinsically rewarding leading to an increase in academic and social integration that results in increased persistence and course completion.

Providing online educational environments that best meet the needs of learners is a critical concern for educators. As technology in and of itself does not promote or ensure a successful learning experience, it is important for educators to know how to develop and plan learning opportunities and strategies in online courses that would be most effective in meeting the learner's needs. If sustaining interactions in which collaborative construction of meaning among learners is an objective, then it is essential that a learning environment be most adept at meeting the learners' needs regarding not only cognitive development, but also social presence and collaborative learning at a distance. The objective of this chapter will be to explore the links between online learning and social presence.

BACKGROUND

The Importance of Social Presence Online: Issues, Controversies, and Problems

Throughout this section, we discuss the issues, controversies, and problems related to social presence online. We present first a brief overview of online learning, followed by social presence theory, interaction, immediacy, and intimacy as components of social presence, learner retention/persistence, and recommendations.

Online Learning

Online learning is a form of distance learning that has been defined as any class where at least part of the curriculum is presented online via the internet, affording connections between instructors and students regardless of time and place (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). This internet-based instruction is known as a media-rich, online environment that allows people to interact with others in collaborative environments to gain access to remote multimedia databases through the internet for active and resource-based learning and to manage self-paced individual learning in a flexible way. Greater numbers of students than ever before are enrolled in distance education through enhanced college courses, collaborations with other universities and colleges, and in some cases through completely virtual universities (Lee & Bush, 2005).

Online learning has been promoted as being more cost-effective and convenient than traditional education environments as well as providing opportunities for more learners to continue their education in various settings (Oliver, 1999; Wheeler, 2005). Because of these features, the use of synchronous—communication that occurs between two or more people in real-time—and asynchronous—a time-delayed interaction that does not require participants be online simultaneously—online learning and the internet has significantly changed the way learning is delivered and facilitated by allowing for the conversion of traditional courses into web-based courses (Jiang & Ting, 2000). Although the combination of the computer and various communication technologies facilitate the learning and interaction processes between the instructor and the learners at a distance, it is the time-delayed and place-independent asynchronous online learning mode that is of interest in this chapter.

The attributes of time-independence, text-based communication is a double-edged sword for the learner. It may facilitate participation and

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