

Chapter 28

Lecturers' Social Presence and Personality in the Online Environment: The Perceptions of Off-Campus Postgraduate and On and Off-Campus Undergraduate Management Students

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ABSTRACT

The first aim of this chapter is to present a literature review regarding two very important concepts for the online learning environment: social presence and personality. The second aim is to present the findings of an exploratory study that measured students' perceptions regarding different aspects of their experience with the online learning environment including social presence and personality of lecturers in the online environment in particular. An online survey (developed using Qualtrix) was emailed to 474 off-campus postgraduate and 699 undergraduate students who are pursuing a coursework degree in management. To date, 62 responses from postgraduate and 41 from undergraduate students have been received, which indicates a response rate of 13 percent and 5.9 percent, respectively. Results show that social presence is not being successfully developed by lecturers, with discussion boards and chat rooms showing relatively low evaluations. In terms of lecturers' personalities in the online environment, results show that some lecturers do not have a clear structure for their discussion boards and chat rooms and that the language used by lecturers in the online environment (especially discussion boards and chat rooms) differs from their language in face-to-face contexts. Other online learning tools, such as special

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podcasts and special vodcasts, show less difference in the personality of lecturers in the online and face-to-face contexts, especially in terms of language and tone of voice used by lecturers.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decade, distance education has experienced a huge growth mainly due to the increase in students' accessibility to the Internet (Robert & Dyer, 2003). However there is an ongoing debate over the quality and efficacy of online learning (Goldsmith, 2001). McGregor and Turner (2009, p.166) argue that there are two main issues to be considered when discussing the effectiveness of online learning. The first one "focuses on external variables influencing the student and the efficacy of the student learning experience within the e-learning environment". This issue puts the student at the centre of a wider online community and it includes variables such as information and communication technology, and information literacy. The second one deals with internal forces affecting online learning such as system design, usability and information architecture, among others. Any institution involved in the delivery of online programs needs to consider these two factors when designing these programs or when engaging in evaluation and review of the online programs currently offered.

The University of New England (UNE) is involved in a renewal project, UNE Flexible and Online (UNEFO), which aims "at enhancing all course offerings, using a new virtual learning environment, a single software learning management system which will replace the three systems been used concurrently" (UNE, 2010). In this context, the aim of this chapter is to explore two important issues for the online learning environment: "social presence" and "personality". The chapter first presents a concise literature review that assists in understanding these concepts and then moves on to present the findings of an exploratory study conducted at UNE during 2010 that measured the perceptions of management students regarding the

social presence and personality of lecturers in the online environment.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Definition of Online Education

The literature generally refers to "online" education or learning when the offering includes the use of technology in education and training. However, "online" learning in many contexts may actually refer to a blended mode of education, as the term is often not clarified in terms of being fully "online." The University of Western Australia (2011, n.p.) describe an online learning environment as one which "goes beyond the replication of learning events that have traditionally occurred in the classroom and are now made available through the Internet" and further "an online learning environment can supplement or complement a traditional face-to-face learning environment or it may provide a complete learning package that requires little face-to-face contact" (University of Western Australia, 2011, n.p.).

Rovai & Jordan (2004) describe blended learning as a flexible approach which offers some of the conveniences of fully online courses with some face-to-face contact. They identify this approach as having the potential to be more robust in educational experience than fully online or traditional education. Similarly, Garrison and Cleveland Innes (2005) distinguish online, face-to-face, or a blending of both.

Online Learning and Teaching and the Development of Community

The effectiveness and quality of online offerings is widely challenged and online delivery of

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