Chapter 12
Technology and Presence: Multi-Presence in Online Interactions

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ABSTRACT
This chapter presents and discusses the concept of presence in online dialogues and interactions. The point of departure in this discussion is that of multitasking and social presence. Then, the chapter frames different e-learning scenarios that give participants the impression of being—or not being—present in the same room although geographically dispersed. On the basis of theoretical inspiration from symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, educators’ new roles in e-learning are discussed in the context of empirical material collected from an e-learning program in a physiotherapy school. In addition, the concept of multi-presence is presented. This chapter argues that multi-presence occurs in both online and offline interactions and that, as a result of technology, is utilized in both professional and learning situations.

INTRODUCTION
In the Western globalized world today, the internet enables people to meet with others when located in different parts of the world and even in different time zones. But, what does it mean to be present in an online situation? What does this presence feel like, and how can it be described? Is online presence different from offline presence? In this book chapter, the concept of presence in both offline and online interactions will be presented and discussed. The theoretical perspective is based on symbolic interactionism, which focuses on interactions as well as interpretations and reflections of interactions in different settings. Thus, the objective of this chapter is to discuss the experience of presence in online settings from the perspectives of time, space, and professional learning. For this purpose, empirical material from interviews and participant observations of an e-learning program at a physiotherapy school in Denmark will be included. 46 students and 12 educators participated in the study that was conducted between 2011 and 2015.

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-4094-6.ch012
The data for this chapter were collected during the author’s Ph.D. project and more detailed descriptions are also found in her thesis in Danish (Nortvig, 2015a). This project was concerned with the following research questions: How does e-learning in a professional Bachelor’s program influence students’ participation and presence during teaching and learning? How does e-learning influence students’ opportunities to develop a professional identity during their education? Fieldwork was conducted at a school where e-learning had just been introduced as a way to become physiotherapist. In this e-learning program, students were physically present at campus for three days every second week. The rest of the time, they studied at home or were in internship at hospitals, rehabilitation centers, or clinics. The format of e-learning at the physiotherapy school was specifically geared toward blended learning (Pytash & O’Byrne, 2014) in which the classroom on campus consisted of both traditional on-campus students and of e-learning students at home who accessed the classroom via the internet through Adobe Connect. Thus, e-learning students could see and hear what was going on in the classroom. Moreover, lectures were video-recorded, so students unable to participate in the classroom at a specific time could later watch the lessons.

As it will be shown below, the educators found it difficult to teach using e-learning methods and to meet students online, especially in the beginning. Moreover, as the decision about using e-learning in the physiotherapy school was based more on organizational arguments than on didactical ones, the educators also had doubts about whether their e-learning students would end up having the same physiotherapy competencies as non-e-learning students. Thus, the data presented at following have been generated at a time when e-learning and online education were still new in this specific context and when it was experienced as something very different—especially for educators—from the usual teaching format. Furthermore, the experience of being present both online and in a classroom on campus at the same time was not always felt by educators to be a natural way of being present.

In this setting, the researcher took on the role of participant observer in the e-learning sessions for student physiotherapists. She participated in the e-learning sessions from home and watched online lessons via Adobe Connect. She also interviewed the educators and conducted focus group interviews with two cohorts of first-year e-learning students. One of the foci of this data gathering was the experience of presence in online learning for both physiotherapy educators and students, and a portion of the researcher’s Ph.D. thesis will be further elaborated at following. But before addressing the context of the physiotherapy school in order to understand educators’ and students’ experiences of online interactions, recent research on two concepts related to presence, namely social presence and multitasking, will be presented (see also Nortvig, 2014).

**BACKGROUND**

Being socially present is not necessarily considered the same as being physically present. Several years ago, Short et al. (1976) defined social presence in the context of telecommunications as “the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of interpersonal relationships ...” (p. 65). Here, salience refers to the degree to which a person is perceived as real in mediated communication (Pugsley, 2010), and the authors considered the medium itself to establish more or less social presence according to its ability to transmit nonverbal social cues. However, in the internet age, the concept of social presence became less concerned with the objective qualities of the medium and more about perception (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Swan & Shih, 2005). Moreover, the concept of