Foreword

Dr. Robert Wright, in this book, has gathered together a selection of chapters that examines the importance of social presence as it relates to instructional interaction in online learning environments. I have known Robert since he started his PhD in Learning Technologies at the University of North Texas (UNT) and selected me as his academic advisor and, later, as his dissertation chair. This book is a natural extension of his PhD research that further expands the knowledge about social presence in these learning spaces. As I state in many of my doctoral courses in Learning Technologies at UNT, it is important to understand that teaching and learning relationships are no longer confined by space, but are defined by connectivity. This book provides relevant examples of that statement.

When technology-based or online learning environments were first created, the purpose of those systems was to increase learning efficiency and better management of the learning spaces. Since those early days, the research has shown that the technology itself is much less important to the learning outcomes than the rapport created among the students and between the students and the instructor/teacher to achieve the sought-after learning outcomes. A primary area of interest in achieving the required communications in any online learning space is how to create, improve, and then foster student and teacher interaction.

My research in distributed learning has shown that rapport, created by social presence and other interaction factors, is a primary mechanism in delivering successful online instruction. Any online course can be shown to achieve the learning objectives with students passing either by grade or by some authentic learning outcomes. My interest has been to examine how to improve long-term learning and knowledge transfer after a student finishes a degree program or other course of study, not just one course at a time. A student’s perception of course satisfaction, achievement, and learning, as well as lower anxiety and higher amounts of online discourse all provide the cognitive scaffolding to achieve higher order learning transfer and long-term retention. The first step in that process is creating social presence.

This book focuses on the specific topic of social presence, as well as interaction, rapport, and how they can be supported in technology-rich environments. It is broken into three keys areas. The first defines the theories, conditions, and emerging best practices in social presence. These chapters provide a framework that lays the foundation that is then expanded upon in the later sections. The second is how technology and social presence interact. These chapters examine different technology-based and online learning environments and look at different styles and types of social presence issues. Technologies include virtual environments, Web 2.0, Twitter, and other platforms. The third section examines how social presence is established, supported, and maintained in these differing systems and technologies. These chapters examine designing materials and courses, instructional strategies, and other topics that are of importance to creating social presence in online learning environments.
This book provides a well-rounded set of practices, principles, theories, and examples that are currently being used or tested to promote, establish, and maintain social presence within the online learning environments that exist at all levels of education. It should be a useful resource to any student or researcher in the field.

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Greg Jones received his PhD in Curriculum and Instruction/Instructional Technology from the University of Texas. He currently serves as Associate Professor of Learning Technologies at the University of North Texas, and as Program Coordinator for the online doctoral program in Learning Technologies and the master’s program in Computer Education & Cognitive Systems. His primary research interest is in using technology to further the creation and distribution of knowledge and learning. His research focuses on the combination of visualization systems, virtual communities, tele-mentoring, games, simulations, and 3D online learning environments for teaching and learning. These emerging technologies support learning by distributing interaction and feedback across time and space via interactive forms of multimedia. Teaching and learning relationships are no longer confined by space, but are defined by connectivity.