

Lack of Social Presence as the Source of Many Online Class Problems

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Abstract

Online education has seen exponential growth within the past 15 years, and is only expected to grow even further. There is no doubt that online classes are providing people with more opportunities to gain an education thanks to low cost, flexibility, and convenience. However it also comes with a new set of problems. Namely, lack of authentic learning, learner disengagement, and interface burnout. It could be argued that many of these problems stem from a lack of social presence within the online community. That is to say that students lack a sense of identity while taking classes in an online context. Research has shown that students who have a greater sense of social presence in online classes do better, adapt more naturally, and take more advantage of the online learning format. Thus, instructors should provide as many opportunities for students to establish their identities within online classes by creating a free-flowing discussion board, model and scaffold as many topics as necessary for peer-reviews, and not overloading the course with too many assignments. The interface of online educational courses is still relatively in its infancy compared to the traditional classroom setting, therefore there will surely be more and more changes. Likewise, as technology develops even further, it is without a doubt that online classes will become part of the norm. Many universities now require students take some kind of distance learning class before graduation. Thus, the importance in researching methods of establishing social presence will become ever more necessary.

Key words: online education, learner identity, social presence, online learner disengagement

Enrollment in online educational programs has grown steadily in the past ten years. The Babson Group indicates that 32% of college students are enrolled in at least one online course, and online courses were a “critical component” of the long-term strategy at 69% of all higher education institutions in the U.S. (Allen and Seaman 2014) Specifically, regarding online writing courses are evolving in a way in which students can actively create and synthesize not only their own texts but the every discourse of an online class. In this electronic medium, which draws more completely on the ethos of writing and writing instruction than mere discussion, a significant alternative discourse can be created the class. (Stroupe 2003) However, as humans have encountered in the past with technological advancements, solidarity and spatial problems accompany this phenomenon. Specifically, some students thrive in the online classroom while others struggle. What can explain the difference between the two, and how can we as educators help to fill the gap?

Along with the increase in online education programs, there has been an explosion of online education research. This new paradigm of learning brings us a plethora of topics to examine; curriculum design, technology, and of course the new set of problems that come along with the online environment. Success in an online class requires students to modify their classroom experiences to accommodate the unique constraints and conditions of computer-based delivery. Providing students with the support necessary to achieve their individual learning goals and satisfy their individual needs is an important facet (Winiiecki 1999). Although technology is an integral part of distance education, just as in the traditional physical classroom setting, any

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successful program must focus on the instructional needs of the students, rather than on the technology itself (Sherry 1996). The old saying that "content is king" holds true for online learning as much as any other form of communication media. The success of online learning programs depends on a combination of learning enhancing content and effective technology to facilitate the interactive element of the learning experience (Combe, 2005) As one may see from the previous studies, the ultimate goal of online education is to present and pass knowledge from one being into another.

The problems occurring within the online educational writing classroom usually stem from the lack of a physical classroom, teachers and classmates. This results in some students feeling like they have lost their identity, which causes them to disengage. One could argue that students have been taught from the beginning of school that their identity is made up by how they interact with peers. When that type of interaction is taken away, many students in online classes feel not only lost but also lose motivation. According to a study done by Peterson, "there is the lack of sociological interactions that occurs in a classroom which help to further deepen knowledge areas. Arguably, the academic experience of a distance learner changes dramatically because the physical space of the classroom is displaced and the primary mode of interaction is computer mediated. (Peterson 2001) Meanwhile, others are overwhelmed by the new online interface that presents them with a list of seemingly unending tasks to complete. Bombarded with a text-based welcome page, a written syllabus, a dense print textbook or poetry anthology, a bewildering set of folders filled with written lectures and assignment instructions, a discussion board filled with other students apparently capably and confidently posting writing, and later a set of text-based instructor emails asking whether they needed assistance, the path of least resistance was to avoid interaction (Harris, Lubbes, Knowles 2014) This tidal wave of screen time shall henceforth be known as interface burn-out. Up to now, research has primarily focused on addressing these problems; lack of authentic learning, learner disengagement, and interface burn-out. In this literature review, the focus will be on this disengagement due to lack of feeling present within the class, due to a lack of social presence within the online classroom as it is the common core to most of the other problems faced by online educational programs.

