Chapter 2
On Social Presence:
Theories, Methodologies, and
Guidelines for the Innovative Contexts
of Computer-Mediated Learning

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ABSTRACT

Social presence in online learning communities may be defined as the degree to which a learner feels connected with other learners and the teacher/educator, within a computer-mediated context. However, social presence is a broad construct that cannot be reduced to its manifestation in the specific context of distance-learning communities. How can we feel the presence of others? And, in virtue of what such a sensation may establish in our consciousness when others are actually not present in the physical environment we are in? This chapter includes a review of the main theoretical proposals to understand social presence, along with their guidelines to promote it, specific instruments and possible criticalities. Then, the different theories on social presence are resumed and integrated, in order to provide practical design guidelines open to the new technologies that may constitute innovative resources for the computer-mediated learning tools of the future (virtual reality, virtual worlds, augmented reality, and ambient intelligence).

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INTRODUCTION

New communication technologies have brought innovative, extraordinary opportunities for personal relationships, networking, and collaborative activities such as work and learning. Historically, such innovations have been accompanied by philosophical and scientific study devoted to understand whether mediated interactions could be regarded as more or less similar to face-to-face communication. Is computer-supported work effective? Is mediated learning desirable? And, more specifically, what factors are important (to be analyzed, measured, reduced or improved) in order to promote the processes impacting the final outcomes of mediated interactions?

Among these factors, the fundamental construct of social presence has emerged. Social presence can be defined as the perception of being present with others within an environment that is characterized by some sort/level of mediation granted by communication technologies (Biocca & Harms, 2002). Indeed, when we use a webchat, read others’ comments on our social network profile, play an online-based multiplayer video game or attend an online course, we could feel more or less the sensation that other people are “there” with us and that an actual relationship is emerging (or may emerge) among us and them. On the other hand, if such a perception does not manifest in our own consciousness, no interaction will be possible at all, along with the potential desirable outcomes it could bring (learning, collaborative work, social capital etc.).

But what exactly is social presence, and what factors do generate, maintain, or enhance it? Does social presence depend on defined characteristics within the communicators involved (such as social attitude, personality, emotional expression), or is it more related to technological features and the advancement of the medium? The aim of this chapter is to describe social presence and relative theories, and discuss its relevance to mediated learning.

Classic Theories

The first theory on social presence has been provided by Short and colleagues (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976), who defined it as the “degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships” (p.65). In this context, social presence seemed to be considered an attentional feature, where one feels more or less in the company of another depending on the other’s “detectability” within the mediated interaction. Specifically, such salience was influenced by features of the medium, namely intimacy and immediacy. Indeed, Short et al.’s objective was mainly to highlight differences among a limited number of communication technologies which were available at that time. For example, video-based communication can be regarded as more intimate and immediate than
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