Instructor Use of Available Strategies to Develop a Sense of Community in the

Asynchronous Online Environment

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Abstract

Asynchronous online courses continue to be attractive to learners who cannot attend face-to-face university courses because of many life responsibilities. Many times these students, although having the best of intentions, find it difficult to persist to the end of the course and earn college credit because of social isolation, or lack of ‘presence’ in the online environment. Social presence, the connectedness students have with one another and the instructor, if implemented by the instructor, may be a solution to help students persist in the course. This social presence in the online environment is effective in both word generated communications and video. The use of email, texts, and discussion boards offers only online text, but participants can use emotional cues such as emoticons, explanatory text, and quickness in response time even when non-verbal cues are impossible. Video is another opportunity to build social presence because of the course participants’ ability to interpret one another using not only verbal cues, but non-verbal cues such as facial expressions, body posture, and tone of voice when speaking.

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With the Internet having entered the arena of higher education, courses are often taught without the use of a “brick and mortar” classroom. This type of course, taught and referred to as an online course, is a way to educate students with instruction and content delivered primarily over the internet with little, if any, face-to-face meetings (Watson, Winograd, & Kalmon, 2004; Staker & Horn, 2012; Dalton, 2012). The growth of online courses has been explosive in recent years even though the design and implementation of these courses have failed to keep a large percentage of students enrolled through completion.

One of the major challenges in online learning is the physical distance between the instructor and the learners (Sung & Mayer, 2012). This awareness of being in different places creates the potential of poor social connections between the instructor and the students (Moore & Kearsley, 2005).

Keengwe and Kidd (2010) suggest the instructor’s role in an online course includes creating a social environment to encourage learning, and being comfortable with technology in order to transfer that comfort to learners. These practices can help make participating in an online class a positive experience.

The social environment instructors are encouraged to create are meant to generate a sense of social presence and thus community between students and instructor. Social presence, defined as, the amount in which a person feels ‘present’ or perceived as a ‘real person’ in the online environment, (Gunawardena, 1995) is used to build community and reduce the sense of isolation students often feel in online courses thus reducing their decision to withdraw (Ali & Smith, 2015; Frankola, 2001).

Studies in addressingsocial presence in the online classroomhave found relationships between instructor and student increase the satisfaction, motivation, and retention of students in online programs (Nunez, 2005). This leads one to search available strategies in order to develop a sense of community and presence in the asynchronous online environment.

 As strategies to build social presence are considered, it is important, first of all, to discuss the profile of the online student and define social presence.

**Online Asynchronous Courses**

**Profile of the Online Student**

The attraction for asynchronous online education among university students seems to center around busy schedules and access to college and university campuses. Students enter the online domain because it is convenient, adaptable, and immediately accessible (Mupinga, Nora, & Yaw, 2006). In fact, students have been shown to prefer the asynchronous method of online courses, those courses which rarely if ever have scheduled meeting times, over synchronous courses, those which have regularly scheduled meeting times, (Costley & Lange, 2016) because of more freedom in scheduling. These course options bring the number of students enrolled in at least one online course to 33.5% in 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2014).

Although Dr. Mark David Milliron (as cited in Robb & Sutton, 2014) believes the ‘traditional’ college student is becoming more and more difficult to define with many students ‘swirling’ in and out of education, Moore and Kearsley (2005) found that many online students are older students, 25-50 years of age, and often unable to enroll in traditional courses because of family and full-time employment (Park, 2007; Castillo, 2013). Online courses offer students flexibility (Renes & Strange, 2010) so they are able to devote time to work, family, and a course schedule by doing much of their coursework via the internet at a time that is convenient.

