Feeling Real: Social Presence within Online Discussion Forums

Maggie Struck, Trish Harvey, Jennifer Carlson, Karen Moroz
Hamline University
Innovate! Teaching with Technology Conference
June 14, 2017

Goals of the Session

Participants will leave this session with:

- A working definition of social presence
- Strategies to enrich social presence in an online learning environment
- Multiple online discussion format tools

Think back to the first day of a professional development training you had never attended before, the first day on a new job, on a new committee, or the first day in a new class. Imagine all the new faces around you. Think about not knowing the rules of this new setting or the ways in which people were expected to act. Think about not knowing the "language" of the group whether this was literally or figuratively true. Although you may have been excited to be there, you may also have felt some degree of nervousness and unease because this was a new educational setting.

What did you do to feel comfortable and make connections with others?

Argon, 2003

Social Presence

- When we connect with others in new social situations, we create **social presence or a degree of interpersonal contact (Argon, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).**

Think about the scenario described on the last slide, and imagine it taking place within an online context. How would it be different? How would you make connections with others students? How would an online context impact your engagement?

Social presence defined - what the literature says...

The ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people in a learning community (Garrison et al., 2000)

Social presence - "to create a level of comfort" (Aragon, p. 60)

...and "the degree to which participants are able to project themselves affectively within the medium" (Garrison, 1997, p. 6).

Great podcast - SBOSE ENU - Online Social Presence

Without social presence….

- Dropout/decreased engagement
- Feelings of isolation
- Less learning potential

With social presence….

- Enhanced information flow
- Improved learning support/group cohesion
- Improved learning satisfaction

Research shows a clear relationship between students perceived sense of social presence and students perceived learning

Abdelmalak, 2015; Aragon, 2003; Garrison et al., 2000

Social presence - Our research themes/goals

1. Social climate
2. "Real person"
3. Membership in the community of learners
4. Quality of the learning experience

Strategies to enrich social presence

1. Course Design (course designers or instructors)
2. Delivery and Management (instructors)
3. Participation (participants)

Aragon, 2003

Specific strategies:

⇒ Student pictures and profiles

⇒ Audio/video tools

⇒ Prompt responses to ?s

⇒ Introduction activities

⇒ Using first names in posts

⇒ Sharing personal experiences

⇒ Providing unmoderated discussion places ("Muddiest point", "Coffeehouse", "Student Forum")

Discussion forums!

How does incorporating a variety of discussion forum designs enhance social presence in an online course?

Procedure:

- Four discussion formats implemented
- Data Collection
    - Student Surveys
    - Facilitator Reflection

Online Discussion Formats: Large Group

1. Implement large group discussion 3-4 weeks into the term
2. Provide forums specifically for community building
3. Acknowledge opportunities for creative interactive response

Online Discussion Formats: Small Groups

1. "Nested Community"
2. More complex learning

Online Discussion Formats:Synchronous session

1. Tension with the "flexibility" of online learning
2. Increased the sense of "feeling real"
3. Contradicted literature - they had a higher perceived sense of social presence but the results were mixed.

Online Discussion Formats: Artifact-based

1. Quality of learning experience was enhanced.
2. Invested, personal, constructive responses
3. Instructor/facilitator responses
4. Using creative mediums provide ways of knowing students in multiple ways

Questions?

Thanks for coming!

Stay in touch...

Trish Harvey, @TrishLHarvey, tharvey03@hamline.edu
Maggie Struck, mstruck01@hamline.edu
Jennifer Carlson, jcarlson17@hamline.edu