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The Relationship between Student Engagement and Social Presence in Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

The study resence in online learning. The study's interests were: 1) identifying how social presence affects student engagement; and 2) what instructors can do to enhance social presence and student engagement in online learning. Effective online learning must facilitate social presence. This involves providing space and technological support for students and instructors to engage in social activities which are an integral part of the learning process. In this document, we describe social presence, the forms in which it occurs and also how it relates to ensuring that students are fully engaged in the learning process, whether online or face-to-face. It was concluded that social presence has a very huge impact on how students get engaged in the lessons they take in online classes.

Keywords: Online learning; Social presence; Student engagement; immediacy; Virtual learning; Virtual labs

1.STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

In this study, student engagement was defined as the interest and motivation students have in their own learning of course content. Student engagement depends primarily on a number of factors, including an instructor's personal connection with students and creation of an active online environment, [14]. Having developed an instrument to measure student engagement, [9] found that student engagement consisted of four dimensions for students in traditional face-to-face classrooms. These dimensions were: 1) skills engagement, 2) participation/interaction engagement, 3) emotional engagement, and 4) performance engagement. Similarly, however, [17] contended that student engagement was affected by the number of online courses that students took as well as the degree to which students took responsibility for their own learning. In face-to-face courses there is a feeling of constant engagement through regular class meetings, for example, where teachers and learners interact with one another in one location for a specified period of time. Interactions exist in mainly three ways, namely: student-instructor interactions; student-student interactions

and student-content interactions [3]. According to [4], student-student interaction is critical for learning designs based upon constructivist learning theories. Student-instructor interaction on the other hand has the highest perceived value amongst students, thus commanding a high market value. Most forms of student-content interaction can be recorded and displayed asynchronously to substitute for student-student interaction by time or technology bound students. Typically in campus settings the courses consists of lectures, discussions, and group work- all in various combinations being done with the intention of fostering reliable engagement with the course material and with one another on a regular basis. Online learning, however, basically alters the dynamics of time and space in the educational process. Instructors and learners don't share any one physical location nor one period of time, as interaction is spread across many spaces. Instead, the virtual community itself serves as the standard for shared time and space [1]. In courses conducted exclusively online, this is the only shared time and space instructors and learners will experience.

2.SOCIAL PRESENCE

Social presence is the connectedness among students and between students and instructors which leads to increased learning. Social presence is a construct which consists of a number of dimensions relating to the extent of interpersonal contact [23]. The two concepts associated with social presence are: the concept of intimacy and the concept of immediacy. [20] suggested that the social presence of a communications medium contributed to the level of intimacy which depended on factors such as physical distance, eye contact and smiling. They contended that in a televised session, one is able to get the entire message from a television host as compared to listening to a radio host. As people watch television, they are able to take note of the facial reactions and gestures of the host thus giving them the ability to interpret the behavior exhibited by the host. Immediacy, on the other hand, is a measure of the psychological distance, which exists between a communicator and the object of communication. A person can convey a level of immediacy or non-immediacy both non-verbally as well as the verbally. Instructor immediacy enhances social presence in online learning

because students will tend to feel that even though their instructor is not physically within reach, the immediate responses to the questions and queries that arise make it seem as though the instructor was physically present.

Authors in [25] argue that, social presence is both a factor of the medium, as well as that of the communicators and their presence in a sequence of interaction.