There is no doubt that online programs have advantages. Their affordability, reach, and flexibility seem to complement humans' current busy lifestyles. Their popularity is booming across campuses all over the world. They not only bring educational opportunities to those who had not had them earlier, but they also utilize the strides in technology that humans have made with the advent of the Internet. However, with all the attractiveness online classes offer they are far from perfect. Due to these problems many schools have expressed the need for an immediate solution. One answer to this was the creation of hybrid programs, in which students have face-to-face classes and online classes within the same course. Previously, colleges focused on developing fully online courses that required no face-to-face meetings, hoping to attract students who could not otherwise get to a campus. But some high-profile efforts to do so, such as NYU online, have flopped, and some colleges report high dropout rates in classes that are completely virtual. (Young 2002) However, as universities have undergone budget cuts that have caused them to shrink faculty numbers while increasing student enrollment rates and tuitions. With the increased availability of technology and software, these are potential tools to overcome these challenges. (Ishiyama & Watson 2014) Thus, the conversation about disengagement and lack of social presence in online classes continues.

Problem Statement

The problem statement presents itself as follows: what are some of the major ways to address these problems of lack of authentic learning, disengagement, and interface burnout? Specifically, psychologically why are students disengaging from online classes? What are the ways in which researchers have deciphered, tested, and improved their hypotheses concerning this? This literature will attempt to focus on the three

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problems mentioned above examining it through the lens of social presence, followed by a brief look at the background and academic research concerning it and finally arguments of discovery and recommendations. As one will see, perhaps more than anything the most important issue surrounding online classes is how schools and educators will be able to create a sense of community and social presence within the classroom. It is this lack social presence that prevents many learners from fully participating in the class and taking full advantage of distance education. Because students who are not physically present in a class have the option of simply turning the screen off, it is a lot easier to disengage from the environment than say a physical classroom in which students may not be mentally present but physically are. Research has also shown that when students have a strong sense of identity and purpose within a class they fair better. This is not only limited to face-to-face classrooms but also the online classroom as well. However, developing social presence is a different process when it comes to online education.

Establishing social presence is one of the biggest challenges when teaching online. (Sung & Mayer 2012) It is natural that students will feel disconnected, frustrated and critical towards something a class that they are not physically in. By being in a class, we announce our presence within a space. When this disappears, students disengage and in turn leads to less authentic learning. Humans have been learning and studying in communal school contexts for thousands of years, and to suddenly have that taken away would of course result in very shocking differences. Their study, among others (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Sung & Mayer, 2012; Tu & McIssac, 2002; Walther, 1992), found that “social presence has a high positive impact on learning.” (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk 2012) Other scholars have examined concepts beyond social presence that influence successful online learning. Regardless of their findings, all point to the positive effects social presence has on engagement within the online classroom. Thus, its importance cannot be understated.

Social Presence

Many researchers since the 1970’s have defined and tweaked this term of “social presence.” The concept of social presence was first defined by social communication studies researchers Short, Williams, and Christie as the “degree of salience of the other person in a mediated communication and the consequent salience of their interpersonal interactions.” (Short, Williams, & Christie 1976) More recently, in another research written by Tu and McIssac, they further redefined social presence in digital environments as being able to create a “feeling of community” (Tu & McIsaac 2002) Around the beginning of the 2000’s the world saw a boom in Internet technology coming off the wave of semiconductor advancements made in the 1990’s. As more people had access to faster Internet speeds and WiFi, the growth of online classes took off. Tu and McIsaac specify that social presence is the “degree of feeling, perception, and reaction to another intellectual entity in the CMC [computer-mediated communication] environment” and include four dimensions used to establish and maintain social presence: social context, online communication, interactivity, and privacy. (Tu & McIsaac 2002) Addressing the importance of social presence in a learning environment, a study done by Wei, Chen, and Kinshuk conclude that “learners must perceive an appropriate degree of social presence before feeling comfortable in interaction with others. Therefore, social presence is a key element for enhancing and fostering learning interactions in online classrooms.” (Wei, Chen, & Kinshuk 2012)

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical frameworks surrounding the problems associated with online learning rely on three constructs. The first is that online education may result in less authentic learning. Directing a face-to-face composition class to work in small groups may produce small, successful learning communities by silently employing a thousand small factors that teachers neither control nor even necessarily note—the “multitude

of ways [we convey] who we are as people”: small talk, gesture, physicality, timing, tones of voice, even clothing, posture and other things that help individuals learn about one another, find connections, and engage. (Palloff & Pratt 2007) The second framework looks at the concept of learner disengagement. Relating to the first framework discussed above, when students do not physically enter a classroom, it is simple for them to simply walk away or ignore an online class. For a multitude of reasons such as lack of confidence, uninspiring content, not understanding the technology students may simply choose to do the bare minimum to pass the class, thereby disengaging from any meaningful learning. In a study done by Harris, Lubbes, and Knowles, students were overwhelmed by the amount of text, and work set before them. Students spent so much time writing weekly discussion posts (the equivalent of two full essays per week) and responding to classmates that they were completing the bare minimum to get by, the quality was rushed and superficial, and they failed to truly engage in discussions with each other. (Harris, Lubbes, Knowles 2014) Finally the last framework looks at interface burnout. This especially affects learners of older generations, as they have not grown up with computers. Many of them find it difficult to navigate online learning tools such as Blackboard or Moodle. Having to sit down in front of a computer, complete everything on a small laptop screen requires technical multitasking skills that many older learners are not accustomed to. Many other learners have complained that staring at computer screens seems like a very cold and lonely way to learn. This coldness impedes motivation. No initiation of intrinsic fantasy – a lack in the perceived relevance of the learning task or a very low ratio of perceived benefit to expended effort can lead to the student slowing down or dropping out. (Rowntree 1992) What these three theoretical framework share is the perceived lack of social presence from the learning environment. Whether is be due to superficial materials, physical disengagement, or a sense of a cold and lifeless learning interface, they all have to do with the student establishing his learner identity and participating with the class.

