

Chapter 11

Social Presence in Online Dissertation Classes

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the results of a study that explored doctoral learners' perceptions of social presence in online dissertation courses. Seven doctoral graduates were interviewed to understand how social presence functions in online dissertation courses, whether social presence influences their dissertation completion, and how technological tools help improve social presence in the dissertation courses. The results of this study indicate that social presence plays an important role in online dissertation courses. Students' course satisfaction and learning outcome were associated with the degree of social presence. The use of emoticons, emails, and phone calls in online dissertation courses increased students' sense of social presence. Students were more satisfied with instructors who interacted with them frequently and who provided detailed and constructive feedback in a timely manner. Recommendations for further research are included.

INTRODUCTION

The evolution of technology has reshaped instructional and learning methods drastically in the past three decades. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) enhances human communications through computer-mediated formats, such as emails, chat rooms, instant messaging,

text messaging, and social networking. Online delivery media, which allow learners to interact with instructors, with each other, and with content resources, have minimized the constraints that are common in traditional classrooms. Harasim (1990) described five attributes to distinguish online learning from other educational environments: place-independent communication, time-independent communication, text-based communication, many-to many communication, and computer-mediated learning, all of which “create a

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unique social climate that impacts interactions and group dynamics online” (p. 43). Online learning has attracted millions of learners to attend many distance education programs today. While people are praising the benefits and advantages of taking online courses in this advanced technology era, there are drawbacks and disadvantages in online learning environment as well. The lack of facial expression, body language, visual cues, hand gestures, voice intonation, and face-to-face interaction might incur students’ misunderstanding of the instructor’s meaning, defer comprehension, and impede students’ learning. Because the instructors are not immediately accessible to answer questions or to convey ideas, the flow of the online discussion tends to be slower and students may feel a sense of isolation. How do online instructors break down these barriers?

Social presence becomes critical in online learning platform. Tu (2000b) pinpointed that social presence, a significant factor in distance education, is the major vehicle of social learning and is a must for improving social interaction online. Though research on social presence has proliferated in the past decade, studies on the relationship between social presence and online dissertation writing courses are rare. Does social presence exist in online dissertation writing classes? How does social presence function in online dissertation courses? To what extent does social presence influence the effectiveness of students’ dissertation writing? What technological tools or social media could be used in enhancing teachers’ social presence in distance dissertation courses? Considering the asynchronous online learning and communications in niche online communities, social presence is worthy of study. This chapter reports on a study that explored doctoral learners’ perceptions of social presence in the online dissertation courses, especially its existence, function, and effectiveness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past three decades, many researchers have devoted efforts to investigating social presence. Some researchers focused on the theories and definitions of social presence (e.g., Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001; Garrison, 2007; Kehrwald, 2007; Lowenthal, 2009; Short et al., 1976; Tu, 2000a, 2000b; Tu, McIsaac, Sujo-Montes, & Armfield, 2012; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk, 2012). Others examined the relationships between students’ perceived social presence and learning outcomes as well as online course satisfaction (e.g., Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Bozkaya, 2008; Bozkaya & Aydin, 2007; Caspi & Blau, 2008; Cobb, 2009; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hassanein, Head, & Ju, 2009; Hostetter & Monique, 2006; Jolivet, 2006; Ko, 2012; Lee, Mykota, & Duncan, 2007; Leong, 2011; Reio & Crim, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; So, 2008; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu, 2001, 2002b, 2002c; Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Tu, Yen, Blocher, & Chan, 2012; Tung & Deng, 2007; Wise, Chang, Duffy, & Del Valle, 2004). While some researchers have developed instruments to measure social presence (e.g., Biocca, et al., 2001; Cobb, 2009; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & Buuren, 2011; Richard & Swan, 2003; Short et al., 1976; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu, 2002a), others have created activities and strategies for establishing social presence within online communities (e.g., Aragon, 2003; Lowenthal, 2009; Shore, 2007; Tu, McIsaac, Sujo-Montes, & Armfield, 2012).

Theories and Definitions of Social Presence

The theme of social presence first appeared in Asimov’s (1957) *The Naked Sun* where robots in Solaria were strictly taught to avoid personal contact, and communication was done in the trimensional image instead of in person. This

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