However, some researchers [22] contend that psychological distance, or rather lack of community, in the online learning environment, can result in student isolation, frustration, boredom, overload, and low course completion rates. On the other hand, [2] found that creating online social communities fosters an encouraging environment of shared activities which results in deeper learning, higher final course grades, and successful online courses. In order to ensure positive outcomes, it has become imperative for instructors to shift focus from a content-leaning online instruction to a learning environment which is sensitive to the needs of students. This focus shift was also supported by [10] in his discussion of content retention in distance education. However, [12] found that instructors who facilitated a sense of community and student engagement had a significant effect on student satisfaction and the sense of worth of online learning. Social presence and student engagement are so closely related to one another that one cannot exist without the other. When students feel a sense of being connected to other students, and when there is also a sense of psychological closeness rather than isolation, they are better prepared to become more actively involved with online learning. This active involvement results in higher order thinking and knowledge building in students learning in an online medium [5]. Collaborative learning experiences in an online learning environment are capable of increasing participation and a sense of belonging by means of improved critical thinking, shared reflections, and helpful feedback among peers and instructors [11]. In a similar approach, continuous online supported interactions can serve as the basis of a classroom social presence, which in turn encourages students to thoughtfully engage with each other [7]. Online students do work together by sharing their individual points of view, ideas, and personal experiences. This in turn leads them to deepen their understanding with increasing higher order thinking and greater personal satisfaction [27]. The welcoming teaching and learning community, which is central to online student knowledge acquisition also leads to meaningful learning experiences [12].

When trying to enhance interpersonal and social presence, online instructors and students often have to work hard to become acquainted with each other by means of text-based content. Nevertheless, these interactions mainly focus on academic content with very little regard for meaningful, interpersonal connections. Instructors in various disciplines may differ in their beliefs that mastering content knowledge and skills is a sufficient focus to facilitate meaningful student engagement.   [23] proposed that a successful online learning community encompasses two

underlying dimensions: (i) social, whereby students feel a personal involvement with others, and (ii) learning, which relates to academic content.   According to [19], an online community in general can be enhanced in seven ways, namely: (i) decreasing the learners' transactional space, (ii) increasing social presence, (iii) providing equal opportunity for involvement, (iv) designing small group activities, (v) facilitating group discussions, (vi) matching teaching style with the learning stage, (vii) and limiting class size. He also suggested that a community is based on what groups of people share and do with one another, not how or where they do them.

3.BEST ONLINE TEACHING STRATEGIES TO FOSTER SOCIAL PRESENCE AND STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

The best online practices require instructors to support all students' points of view and to acknowledge the diversity of beliefs and prejudices in developing a community that makes students feel welcome. Meyers [15] suggested that this approach will validate all student perspectives to create a safe and welcoming community that helps students become "more engaged and feel more interconnected" (p. 220). In a similar manner, [2] found that classroom community was positively related to student engagement because the social and emotional support of an online community does increase members' feelings of belonging, of being and of interdependence, which in turn can boost academic motivation and reduce weariness. The interdependence among members of an online community can also increase psychological health, and in turn lead to greater productivity and enhanced learning [26]. A sense of belonging may also enhance personal adjustment and success in higher education especially when one is a student taking online classes and despite being alone he or she is able to get help from fellow learners situated in a different environment from him or her. It is important to note that online courses create unique environments which require thoughtful care for instructors to help students become engaged in their learning and to design virtual classrooms that enhance a sense of community [15]. When instructors carefully plan ways for students to interact, students can focus on achieving course learning goals, [6]. Students are able to learn the most from online courses if they have online instructors who provide a structured and comfortable classroom environment which involves the participation of everyone in the learning activities [32]. Meyers [15] also states that teaching strategies which uphold classroom community with free and open communication enable the personal engagement of students, which in turn goes to enhance the quality of student learning.

4.WHY EXAMINE SOCIAL PRESENCE

The role of social presence in online learning can be linked to the larger social context which includes motivation, communication, group unity, verbal and non-verbal communication, and social equality-all being things which are very difficult to achieve and maintain in the absence of

social presence. It is important to examine social presence in online learning because we need to know that despite it being online, it is really a representation of what would be in a face-to-face class. If there is not that much an amount of social presence, then something will need to be done in order to address this absence in an online environment. [19] observed that in "most psychological theory, the social and the cognitive have engaged only peripherally, standing in a kind of figure-ground relationship to one another rather than truly interacting" (p. 1). They support undoing the figure-ground relationship between cognitive and social processes and emphasizes human cognition that is so responsive to the cultural context that we must also try to find ways through which people actively shape each other's ways of knowledge and thought. According to the constructivist theory, everything an individual knows is personally constructed, and their experienced events are part that construction. People also build their knowledge based on what they have heard, seen or been told by others, orally, in writing, in pictures, and in gestures. All of these moments collectively have an influence on the constructive process by providing information, pointing things out to one another, asking questions, and arguing with and elaborating on each other's ideas. By stressing the interdependence of social and individual processes in the co-construction of knowledge, socio-cultural approaches view semiotic tools or cultural amplifiers as personal and social resources, and hence, mediating the link between the social and the individual construction of meaning [30].

