Chapter 12
Strategies for Establishing and Sustaining Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment

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ABSTRACT
Establishing a level of comfort in which students feel at ease in an online course is primarily the responsibility of the professor, but fostering this community of inquiry is a complicated task. While research is rich with regard to broad instructional practices that can be used to foster social presence, practical strategies and examples for faculty to use are lacking in the literature. This chapter describes specific social presence-related instructional strategies used to foster an atmosphere of sharing, support, and success for students enrolled in online courses.

INTRODUCTION
This chapter will provide online professors with a clear blueprint for infusing social presence into their courses. Concrete ideas, methods, and strategies that are grounded in theory are outlined to allow professors to easily identify, plan for, and implement a change in online courses. The chapter includes supplemental demonstration-based videos for incorporating some of the more technical strategies. These supplemental materials can be accessed via a QR (Quick Response) code listed next to the strategy that allows you to access materials from your mobile device using a QR reader app. The website with all supplemental materials can be accessed at http://socialpresence.weebly.
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com/. All related tools described in the chapter are free to use, and methods for evaluating the effectiveness and sustainability of strategies are provided.

BACKGROUND

A theory that connects both the need for intentional instructional strategies and communication mechanisms in the design of the course in order to build community is social presence theory. The roots of social presence as a construct can be traced back to the field of communications, and Mehrabian’s (1971) concept of immediacy, in which certain physical and verbal behaviors were shown to reduce the psychological and physical distance between individuals. This concept spawned research by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), who studied face-to-face, audio, and closed-circuit television interactions, and derived a definition for social presence as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p. 65). Subsequent research provided early descriptions of the concept of social presence from an instructional lens, defining it as teacher immediacy in the classroom (see Christophel, 1990; Gorham, 1988; Kearney, Plax, & Wendt-Wasco, 1985). Behaviors associated with teacher immediacy include both verbal and nonverbal actions, including smiling, nodding, using humor and self-disclosure, addressing students by name, using inclusive pronouns, repeating contacts with students over time, responding frequently, offering praise, and communicating attentiveness (O’Sullivan, Hunt, & Lippert, 2004). Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) began studying the construct in the context of online learning environments, and derived the Community of Inquiry model, describing social presence as the feeling that group members communicate with people instead of impersonal objects. As communication channels are restricted, social presence may decrease. When social presence is low within a group, group members often feel disconnected and cohesion levels are low. When social presence is high, however, each group member has the feeling of joint involvement. Aragon (2003) noted that the overall goal for creating social presence in any learning environment, whether online or face-to-face, is to create a level of comfort at which people feel at ease around the professor and the other participants. The lack of social presence with the professor, the content, and with other learners has been shown to impact student satisfaction and perceived learning (see Richardson & Swan, 2003). Without the awareness of other learners’ presence, it is nearly impossible to develop strategies to encourage learners to be present in the course. The key is to create opportunities for interactions between learners that are stimulating, allow learners to express themselves, and have significance in the learners’ life (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). While research is rich with regard to broad instructional practices that can be used to foster social presence, practical strategies and specific examples for faculty to use are lacking in the literature. This chapter describes specific social presence-related instructional strategies used to foster an atmosphere of sharing, support and success for students enrolled in online courses. In relation to the Community of Inquiry framework, it details strategies for student engagement with the professor, strategies for student engagement with the course content/concepts, and strategies for fostering an engaged learning community. Our chapter begins with the story of one student trying to navigate her first online course.

Chapter Vignette

Professors are sometimes puzzled when they find that, despite intentions of making their online courses engaging and meaningful, students seem disengaged or disillusioned. Let’s examine undergraduate student Beth’s experience:
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