Students who are unable to attend a college campus are also attracted to online courses. These students include those with disabilities (Serianni & Coy, 2014), live in remote locations (Owens, Hardcastle, & Richardson, 2009), and those in the military (Wilson & Smith, 2012). Also included in the population of online students are women who are trying to balance several roles and demands of life, and are able to continue their education in the midst of heavy family and financial loads (Yukselturk & Top, 2013). This means that many of the students attending online courses have additional challenges above and beyond the courses they are taking. These very challenges are oftentimes the reasons students take online courses as well as the reasons many do not persist to the end of the course.

**Persistence**

Persistence, as defined by Hart (2012), focuses on student success in completing an online course. Barriers to persistence often include ineffective or incomplete communication by the instructor toward the student. This lack of adequate communication includes slow feedback, difficulty in contacting the instructor, late changes in course requirements and due dates, and limited communication (Aragon & Johnson, 2008). The absence of meaningful social contacts with the instructor increases the chances of social isolation for the student and is a main factor of student dissatisfaction (Ali & Smith, 2015). This lack of “nearness” or “closeness” between the student and instructor brings with it isolation and exclusion from a community environment. In fact, infrequent interaction with instructors was found to be a key reason for withdrawal from an online course (Youngiu & Jaeho, 2011). Persistence then, can be highly attributed to the students’ satisfaction with the instructor and student social relationship and community in the online environment (Hart, 2012).

**Social Presence**

Social presence, prior to the advent of online communication, was defined by Gunawardena (1995) as the extent that participants are able to view each other as actual people through mediated communication. After the arrival of online communication, Garrison, Anderson, & Archer (2000) followed up Gunawardena’s definition with the degree that participants are able to project their full personality both socially and emotionally in an online community so that one is perceived as a ‘real’ person. As online communication continues to advance, the definition of social presence is also modified. Mayne and Wu (2011) define social presence as the degree participants in an online environment feel affectively connected to one another. This ‘connectedness’ as the predominant component of social presence (Sung and Mayer, 2012), is the foundation of any social community

The degree of social presence, or the connectedness of students in an online classroom is based on student perception. If students do not feel connected with each other, or the instructor, there is no social presence. Therefore, immediacy, a component of social presence, must be briefly explored.

**Immediacy**

Immediacy involves how social presence is initiated and maintained during an online course and has more to do with how, when, and how often an instructor communicates with students than the content of what is being taught (Baker, 2010). It is the creation of closeness, or psychological distance, between students and instructor that is conveyed in the online environment by written, verbal, and nonverbal cues (Tu, 2014). Therefore, the more the interaction between the instructor and the student, the smaller the psychological distance between them. Immediacy helps convey a sense of interest and attention toward another. It suggests a ‘liking for’ or attraction to another (Tu, 2014).

Because the online environment is the venue in which immediacy takes place, closing the psychological distance between persons is usually accomplished through online interaction (Teven and Hanson, 2004). The immediacy or, attentive behavior toward another, is often displayed by the use of humor, personal stories, encouragement of students and their ideas, responding frequently to them, offering praise, asking questions, addressing students by name, and remembering past conversations and personal stories (Arbaugh, (2001).

**Teacher Social Presence**

Social presence, as one of the elements in lessening or eliminating social isolation in the online environment, is initiated by the instructor of the course. It is the instructor’s responsibility to design, facilitate, and direct the course in such a way as to improve social presence. This “presence” by the instructor, called instructor or teacher social presence, is the driving force behind social presence (Swan & Shih, 2005).

Teacher social presence, is the ‘visibility’ of the instructor in the online classroom as perceived by the student (Baker, 2010) as the teacher focuses on creating and maintaining a learning environment that encourages student participation and communication. This presence facilitates the overall social presence of the classroom community and has been found to predict student connectedness and satisfaction in online courses (Wise, Chang, Duffy, & del Valle, 2004). In fact, Swan and Shih (2005) found that instructor interaction led to more student satisfaction of online courses than peer communication. The lack of teacher social presence then, according to Hart (2012), appears to be a likely reason for the lack of motivation to study, a high level of student frustration, and a negative attitude toward the instructor causing reduced course satisfaction.