Findings

Lack of social presence as an explanation for the problems faced by distance learners has been researched. Perhaps not surprising is the role group work—small group discussions, peer feedback, and a collaborative project—plays in establishing social presence. Students usually indicate that group work and interacting directly with their peers helped them feel more acquainted with other students. Thus, one solution that could be presented is the use of collaborative learning in the online educational context. Stacey found that collaborative learning enhanced overall online learning. (Stacey 2002) Similarly, Kim, Kwon, and Cho found that student demographics and previous online experience mattered little regarding students’ perceptions of social presence; however, “evidence showed that both social presence and learning satisfaction are affected by media integration and quality instruction” and that “interactivity was found to be a good predictor of social presence.” (Kim, Kwon, & Cho 2011) Likewise, Akyol and Garrison analyzed social presence over time in messages posted in a discussion board during a graduate course, finding that “some of the students’ responses to open-ended questions also confirmed the importance of collaborative activities for their learning.” (Akyol & Garrison 2008) Social presence is necessary for collaborative projects to be effective (Garrison, 2007) but collaborative projects, according to this study, may also help establish and maintain social presence. As Garrison writes, “the purpose of social presence in an education context is to create the conditions for inquiry and quality interaction (reflective and threaded discussions) in order to collaboratively achieve worthwhile educational goals.” (Garrison 2007) Thus, when implementing an online curriculum it is pivotal that curriculum designers integrate opportunities for students to experience media and team work so that they may be able to express themselves and forge an online identity.

Practical Implications

Thus, the question becomes, how do educational institutions deal with the lack of social presence in online learning and face-to-face learning. Mayne and Wu (2011) offer the following strategies to help instructors establish effective social presence in online learning environments:

- Personal email contact by instructor with request for student information as early as 2 weeks before semester begins
- Early course availability with invitation and opportunity to “look around” and ask questions
- In addition to instructor information, an “About Me” section with biographical and personal information/pictures from instructor
- Announcement with “Begin Here” instructions on course flow, links to helpful tutorials, “help links” & Inclusive and complete syllabus with timelines, due dates, course expectations, learner’s role, instructor’s role
- Contingency plans for problems and issues
- Library links and direct access to library liaison
- Rubrics for evaluation of assignments, self-evaluation rubrics
- Extensive Resource Section for students to access as needed
- Groups formed based on student-submitted information about clinical interest and work experience
- Use of an instructor-designed “seating chart” with specific and personal information about students and groups that is used with all asynchronous interactions
- Use of ungraded “pre-lesson” with feedback to facilitate group work
- “Coffee Shop” that is “off limits” to instructor

While many of these suggestions seem miniscule at first glance, added up together help to form a more constructive way to deal with establishing social presence. One overlying theme seems to be to allow students to freely express themselves within the online environment, until they feel that they have the confidence to perform well. This may seem a bit overboard in a regular physical classroom setting however, in the online classroom, extra measures must be taken for students to express themselves. Also, online discussions can help students improve their synthesis and research skills but only when students are not overwhelmed with a multitude of text- or print-based reading and writing activities. The “less is more” philosophy also applies to instructor texts where concision aids in avoiding confusion (Ragain and White 406). Thus, a balance must be struck between using media and giving opportunities to express themselves and not overwhelming students with too much interface. Using an array of media and teaching methods also have positive influence on student outcomes. Additional research on the effectiveness of using multi-modal elements should be conducted to understand the specific relationships between multimodal instruction and increased writing competencies across the curriculum (Harris, Lubbes, Knowles 2014)

The responsibility of helping students to share their identities and utilize their social presence relies not only with the learner themselves but also with the teachers. As they are the leaders of the class, they are in charge of leading the class on the path of the course. Instructors themselves must also be mentally equipped to deal with the online course environment. Perley and Tanguay (1999) expressed the fears that many faculty members have about distance learning and its effects on their role. They warned that the quality of education will suffer because, in traditional capitalist fashion, workers (in this case, teachers) and products (the class material) are divided. What may result, they argued, is an assembly-line delivery of courses by people who are not content experts. Likewise, many instructors who simply take their face-to-face courses and translate them into the online environment may also be met with many difficulties. In the case of a writing course at Eatsern Oregon University, face-to-face techniques based in effective composition theory cannot simply be

redeployed for use in the online environment; they must be adapted to suit the modality (Harris, Lubbes, Knowles 2014) Thus, it is not only students who need to engage in a personal discussion about social presence in a classroom, but also teachers and what their roles are.

