

Students' Perceptions of What Matters Most When It Comes to Establishing Social Presence Online

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Abstract

- Social presence theory seeks to explain how people present themselves as “real” and being “there” while using a communication medium. It is a popular construct used to describe how people socially interact in online courses. Because of its intuitive appeal and students regular complaint of feeling isolated and online while taking online courses, educators have experimented with different ways to establish social presence in their online courses. However, to date, very little research has been conducted on identifying the best way to establish and maintain social presence in online courses. In this session, I will present the results of my ongoing research on students perceptions of the best way to establish and maintain social presence in online courses.

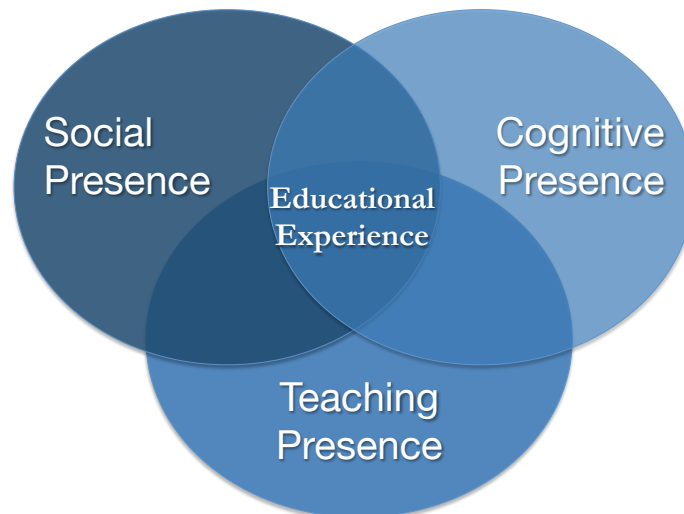
my Story

- When I started teaching online, I was scared. I was scared of lots of things . . . (including the dialup connection I was using). And the funny thing is that I had taken a couple of courses online prior to teaching online (something that many first time online instructors haven't had the chance to do).
- But one of the things that scared me the most was whether the things that I thought worked so well when I taught face to face – like my immediacy, passion, energy, humor – would translate to the online environment. My fear is that they wouldn't. And most of all I feared that I wouldn't be able to connect with students. They wouldn't get a sense of who I was and I wouldn't get a sense of who they were.

Theory of Social Presence

- Social presence is the degree of salience (i.e., **quality or state of being there**) between two communicators using a communication medium.

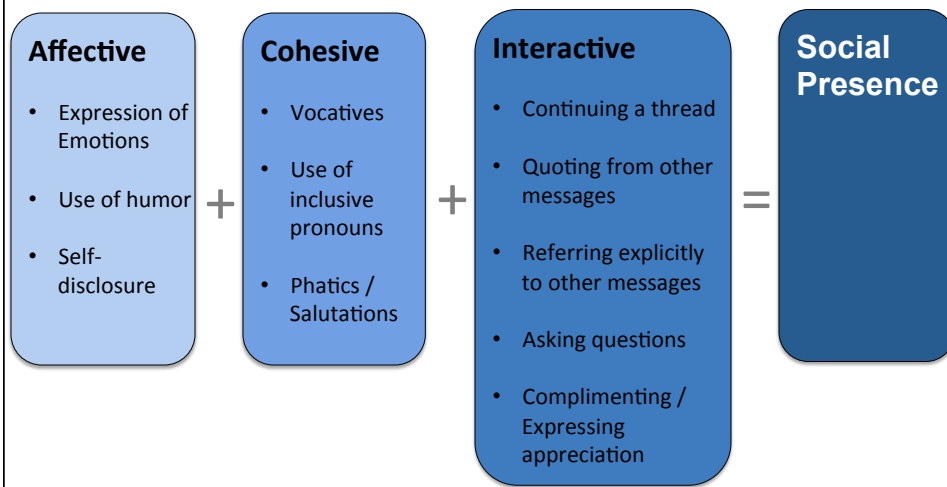
Conceptual Framework



Community of Inquiry Framework

Social Presence

Categories of Social Presence: 1. Affective; 2. Cohesive; 3. Interactive



Research on Social Presence

Researchers have shown—in varying degrees:

- A relationship between social presence & **student satisfaction**
- A relationship between social presence & the **development of a community of learners**
- A relationship between social presence & **perceived learning**

Social Presence Strategies

- Bio strategies
- Orientation strategies
- Reconnecting strategies
- Feedback strategies
- Discussion strategies
- Small group strategies
- Organic interaction strategies

Guiding Question

What matters most when it comes to establishing social presence in online courses?

