Chapter 8

Bridging the Social and Teaching Presence Gap in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

Feelings of disconnection and isolation from teachers and other classmates could have a major negative impact on students’ satisfaction and success when learning online. This chapter describes how a variety of Web 2.0 tools have been used to establish and maintain teaching and social presence in online learning. Rather than limiting contact to the virtual world created by well-designed interfaces of learning management system platforms, the creative use of Web conferencing in online teaching not only brings students and teachers together as real human beings but also generates interactions that create more interest and higher engagement. The combined use of synchronous and asynchronous tools, together with mobile devices, has made online learning more flexible, accessible, and credible.

INTRODUCTION

Living in the era when technologies develop at a break-neck speed, incredible computing power has changed the way we learn in a profound way. Teaching the Net Generation of learners, with their digital expertise and constant demand for instant information, not only presents professional challenges to educators but also opens up a vast panorama of possibilities. Discussions about the difference between online teaching and traditional classroom teaching are prominent among educators today (Helleve, 2012; Smith, Ferguson, & Caris, 2002). Certainly, we cannot copy and paste the traditional approach onto the online model. But, do they really have to be as different as one may believe? Whether online or offline, teacher-student and student-student communication and interaction, or so called social presence is an important factor that supports learning (Kehrwald, 2007). When such communication is mediated solely by computers or other electronic devices, can it be as effective as when people meet face to face?

This chapter will describe the uses of different web tools and best practices that connect students and teachers as real human beings, will examine...
the roles of these tools in establishing and maintaining social and teaching presence, and will discuss their impacts on quality and accessibility of online learning. The chapter will:

- Review different tools that can establish, develop, and maintain social presence in an online learning environment, including categories, features, implications, and influences in teaching and learning.
- Highlight emerging best practices—Web conferencing as an effective medium to unite the teacher and students online in real time despite the remoteness of their locality.
- Discuss the combination use of synchronous and asynchronous tools to increase social and teaching presence.
- Explore the efficiency and flexibility of mobile devices in establishing and maintaining teaching presence and bridging the social presence gap.

**BACKGROUND**

The Internet has changed the reach and nature of distance education, which was previously done via mailings, radio, or television (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). Online learning, a new and improved version of distance learning, is primarily delivered via the Internet (Power, 2008; Watson & Kalmon, 2005). With online and blended/hybrid courses sprouting up all over the world, online education has flourished because of its unparalleled accessibility, connectivity, and flexibility (Hiltz & Turoff, 2005). Growth momentum in higher education institutions offering online courses has remained strong over the past decade in the United States. In 2012, 6.7 million American students took at least one online course, equivalent to 32% of all students in higher education, indicating that this new form of education has been generally accepted (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Studies have demonstrated that online learning is positively related with increased retention rate, and both active and collaborative learning, suggesting this new format of learning has some transformative effects on students learning (Fasse, Humbert, & Rappold, 2009; Meyer & McNeal, 2011). The advancement of technology and increasing bandwidth capabilities have divided online learning into two camps, asynchronous and synchronous, with each having its own benefits and limitations (Hrastinski, 2008). Asynchronous learning provides the flexibility of learning “anywhere, anytime”, whereas synchronous learning offers the opportunity to communicate more similarly to traditional face-to-face teaching. These two delivery modes coexist and complement each other (Hrastinski, 2008). Integration of the two produces blended online learning (Power, 2008).

The online learners connected by computers and the Web form a community of inquiry that is an integration of social, cognitive and teaching presences (Garrison, 2007; Swan, Garrison, & Richardson, 2009). The term of social presence has been interpreted variably by different educators and researchers (Leh, 2001; Picciano, 2002; Tu, 2000). In the context of online learning, Kehrwald (2007) defined social presence as an individual’s ability to demonstrate her state of being and signal her availability for interpersonal transactions. From a study of students’ experiences with social presence, Kehrwald further identifies six social-relational mechanisms: commonality, feelings of safety, trust, respect, rapport and interdependence. According to Garrison (2007), there are three aspects of social presence: effective communication, that helps members get to know each other; open communication, indicated by risk-free expressions; and group cohesion, evidenced as mutual support and collaboration. Development of social presence is affected by social context, online communication and interactivity (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Lowenthal (2013) suggests that intimacy and immediacy, indicated by a sense of equilibrium and psychological closeness between