

WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESENCE?

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The social presence theory classifies various types of communication along a continuum. Sallnas (2000) defines social presence as the degree of awareness of the other person in any given communication. For example, face-to-face communication has the highest social presence, while written or text-based communication has the least social presence. This presents an interesting challenge to online instructors: how to create a social presence online while utilizing limiting mediums (such as text based) within the online classroom. The role of an online instructor is that of a facilitator, organizer, and manager (Cooper & Hendrick-Keefe, 2001), but must be much more than that. The instructor who wishes to hone skills and techniques related to social presence in the classroom will be the ones most likely to positively impact student opinions of the instructor (Gunawardena, 1995 and 2002).

The social presence, in the online classroom, includes the extent to which the instructor is perceived as a real person, as opposed to a webmaster. In an online classroom, there are eight possible social presence cues identified by Abdullah (1999) and Rourke, et al. (2001). These cues include humor, emotions, self-disclosure, support or agreement for an idea, addressing people by name, greetings, complimenting another's idea, and illusions of a physical presence.

- Humor: Use of humor in the online classroom, such as through announcements or emails can reduce social distance and conveys goodwill (Aragon, 2003).
- Emotions: Showing emotions to students such as happiness can add clarity to a message and forge connections (Scollins-Mantha, 2008). Sharing of feelings and emotions using emoticons in emails to students, for example, is a way to do this in writing (Tu & Mclsaac, 2002).
- Self-disclosure: While instructors may hesitate to share personal information, sharing of some personal information can build the online relationship between student and instructor. For example, noting in an email your plans for the weekend "I am going kayaking, do you have big plans for the weekend?" posting pictures of the instructor performing his or her favorite activity can also heighten social presence, (Savery, 2005).
- Support or agreement for an idea: Through online feedback such as discussion boards and allowing students to peer review posts and assignments, the instructor can generate social presence in this manner.
- Greetings and addressing students by name: Rather than simply replying to an email or communication, saying, "Hi Lisa," or "Good afternoon, Roger" can create greater social presence online.
- Complimenting: Telling students of a job "well done" or "keep up the good work" on assignment feedback can enhance instructor social presence, and develop confidence and connection in the online classroom (Scollins-Mantha, 2008).
- Illusions of a physical presence: Social presence in this manner (Johnson & Keil, 2002) can be accomplished through synchronous tools such as audio or video recordings, feedback, and lectures. Instructors must understand the isolation felt by students when communication lags (Tu & Mclsaac, 2002). For example, a student sends an email asking a question about an assignment at 11 p.m. but doesn't receive a response until two days later. Answering emails in a short turn-around time and providing feedback quickly is an example of showing support and social presence in an online classroom. Providing a "check-in" email to students can show support as well (Scollins-Mantha, 2008).

Other examples to heighten social presence may include: providing virtual office hours, sending weekly checklists and grading rubrics, utilizing social media websites for announcements and for forming professional relationships with students, and developing students' online collaboration skills (Baker & Edwards, 2011). The examples presented can enhance the social presence in the online classroom, but why should social presence matter to the online instructor?

Why Does Social Presence Matter?

In an online environment, it can be challenging to demonstrate to students the instructor is a "real" person. When instructors have low social presence, especially in an online classroom, several things can happen:

1. High levels of student frustration (Rifkind, 1992),
2. Critical attitude toward the instructors effectiveness (Rifkind, 1992),
3. Lower interaction with students (Garramone, Harris & Anderson, 1986),
4. Lower level of affective learning (Rifkind, 1992),
5. Lower levels of learning and effective instruction (Gunawardena, 1995).

All of these factors can contribute to lower student evaluations, less contentment with course, department and/or instructor, and less learning for students. Some online instructors may not be aware of these social presence cues, and the need for awareness of these cues when teaching online is that much more imperative. For example, social presence cues like humor and self-disclosure may come across better and be more comfortable to the instructor when utilizing in a traditional classroom. Learning how to create this type of environment online can assist instructors in avoiding some of the pitfalls associated with low social presence in the online classroom.

Research by Wise, et al. (2004) indicates social presence in an online classroom may not have an impact on learning, but does directly impact the student opinion of the instructor. It is possible that awareness and practice of each of these social cues can create a richer and more student-centered online classroom, resulting in greater social presence from the instructor.

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