Chapter 7
Building Social Presence through Engaging Online Instructional Strategies

Sara K. Mitchell
Walden University, USA

MaryFriend Shepard
Walden University, USA

ABSTRACT

Social presence in the online learning environment is best developed when the instructor is the facilitator of knowledge and the students are the seekers of knowledge. Strategies for consciously developing social presence among learners are provided. This chapter includes the Online Steps to Complex Cognition, an educational model that displays five successive stages of the online learning process and how social presence can be heightened at each stage. Positive levels of social presence allow students to engage in critical discourse and promote learning as they intellectually and socially engage and build a level of mutual trust and respect with their teachers and with other learners.

SOCIAL PRESENCE

Social presence is a collection of practices and actions with a common feature: they all enhance a sense of community or feeling of belonging in the online environment. Online discussions are the heart of the online learning environment and the main cultivators of social presence. For productive, thought provoking discussions to occur the students must have a sense of belonging, trustworthiness, and positive feeling toward the group. Understanding how to enhance social presence is important because there is a common thread among online learning research that indicates that when social presence is heightened students’ cognitive levels increase (Shea et al., 2010).

The interaction in online classrooms is different from the face-to-face classroom. In the online space, there is a physical distance between participants; and the lack of face-to-face interaction may create a feeling of isolation (Bender, 2003). The online classroom is also void of specific behaviors that increase a sense of belonging in a traditional face-to-face classroom: close physical
proximity, eye contact, physical gestures, and tone of voice (Whipp & Lorentz, 2009). Generating a sense of belonging can be achieved in the online environment if online instructors overtly assist with its development. This can be done through a variety of communication methods such as increasing the amount of encouragement during discussion, using personal examples, providing productive feedback, and using students’ first names in communications.

The online discussions differ in positive ways from face-to-face discussions because every student is required to participate and be actively engaged. In the discussions, each student should reflect, question, and engage others in critical inquiry. Promoting, modeling, and sustaining systematic discourse as students connect, communicate, and collaborate with each other digitally requires an instructor to have a special skill set. As online instructors build engaging online communities they break down the barriers of learning at a distance and maximize the sense of community.

The Roles of the Instructor and Student in Online Discussions

The online environment often uses discussions to foster deep learning and to form a community of inquirers. The purpose of the discourse is to engage learners in a continual process of critical thinking and thought reconstruction that ends with further inquiry (Garrison & Anderson, 2009). The discussion is developed through instructor and student facilitation. The discourse is reciprocal as all members are learning from each other. This does not mean that the student’s role is the same as the instructor’s role. “Learners and instructors do not perform identical roles and thus must engage in different behaviors to succeed” (Shea et al., 2012, p.93). Understanding the distinction between the two roles will assist with the development of social presence in the classroom.

The instructor’s role is to provide learning goals, post rules, create an engaging environment, assist with the progression of shared meanings, act as the expert, provide models, and ensure that the discussion advances. The instructor should constantly be assessing the discussion to determine when to challenge or assist students’ thought processes. The students are enrolled in the class to gain more information and should not be considered content experts. Consequently, they require teacher coaching throughout discussions. The student’s role is to “support their peers in developing an understanding and skills” (Darling-Hammond, Austin, Orcutt, & Martin, n.d., p. 131). Students actively engage in the discussion by citing evidence, researching topics, suggesting new ideas, sharing personal experiences, questioning each other, and relying on one and other for help. The instructor is the catalyst in the classroom, sparking the discussion and adding fuel as needed. Creating an environment in which the students engage actively will allow for greater social presence. Two central themes have emerged in the research concerning social presence: (a) the instructor’s presence in the online environment is correlated to the level of social presence, and (b) social presence is correlated to the cognition of the students (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 1999; Shea et al., 2012).

Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, and Fung (2010) posited that it is the instructors’ presence that launches and maintains the social presence for the class. The online instructor is responsible for the design of the class, facilitation of discussions, and direct teaching of the students. The instructor’s presence in each of these components is correlated to the level of social presence for the classroom. Shackelford and Maxwell (2012) found instructor modeling, supportive and encouraging phrases, facilitation of discussions, providing multiple modes for communication, and requiring participation contributed the most to the students feeling a sense of community.

Examples of design elements that may enhance social presence are developing a class café, creating collaborative assignments, posting the instructor’s...