Chapter 11
Social Presence in Online Dissertation Classes

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ABSTRACT
This chapter reports on the results of a study that explored doctoral learners’ perceptions of social presence in online dissertation courses. Seven doctoral graduates were interviewed to understand how social presence functions in online dissertation courses, whether social presence influences their dissertation completion, and how technological tools help improve social presence in the dissertation courses. The results of this study indicate that social presence plays an important role in online dissertation courses. Students’ course satisfaction and learning outcome were associated with the degree of social presence. The use of emoticons, emails, and phone calls in online dissertation courses increased students’ sense of social presence. Students were more satisfied with instructors who interacted with them frequently and who provided detailed and constructive feedback in a timely manner. Recommendations for further research are included.

INTRODUCTION
The evolution of technology has reshaped instructional and learning methods drastically in the past three decades. Computer-mediated communication (CMC) enhances human communications through computer-mediated formats, such as emails, chat rooms, instant messaging, text messaging, and social networking. Online delivery media, which allow learners to interact with instructors, with each other, and with content resources, have minimized the constraints that are common in traditional classrooms. Harasim (1990) described five attributes to distinguish online learning from other educational environments: place-independent communication, time-independent communication, text-based communication, many-to-many communication, and computer-mediated learning, all of which “create a
unique social climate that impacts interactions and
group dynamics online” (p. 43). Online learning
has attracted millions of learners to attend many
distance education programs today. While people
are praising the benefits and advantages of taking
online courses in this advanced technology era,
there are drawbacks and disadvantages in online
learning environment as well. The lack of facial
expression, body language, visual cues, hand ges-
tures, voice intonation, and face-to-face interaction
might incur students’ misunderstanding of the
instructor’s meaning, defer comprehension, and
impede students’ learning. Because the instructors
are not immediately accessible to answer ques-
tions or to convey ideas, the flow of the online
discussion tends to be slower and students may
feel a sense of isolation. How do online instructors
break down these barriers?

Social presence becomes critical in online
learning platform. Tu (2000b) pinpointed that
social presence, a significant factor in distance
education, is the major vehicle of social learning
and is a must for improving social interaction
online. Though research on social presence has
proliferated in the past decade, studies on the
relationship between social presence and online
dissertation writing courses are rare. Does so-
cial presence exist in online dissertation writing
classes? How does social presence function in
online dissertation courses? To what extent does
social presence influence the effectiveness of
students’ dissertation writing? What technological
tools or social media could be used in enhancing
teachers’ social presence in distance dissertation
courses? Considering the asynchronous online
learning and communications in niche online
communities, social presence is worthy of study.
This chapter reports on a study that explored
doctoral learners’ perceptions of social presence
in the online dissertation courses, especially its
existence, function, and effectiveness.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Over the past three decades, many researchers
have devoted efforts to investigating social pres-
ence. Some researchers focused on the theories
and definitions of social presence (e.g., Biocca,
Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001; Garrison, 2007;
Kehrwald, 2007; Lowenthal, 2009; Short et al.,
1976; Tu, 2000a, 2000b; Tu, McIsaac, Sujo-
Montes, & Armfield, 2012; Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk,
2012). Others examined the relationships between
students’ perceived social presence and learning
outcomes as well as online course satisfaction (e.g.,
Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Bozkaya, 2008; Bozkaya
& Aydin, 2007; Caspi & Blau, 2008; Cobb, 2009;
Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hassanein, Head, &
Ju, 2009; Hostetter & Monique, 2006; Jolivette,
2006; Ko, 2012; Lee, Mykota, & Duncan, 2007;
Leong, 2011; Reio & Crim, 2006; Richardson
& Swan, 2003; So, 2008; Swan & Shih, 2005;
Tu, 2001, 2002b, 2002c; Tu & McIsaac, 2002;
Tu, Yen, Blocher, & Chan, 2012; Tung & Deng,

Theories and Definitions
of Social Presence

The theme of social presence first appeared in
Asimov’s (1957) *The Naked Sun* where robots
in Solaria were strictly taught to avoid personal
contact, and communication was done in the
trimensional image instead of in person. This