Chapter 1
Social Presence in Culturally Mediated Online Learning Environments

Vidya Ananthanarayanan
University of the Incarnate Word, USA

ABSTRACT

There is a substantive body of work that examines cross-cultural issues and social presence, respectively, in Online Learning Environments (OLEs). However, there is limited research that examines the interplay of these three variables together. This chapter takes a pragmatic approach to the issues surrounding culture, presence, and interaction in online learning environments to generate awareness of the relevance, timeliness, and importance of this issue among scholar-practitioners, policy makers, and instructional designers. In the process, the author hopes to engender recognition of and discourse around an issue that is still under-represented in literature and research.

INTRODUCTION

Online education is becoming increasingly multicultural due to the convergence of myriad variables. On the one hand, there is growing awareness of online education as a viable alternative to traditional offerings. Consequently, the number of higher education institutions offering online distance education programs to international and transnational students is increasing (Zhang & Kenny, 2010). On the other hand, tighter immigration policies, the need to contextualize learning to personal or professional growth, and the opportunity to balance academic, professional, and personal commitments through anyplace, anytime learning makes online learning a viable alternative for students (Parrish & Linder-VanBerschot, 2010).

Thus, by enabling geographically dispersed students to enroll in online courses, OLEs may be more likely to reflect different cultural conditions and expectations than, perhaps, traditional, face-to-face (F2F) classrooms (Zhang & Kenny, 2010). Ironically, while there is abundant literature on culturally responsive teaching (CRT) in F2F classrooms, literature addressing cultural diversity in OLEs seems limited in comparison. Rather, research in online learning and social pres-
ence has predominantly focused on interactivity, curriculum and instructional design strategies, instructor roles and student characteristics, tools and technologies, and efficacy, outcomes, and assessment (Conole & Oliver, 2006; Zawacki-Richter, Bäcker, & Vogt, 2009). The purpose of this literature review therefore, is: (a) to examine how culture influences and informs presence in OLEs; (b) to identify practices and strategies that could facilitate social presence in culturally mediated OLEs; and (c) to identify future research that would provide new insights on the interplay between culture, presence, and learning in OLEs. In the process, the author hopes to engender recognition of and discourse around an issue that is still under-represented in literature and research.

BACKGROUND

Existing and emergent literature addressing cross-cultural issues in online education reveals diverse research emphases and contexts. Uzuner’s (2009) review identified the following research themes: a) international students’ experiences with and perceptions of online learning; b) age and gender-based differences; c) cultural issues in instructional, curriculum, and learning environment design; d) cultural and linguistic influences on student engagement and satisfaction; e) culturally-driven learning practices versus localized pedagogical strategies. The contexts and subjects for these studies ranged from students of a specific nationality to a culturally-diverse group in an online course at a foreign university. There were cross-cultural comparisons by cultural orientations (low-context versus high-context, or collective versus individualistic); and cross-country comparisons among students who were enrolled in online classes in their native countries were also made. The author’s independent review reinforced the predominance of these themes with regard to cross-cultural issues in distance and/or online learning.

An exploration of evidence pertinent to social presence and online learning revealed that social presence is chiefly investigated in conjunction with student learning, interaction, engagement and retention, and course success and outcomes. Ancillary research themes address strategies to create social presence, instruments to measure it, the instructor’s role, or proffer theoretical frameworks and models to enhance social presence in OLEs. Per Oztok and Brett (2011), research on social presence and online learning consistently focuses on one of the following topics: (a) the correlation between social presence and a sense of community, (b) the correlation between social presence, interactions and behaviors, and (c) the correlation between social presence and success and satisfaction. In summary, social presence is primarily viewed as an influencing variable, not a standalone entity.

It is evident that culture’s influence on online learning and social presence is a relatively nascent area of study (Moore, Shattuck, & Al-Harthi, 2012; Uzuner, 2009; Wilson, 2001) and primarily descriptive, not experimental (Zawacki-Richter et al., 2009). As such, it does not always provide solutions to the challenges and concerns it uncovers. However, the challenges of addressing cultural diversity remain the same, be it in a F2F classroom or in an OLE (Uzuner, 2009). It may be pertinent therefore, to review the preeminent theories and themes relevant to culture, presence, and online learning so as to better understand how they inform each other.

Online Learning

The basic premise behind online learning appears simple: Learning that takes place in cyberspace or “the online world of computer networks and especially the Internet” (Cyberspace, 2014). In reality however, the phrase online learning is used synonymously with e-learning, networked learning, Internet learning, distributed learning, and many more (Ally, 2004; El Mansour & Mup-