5.DISCUSSION

Instructor immediacy is a good predictor of student affective learning across varied course content. This is because whenever there is immediacy, a student's feeling of belonging to the class, the feeling of ownership in the learning process increases. In online learning, social presence theory has been useful in accounting for interpersonal effects. Computer-mediated learning is mainly said to be extremely low in social presence in comparison to face-to-face learning because of the absence of verbal cues. However, there is a more positive relationship and behavior that have come about as a result of online learning. Some students and other participants have reported the development of online communities and long lasting and warm friendships [31]. Walther reports that a substantial amount of research that has investigated the effects of computer-mediated learning has failed to account for the different social processes, settings, and purposes within computer-mediated learning. His reported findings are ironic since research has demonstrated that social presence not only affects outcomes but also student, and instructor satisfaction with a given course. Instructor immediacy characteristics and the   presence of other students are very critical issues for individuals who are involved in delivering online learning.

While analyzing the role of social presence in online environments, [20] found that students with high overall perceptions of social presence also scored high in terms of perceived learning and perceived satisfaction with the instructor.   They additionally suggested that student perceptions of social presence overall contributed significantly to the predictor equation for students' perceived learning overall. Gender accounted for some of the variability of students' overall perception of social presence, while age and number of college credits earned did not account for any of the variability. They concluded that students' perceptions of social presence in online courses were related to their perceived learning for those activities-an argument which validates the importance of social presence to student engagement in online learning.

6.WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE TO ENGAGE STUDENTS

There are challenges related to student engagement regardless of the delivery medium used and these challenges include online. In face-to-face courses, unlike online courses, instructors are able to observe how students behave and this inability to observe makes it difficult to know how engaged they are in the learning activities.   Students in online environments and lacking technological skills are more likely to be less engaged in the lessons. Since student engagement can have a positive impact on understanding of course materials, retention and course completion rates, student engagement strategies must increase learner motivation to be involved in the learning processes.

Venable, [29], an online education expert, believes engaging the learner aides in developing an understanding of how the topic and materials are important and related to their academic programs. Engaging learning is more than just a presentation of information, it is also participatory. Students are active participants in the learning process interacting with the content, each other, and their instructor, and involved in conversations and decisions related to their learning. There is also collaboration in engagement learning. Instructional strategies that promote engagement often leverage collaborative activities in which students work together to solve problems, practice new skills, and create products that demonstrate their learning. Lastly, she wrote, engaging learning is challenging. Students are more likely to become engaged with learning activities when working toward a challenging, but reasonably achievable, goal. When developing learning activities to foster student engagement, Venable suggested the following constituents: First, there has to be specific feedback. Students should receive feedback that extends beyond "correct/incorrect," with explanations of why

they were correct or incorrect, and suggestions for further improvement. Secondly, the learning environment should be a friendly climate provides comfort to the student. Questions and input are encouraged and not subject to inappropriate criticism from the instructor. Opportunities should be present for online students to connect with each other and their instructors as members of a learning community. Students who feel like they are part of the group and know each other may be more likely to engage in class activities in a meaningful way.

Park and Choi [17] laid claim that student characteristics could not have been as crucial as other factors when examining how to improve students' learning experiences online. They suggested, however, that institutions and instructors must focus their efforts on how to produce increased engagement and sense of community, which in turn would result in enhanced student satisfaction and persistence in online programs. This means that what needs to be done is provide specialized professional development for all instructors who are teaching online to have special skills of handling different kinds of students. When there is an instructor who is conversant with the course materials and the course management systems used to deliver instruction to students, then there is an assurance that the instructor's presence online will maintain student engagement, thereby offering encouragement, and setting the expectation and climate for high achieving community members who learn together in an equitable culture [24].