Continuing on the previous paragraph, when instructors are designing the curriculum for an online class, there are ways in which to help encourage learner engagement and the confidence use of social presence so they may thrive in the learning environment. One extremely popular and newly developed system is known as a hybrid course. In a hybrid course, students will perform a majority of the class online but meet with their instructors and classmates at some time during the course. Hybrid courses were developed to bridge the gap between the traditional physical classroom and the modern online classroom. Many students who have tried hybrid courses say the model fits their attention spans and their lifestyles. "I lose interest in a classroom setting, but meeting 50/50 is nice -- it helps keep me in check and also gives me freedom," wrote Sarah Hangen, a student at Sinclair Community College, in an online discussion as part of a hybrid course (Young 2002). At another school, students were given the option of meeting tutors face-to-face to discuss problems they were having when they were starting to disengage from the class. The most positive feedback from students was in response to questions on the blended learning approach. All noted a positive outcome of spending time at the university during two periods each year. The face-to-face contact with tutors helped to augment the online relationships that had built up. The students also benefited from meeting each other face-to-face to build on relationships forged through shared experiences. (Combe 2005) However, hybrid courses also have a high drop-out rate when the curriculum and teaching causes disengagement. Therefore, they should not be touted as the ultimate solutions to online courses, but rather an option to help engage students.

Conclusion

As Lorraine Sherry (1996) pointed out, adult learners have a wide variety of reasons for pursuing learning at a distance: constraints of time, distance, and finances, the opportunity to take courses or hear outside speakers who would otherwise be unavailable, and the ability to come in contact with other students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds (Willis, 193). As a result, they gain not only new knowledge, but also new social skills, including the ability to communicate and collaborate with widely dispersed colleagues and peers whom they may never have seen. It is without a doubt that online education is going to see a skyrocketing increase. Not only is it cheap, flexible, and convenient but it also offers a way for schools to reach more students thereby giving opportunities to students who might have otherwise been unable to go to school. However, just as the classroom setting is not perfect, the online classroom has its own set of problems and challenges. Primarily, the lack of a physical classroom causes a sense of disengagement. The online interface can be daunting, especially for learners who are not used to technology. Online course management systems can hinder learning because these systems employ teacher-centered rather than participatory models (Palmquist 406) Finally, a lack of authentic learning can be seen from many online classrooms. These three problems have one thing in common; they have to do with the online identity of the learner. The social presence in a classroom is without a doubt different than the one in a physical classroom. Establishing social presence in a classroom presents a specific set of challenges. How does a classroom give identity to an avatar? While this topic is still being researched, this literature review presents some things instructors and schools can do to help establish social presence. One thing researchers have noticed is that there must be constant engagement, however the type and amount of engagement must be carefully balanced. Overwhelming students with too much work turns them off, while too little keeps them on the periphery of the class. Also teachers cannot simply take their physical class curriculum and transfer it to the online setting. Lessons must be tailored to the specific environment. Scaffolding techniques and the use of a wide array of media helps to engage learners thereby participating and helping them to form their online identity. It is also

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recommended considering the instructors chosen to teach distance courses. For example, such instructors should demonstrate that they are able and willing to learn new technologies, be flexible (a characteristic seconded by Collis, 1996), and that they have the time to develop the new materials and programs required. (Savenye 2001)

Directions for future research

Online education is still in its infancy. This fundamental principle of current composition pedagogy—that knowledge formation happens in socially connected and interdependent ways—underlies much contemporary pedagogical thought across the curriculum (Garrison & Vaughn 2007). With having been established less than twenty years ago, researchers still have a lot of discoveries to make. This literature review surely reflects that. Future research needs to reflect the constantly changing technology that accompanies the online classroom. Specifically, I would like to know how teachers will deal with the mix of cultures that online classrooms bring. Many students participate in the same class, but come from differing backgrounds. How teachers will conduct class and allowing students to find their social presence would be interesting. There also seems to be a lot of qualitative data based on interviews and personal accounts of online education. However, more qualitative data would allow researchers to formulate more traditional hypothesis' to test. The field is filled with the excitement of potential research topics. I am sure that the continued use of online classes will one day become the norm of many curriculums.

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