Social Presence - Student Engagement

1 What is it?

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) define social presence as the ability of participants in an online learning environment, "to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89). The authors view social presence as one of three presences in their Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework that support learning processes in online and blended environments. (See Community of Inquiry Framework). They further view it as consisting of three elements – affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion.

2 Why is it important?

Online courses have continued to grow steadily in the United States. However, the retention rate in these courses remains lower than face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2016). While there are multiple factors related to the low retention rate in online courses, student satisfaction is the common denominator (Weidlich & Bastiaens, 2018). Social presence has been found to have positive effects on students' participation, motivation to participate, satisfaction with the instructor, satisfaction with courses, and improve course retention (Richardson, Maeda, Lv, Caskurlu, 2017). In order for students to be successful, they must feel that they are part of a learning community. They must also feel the instructor supports them and has the expertise to help them achieve their goals. At the individual learning level, social presence influences students' participation in learning activities, such as discussions, and enhances their overall learning outcomes. On a broader level it also increases students' satisfaction with the course and the instructor.

3 How to do it?

There are multiple ways to create social presence in your online courses.

- **Include a self-introduction activity in your course.** As mentioned in the previous sections, social presence adds authenticity to the learning context and builds relationships that will enhance learning, therefore, it is important to include an exercise in which students will have the opportunity to connect with each other. The self-introduction activity can include basic questions such as name, profession, hobbies, city of residence, etc. It is also recommended that students post a picture of themselves so everyone can begin to put faces with names. Students can also create a self-introduction video if they are comfortable with that medium.

- **Design community building and/or collaborative activities.** Small group work makes it necessary for students to interact around a task and so naturally get to know each other better. A simple way to do this is to put students into small groups for discussions and report out to the larger group so good ideas are not lost. More complex tasks such as problem solving activities or presentations require more structure but similarly bring students together so social presence can develop. At the end of the week/module, consider providing students with a review/summary of what has happened in that week; this can motivate them and provide guidance to help them to stay on track.

- **Model & encourage the use of verbal immediacy behaviors in interactions with students.** Verbal immediacy behaviors are markers of social presence including such things as using students' names, disclosing things about oneself, and valuing student contributions. When

students see you using them, they will be more likely to use them themselves and this will foster the development of social presence. Mentioning individuals by name reminds them that you have reviewed and thought about their work.

- **Create a social interaction space (e.g., Water Cooler) within the course site.** To establish a feeling of community, a space in which students can ask questions, share ideas, and help each other with the course is recommended. Some instructors prefer to have two forums. In one, the instructor contributes to the conversation and can answer questions. In the other, students talk among themselves about group projects or other initiatives - consider making it an instructor-free zone.

Examples

- This video demonstrates **How to create social presence using a welcome video** that you can share with your learners before class begins
- This video showcases **how to create social presence using weekly preview videos** to prepare students for what is ahead.

4 Technology Tips & Tools

- Announcement tools, which are available within most Learning Management Systems, enable the instructor to send messages to the whole class to increase their sense of community.
- Discussion Forums allow instructors to set up interactive discussions through which social presence is developed. Be sure to use student names in your discussion posts. Consider using **VoiceThread** for audio-based discussions.
- An important vehicle for the development of instructor social presence is feedback through which instructors can develop relationships with their students, and students get a sense of the instructor. Consider providing audio or video feedback.

- Video creation tools, such as **Camtasia**, **SnagIt**, **MovieMaker**, and **iMovie**, make it possible for an instructor to record check-ins, weekly reviews, or office hours videos for the class.

5 Additional Resources

- **The Community of Inquiry website**
- **Tools supported by Purdue ITaP**
  - **WebEx**: A web conferencing tool useful to host virtual office hours or record sessions.
  - **SnagIt**: Screencast tool useful to give feedback and make announcements. Create, edit, and add images to screen captures of your computer.
  - **Camtasia**: Video editing and screencast tool useful to make tutorials and announcements. Add transition, highlights, titles to videos.
  - **VoiceThread**: Collaborative tool allows file sharing and audio-based discussion threads
- **Other tools for feedback:**
  - **Screencast-O-Matic**: Create free screencast videos and add narration.
  - **QuickTime**: Allows screencast and video editing.
  - **Kaizena**: Allows audio feedback embedded in Google Docs.

6 References

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