Amanda Evans, (as quoted by [9]) recommended strategies and activities from the book *Worksheets Don't Grow Dendrites: 20 Instructional Strategies That Engage the Brain* by [13]. She further explained, when advising faculty on how to engage students, she reminded them that engagement was a two-way street. The learner has a role as well. The following strategies were offered for engaging students, with an emphasis on working in online environments:

a) Encouraging full participation: students must be active participants in online learning environments.

b) Providing multiple avenues for learning: online learning should include varied opportunities to learn new skills or content concepts.

c) Developing a compelling digital story line, with more challenging activities that match or exceed a face-to-face learning environment.

d) Propelling students toward inquiry and discovery or experiential learning.

e) Providing an appropriate level of challenge.

f) Supporting students' general learning.

g) Encouraging interaction and problem solving.

h) Using new media in different learning environments.

i) Developing relevant and alternative activities to traditional learning.

"Engagement includes on-task behavior, but it further highlights the central role of student's emotion, cognition and voice…When engagement is characterized by the full range of on-task behavior, positive emotions, invested cognition, and personal voice, it functions as the engine for learning and development" [18].

7.CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

To create a strong sense of community and to help students engage with learning in online courses, instructors need to find ways to help students feel more strongly connected with each other and with the instructor. They must design activities that more actively involve students in their own learning. Instructors who purposefully design and create opportunities for students to learn about each other, thereby decreasing transactional distance and increasing social presence [21], are likely to improve learners' sense of classroom community.

To achieve both student engagement and social presence in online learning, there is need for instructors to encourage full participation in the online environments by encouraging students to ask questions and make comments without any inhibitions. Instructors can promote immediacy and encourage student morale by being available most of the time responding to queries within the hours after receiving them. Interactivity should be another important feature of online learning. Instructors should contact their students frequently so that the student knows that the instructor is very much a part of what they are doing.

There is need for students to look at online learning differently. Developing a compelling digital story line, with more challenging activities that match or exceed a face-to-face learning environment, [13] can propel students toward inquiry and discovery or experiential learning, and in turn encourage the desire to learn by and through experience. Also the use of different media can also elicit student engagement in online classes. There is need for online instructors should create an environment which supports the general learning needs of the students, apart from providing a challenging learning atmosphere. Designing instruction to actively involve learners in meaningful tasks may elevate

students' sense of engagement and in turn improve their motivation to learn and complete the course. When students are actively involved, there is more engagement and sense of classroom social presence- concepts which are closely related to one another; students who feel a sense of connectedness rather than isolation are very likely to be better prepared to become more actively involved with course learning, successfully persist, and experience real world success. Students who encounter difficulties should be able to get timely and reliable assistance simply by contacting the technical support team in charge of the online management system.

Social presence is perhaps the most important factor in the success of online learning because students who think that they are in a community are very likely to be productive. As a rule, education without interaction between students, between students and instructors, and also between students and content is difficult. It is actually discouraging for a student to discover that other than him or herself, there seems to be no-one else in the course. As a student discovers that they are alone in the course, there is a very high chance that the student will end up dropping the course. Social presence is important because in most cases, when a student can't understand what the instructor has said, there is a chance of asking a fellow student which in turn ensures that the point the instructor was trying to put across. The influence of social presence on student engagement in online learning creates an encouraging environment of shared activities which results in deeper learning, higher final course grades, and successful online courses [2]. Instructors who facilitated a sense of community and student engagement had significant effect on student satisfaction and the worth of online learning, [12]. Social presence and student engagement cannot exist without the other. When students feel a sense of being connected to other students they are better prepared to become more actively involved with online learning. Where there is social presence there is also student collaboration in learning activities. Collaborative learning experiences in an online learning environment are capable of increasing participation and a sense of belonging by means of improved critical thinking, shared reflections, and helpful feedback among peers and instructors. This in turn results in higher order thinking and knowledge building in students learning in an online medium [5].

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