

Book Review

Creating a sense of presence in online teaching: How to “be there” for distance learners

Marcia D. Dixson¹

Citation: Lehman, R.M. & Conceicao, S.C.O. (2010). *Creating a sense of presence in online teaching: How to “be there” for distance learners*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 978-0-470-56490-5

Publisher’s Description: How can faculty create a strong e-presence for their online classes? This volume highlights the need for creating a presence in the online environment. The authors explore the emotional, psychological,² and social aspects from both the instructor and student perspective. It provides an instructional design framework and shows how a strong presence contributes to effective teaching and learning. Filled with illustrative examples and based on research and experience, the book contains methods, case scenarios, and activities for creating, maintaining, and evaluating presence throughout the cycle of an online course. (<http://www.josseybass.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470873116.html>)

While the book does fit the publisher’s description, providing an instructional framework and examples with activities and scenarios, it is not clear how useful that information really is to an online instructor. The first problem is one of semantics. The authors define engagement as “only one aspect of social presence” (p. 4) yet follow that with the statement that current research focuses on “creating engagement, a rich environment for learner interaction, and a sense of community which together result in an enhanced social presence.” (pp. 4-5). So, while the claim seems to be that presence is larger than and encompasses engagement, the same things we use to create engagement (a rich environment, sense of community) also create social presence. That suggests that the two are overlapping terms rather than one encompassing the other. The authors’ first argument about the difference between engagement and social presence is less than convincing.

The authors then go on to analyze social presence from three perspectives: social, psychological, and emotional. The social aspect makes sense to many of us versed in the online learning research. Social presence is when others in our virtual learning environment seem “real” to us. The psychological state is when the “technology becomes transparent to users” (p. 8). In other words, we stop focusing on the technology and focus on the learning, the other learners, the instructor, etc. The emotional aspect is “the ability to genuinely show feelings” (p. 9). The authors direct the emotional aspect of presence

¹ Associate Professor of Communication, Indiana University Purdue University Fort Wayne, dixson@ipfw.edu

more toward making decisions rather than any emotions shared between participants or about the content.

While these three aspects make some sense, they are not developed any further. The next pages introduce the three elements “essential for online education experience: cognitive, social, and teaching presence.” (p. 11) which are more intuitively satisfying than the previous three aspects being about thinking (cognitive presence), personal and emotional connections (social presence) and the voice of the facilitator (teaching presence).

At this point, the book has posited two sets of aspects/elements to consider when designing online courses. In chapter two, they add four types of experiences: subjective, what occurs in our own minds, objective “sense that you are psychologically and physically in another location” (p. 15), social, sense of being with others and environmental experience, “ability to easily access and modify, provide input about and interact with the online environment” (p. 17).

Then the authors add four modes of presence: realism, close match with the real world; immersion, being immersed in the virtual world, i.e., Second Life; involvement, engagement with others; and suspension of disbelief, creating a reality in our own minds. Then (still Chapter 2) they add the three dimensions of the learner: “the interior world, the interface with the real world (perception/conception process), and the concrete world they share with others” (p. 20).

Finally, on page 22, they offer their “The Being There for the Online Learner Model.” Imagine a series of concentric circles moving from the center outward: at the center is the learner’s inner world (thought, emotion, behavior); next the four types of experience: objective, environmental, social, and subjective; then, four modes of presence: immersion, realism, involvement, and suspension of disbelief; and, finally, in the outer circle: outer world and online environment. The model does not seem to clarify social presence in any way that adds to our ability to understand and/or create it in the online learning environment. Because there are so many factors to consider, it is difficult to see how the model might be used to inform a design that creates social presence or student engagement.

In Chapter three, the authors attempt to apply the model to a framework for designing online courses. Essentially, we are instructed to use the model to inform our understanding of presence, which the authors contend is determined by content type and focus, learning experience format, interactive strategies, instructor role, type of technology that enables presence, and support needed. These are useful areas of design to consider when creating an online course which encourages social presence and engaged students. The three example courses they give offer some valid ideas for creating presence. However, the ideas seem to boil down to communication in various forms (video, feedback on assignments, email, discussion forums) between the instructor and the learners and between the learners themselves. It is not clear how a fairly complicated model four circles of four typologies adds to our understanding that communication within an online course is essential to creating social presence. Nor is it clear how this differs in any substantial way from most of the engagement literature that takes social presence into account.

Chapter four offers activities for measuring and creating presence before, during, and at the end of the course. While they reproduce the model in this chapter, there is no real integration of it with the activities. For example, how does the “Welcome Letter” (admittedly a good idea to send a brief welcome to students explaining some initial things about the class) fit into the model? Is it about involvement mode and the social

experience? How is the model actually used to help make choices about design? And, where did the social, psychological, and emotional presences go? The authors state that it is “important to keep in mind the Being There for the Online Learner model when incorporating the activities described” (p. 45) but give no guidance on how to do that.

In Chapter 5 the authors present three case studies. In the case studies, they do analyze the activities according to parts of the model. This is better but seems incomplete. For instance, for Case 1: Getting to Know You and Your Course, the authors describe three activities and then analyze how presence was established through these three activities. They state that presence was created primarily “through social experiences ... to a lesser degrees through environmental experiences ... through involvement in the course LMS [Learner Management System]” (p. 97). They indicate that the course designer used two attributes from one ring and one from another. Is that the guideline? Pick some from the second and third rings? Is more better? In Case 2 (use of Second Life) presence was created through social and environmental experiences and immersion and involvement modes. If what we should really be doing is being sure we are tapping into at least one mode and one experience within the model, that could be presented in a much clearer and more useful fashion.

In short, the book contains some information that is useful but difficult to dig out because of too many typologies: three perspectives, three elements, four types of experiences, four modes, and six determinants of presence. Some of these are present in the model (Being There for the Online Learner) some in the Framework for Designing Online Courses with a Sense of Presence (which is the model plus the determinants of presence), some just seem to go missing. There is not enough synthesis of the information to make it consistent, cohesive, and maximally useful in actually designing a course, evaluating an online course, or choosing online activities.