Study #1 Details

Dunlap, J.C., & Lowenthal, P.R. (2014). **The power of presence: Our quest for the right mix of social presence in online courses.** In A. A. Piña & A. P. Mizell (Eds.), *Real life distance education: Case studies in practice* (pp. 41-66). Greenwich, CT: Information Age Publishing.

RQ: What are students' perceptions of various social-presence strategies used in online courses?

3 Phased mixed methods study: Phase 1 – course feedback; Phase 2 – survey students; Phase 3 – follow up interviews with subgroup.

Study #1 Findings

- Students reported high perceived learning and high satisfaction but social presence wasn't as high as research conducted by others
- Students reported that the following helped them the most feel connected to their instructor: 1. written feedback; 2. one-on-one email; 3. how to screencasts.
- Students reported that the following helped them the most feel connected to other students: 1. digital stories; 2. previous relationship; 3. access to peers work
- Students reported that Twitter was the least effective with feeling connected with the instructor and their peers. (M=1.75 on 4.0 scale)
- Follow up interviews revealed different social presence needs; activities that help are individualized detailed feedback; collaborative / relevant / authentic group projects; being accessible.

Study #2 Details

Lowenthal, P. R. (2014, April). **Does Video Improve Social Presence? Investigating Students' Perceptions of Asynchronous Video and Social Presence.** Paper presented at the Emerging Technologies for Online Learning International Symposium, Dallas, TX.

NOTE: Still collecting data through the summer 2014

RQ: What are students' perceptions of online video and social presence?

Two phased exploratory study: Survey students; follow up interviews.

Sample: 12 sections of three different courses

Study #2 Findings*

- Experienced online learners; high satisfaction and perceived learning
- Report that it's more important to perceive the instructor as a real person and there vs. fellow students
- Report video as being better than text and audio at establishing social presence
- Report that they generally like video; but don't always like or want video
- Prefer asynchronous video
- Liked instructional videos the most; then video feedback and video announcements
- Preferred one-on-one or personal media over group / generic

*preliminary data; still collecting data

Limitations

- Small sample
- Not generalizable
- Only involved educational technology students
- Highly specialized instructional strategies

Remaining Questions

1. How can a cohort model improve social presence, community, and student satisfaction?
2. How can we establish and maintain social presence in large sections?
3. How important is social presence of peers vs. social presence of instructor?
4. Does social presence help student learning?

Related Papers

- Lowenthal & Dunlap (2014). **Problems measuring social presence in a Community of Inquiry.** *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 11(1), 19-30.
- Lowenthal (2012). **Social presence: What is it? How do we measure it?** (Doctoral dissertation). University of Colorado Denver.
- Dunlap & Lowenthal (2011). **Getting to know you: The first week of class and beyond.** In *The CU Online Handbook, 2011* (pp. 67-72). Lulu.
- Lowenthal & Thomas (2010). **Death to the Digital Dropbox: Rethinking student privacy and public performance.** *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 33(3).
- Dunlap & Lowenthal (2010). **Hot for teacher: Using digital music to enhance student's experience in online courses.** *TechTrends*, 54(4), 58-73.
- Lowenthal & Dunlap (2010). **From pixel on a screen to real person in your students' lives: Establishing social presence using digital storytelling.** *The Internet and Higher Education*, 13(1-2), 70-72.
- Dunlap & Lowenthal (2010). **Defeating the Kobayashi Maru: Supporting student retention by balancing the needs of the many and the one.** *EDUCAUSE Quarterly*, 33(4).
- Dunlap & Lowenthal (2009). **Tweeting the night away: Using Twitter to enhance social presence.** *Journal of Information Systems Education*, 20(2), 129-136.
- Lowenthal (2009). **The evolution and influence of social presence theory on online learning.** In *Online education and adult learning: New frontiers for teaching practices* (pp. 124-139). IGI Global.
- Lowenthal (2009). **Social presence.** In *Encyclopedia of distance and online learning* (2nd ed., pp. 1900-1906). IGI Global.
- Lowenthal & Parscal (2008). **Teaching presence.** *The Learning Curve*, 3(4), 1-2, 4.