

## **Social presence and its application within distance education**

The purpose of this essay is firstly to explain social presence and secondly to highlight some of its applications within distance education. In doing so, the essay incorporates a limited number of perspectives found in the scholarly literature on the issue.

The concept of social presence had its origin in the field of social psychology and was first described by Short, Williams & Christie (1976). However, it was first conceptually formulated within a distance education context by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000) as one of three elements constituting the Community of Inquiry Framework – the other two elements being cognitive presence and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). These three elements interact, overlap and influence each other in educational exchanges between teachers and students. With this in mind, Garrison et al. (2000) defines social presence “as the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as ‘real people’” (p.89).

Social presence (like the other two elements) consists of certain indicative groups – emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion (Garrison et al., 2000). These groups were later renamed affective, interactive and cohesive categories each with its own set of indicators (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 2001). These indicators predominantly entail certain concrete actions from students (and by extension also teachers) to enhance social presence. For example, the affective category consists of the following actions – expression of emotions, use of humor and self-disclosure (Rourke, et al., 2001).

The previously stated definition formulated by Garrison et al. (2000) encompasses most of the elements associated with the concept of social presence in a distance education context – social interaction, personal emphasis, self-exposure and collaboration. Social presence closely relates to the idea that human beings are the most important role players in any educational context. As such educational practices, methods and educational technology cannot be separated from human emotions and needs. High levels of social presence is seen as a way to address the most common problems associated with distance education (or more specifically online learning environments) – psychological distance, the impersonal nature of computer-mediated communication and feelings of loneliness and frustration students encounter. According to Aragon (2003) the primary goal for establishing social presence in any learning context is “to create a level of comfort in which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants” (p.60).

Furthermore, social presence is also viewed as supportive of cognitive presence and critical thinking (Garrison et al., 2000). Supporters of social presence see collaborative learning

within a group context as a key component of social presence. They view collaborative efforts as a strategy to construct knowledge and achieve higher learning objectives.

One has to remember that social presence within a distance education context was first applied to computer-mediated communication (CMC) especially computer conferencing. The conceptualization of the CoI framework was formed on the basis of detailed analysis of computer conference transcripts (Garrison et al, 2000).

Sung and Mayer (2012) mention that social presence gained momentum in recent years within online learning and accompanying theoretical considerations of computer mediated learning. Technological developments in the field made it necessary to redefine the concept of social presence and its relation to online learning environments. Sung and Mayer (2012) redefined online social presence “as the subjective feeling of being connected and together with others during computer mediated communication” (1739).

A number of current research studies focus on the ways social presence can be applied to various digital environments. A good example is the research undertaken by Tugba Bulu (2012) investigating the relationship between different types of presences in virtual worlds and their relationship with satisfaction and immersive tendencies of students.

Another example is the study by Tucker (2012) focusing on the relationship between the use of synchronous Centra technology (in the form of one-to-one discussions and chat sessions) and creating social presence. Tucker (2012) concludes that it “was evident that use of Centra had a positive effect on enhancing social presence in online learning” (p. 181).

It is important to mention that not everyone in the field of distance education attach the same value to social presence. It seems that research results over the past decade have led to divided opinions. There are those who hold the view that social presence is an important factor in enhancing distance education in several ways – influencing cognitive and affective learning (Garrison et al., 2000; Rourke et al., 2001), acting as a predictor of student satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Newberry, 2001) and promoting inclusion, control and affection (Whiteman, 2002).

However, a number of research studies have severely contested the value and relevance of social presence in distance education contexts (see Annand, 2011 for a review). Annand (2011) highlights three important points of criticism against social presence stemming from recent research. Firstly, it seems that social presence does not have a significant influence on cognitive presence. In other words, higher levels of social presence do not necessarily lead to higher order or deeper learning. Secondly, the claim that collaborative efforts sustained by two-way communication are needed to support online learning is challenged. Thirdly, Annand (2011) states that the methodology used to develop the CoI framework led to certain assumptions because it is based on limited evidence “arising from a collaborative

activity that is generally only a subset of a higher-level online learning environment.” (p. 52). Thus, the influence of collaboration on the creation of social presence has been overstated (Annand, 2011).

The significance of social presence in online learning environments requires further empirical research. The one dimensional focus on the influence of group-based social presence on learning requires re-evaluation and expansion (Annand, 2011). In this regard the following suggestions are made – a comparison between learning outcomes resulting from collaboration to other learning models and examining informal learning effects on cognition (Annand, 2011).

Research that considers the relationships between social presence and other variables is necessary. A good example of such an integrated and multidimensional approach is the research conducted by Kim, Kwon and Cho (2011). In their study they examined the relationships between media integration, quality instruction and interactivity with social presence and learning satisfaction. They concluded for instance “that media integration, quality instruction and interactivity are good predictors of social presence while only media integration and quality instruction predict learning satisfaction” (Kim, Kwon & Cho, 2011, p. 1518).

It is evident to me that the focus is too much on certain methods (the use of emoticons for example) to enhance social presence in online learning environments and too little on determining the true significance of social presence in an objective manner. This reduces the concept of social presence to mere practical guidelines that course designers, teachers and learners need to follow. The question still remains – do certain practical methods (like posting a biography and photo of yourself) really have an influence on the quality of individual learning experiences in online learning? Aren't these methods merely superficial in nature?

Furthermore, it is also problematic that most research on social presence is highly subjective. It is questionable whether subjective student responses (in the form of questionnaires) truly tell us more about the relevance and role of social presence.

This essay gave a brief description of social presence as a conceptual and theoretical concept within distance education. It highlighted the most important areas of application and demonstrated the evolving and problematic nature of social presence as reflected in conflicting research results.

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Neil Cochrane  
OMDE 601 Section 9040  
10 August 2012  
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