**Teacher Social Presence in Instructional Design and Facilitation**

The instructor responsibility to students is to create an environment within the online course that will encourage participation and learning. This responsibility begins prior to the course start date and involves the creation and design of the course. As the course is being planned, the course structure must include opportunities for the instructor and student to build social presence which encourages course community. Among the undertakings of creating a course are planning the organization, procedures, and interaction between participants. This would include syllabus design, building curriculum, and providing internet guidelines for the online tools being used (Garrison, et al. 2001). Within each of these foundational pieces, the instructor must always remain focused on methods to improve social presence. Although the course design is completed prior to the beginning of a class, an instructor must be conscientious during the course to ensure that adjustments are made when necessary (Garrison, et al. 2001).

During the course, the instructor has the responsibility to facilitate and remain consistently active in the course experience. This includes communicating in online discussion boards, directing discussions, and being conscientious of both inactive and dominant students in order to ‘equalize’ student participation (Coppola, Hiltz, & Rotter, 2002). In addition, instructors must spend the time keeping the class up to date with any course changes and helping students realize they are approachable.

The final component in building social presence from an instructor perspective is providing direct instruction for students. This provision of scholarly leadership on subject matter has historically been done through lectures, visual displays, and interaction within the face-to-face classroom. In the online environment, the instructor must use creative options to ensure accurate understanding and social presence (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Arbaugh, 2008). Among the methods to ensure social presence in the online classroom is the implementation of assessments with highly explanatory feedback on submitted work in a way to project instructor immediacy (Swan, et al. 2008). Instructors must also respond to student concerns, struggles, and confusion as a part of being ‘present’. This feeling of connectedness is what can build the social presence of students (Baker, 2010).

**Strategies to Improve Social Presence**

Social presence, according to Boettcher and Conrad (2010), is the most important practice in online courses. It is the antecedent to student success in the online format and the foundation for the building of community.

According to research done by Fetzner (2012), it was discovered that students who did not persist in online courses, and therefore were not successful in the course, struggled in areas that the implementation of social presence may have solved. The study found that over 45% of students who dropped out of a class, dropped because of getting behind in the course, struggling to balance work load with other responsibilities, technical difficulties, or lacking the motivation to do the course work. This being said, instructors must work hard to develop methods before and during the course to boost social presence and thus alleviate as many of the above difficulties as possible and therefore, encourage student success.

During course design, the instructor or course designer, must take into account the difficult, yet possible methods of making the course a community of ‘real people’ as Sung & Mayer (2012) calls it, by helping students understand course expectations and encouraging the communication with other classmates and instructor, and minimize psychological distance. This deliberate inclusion of social presence must begin with the development of the syllabus, curriculum, and internet tools to be used in the course.

**Syllabus Strategies**

The course syllabus is the foundation upon which the course is built. Therefore, if the syllabus institutes a priority of social presence, the rest of the course structure will follow. Mayne (2011), in his research, discovered strategies for establishing online social presence in all areas of the course design and implementation including the design of the syllabus. It was found that a syllabus with instructions to begin the course with links to tutorials, as well as timelines, due dates, both instructor and student roles, course expectations, contingency plans when struggles occur, and methods of evaluation might help to decrease feelings of isolation and create social presence between the student and instructor. It also suggests a well-designed course and a spirit of helpfulness by the instructor which in turn encourages community (Mayne & Wu, 2011).

When students begin an online course, whether an experienced or inexperienced online student, each approaches the class with a sense of uncertainty of expectations which can be lessened by a clear and detailed syllabus. This alleviation of uncertainty provides students with confidence and a feeling of security and safety within the online environment (Hagenauer, 2014; Youngiu & Jaeho, 2011).

**Curriculum Strategies**

As the syllabus is designed, consideration as to how curriculum might be woven into the course is a main objective each designer ponders. Curriculum, as defined by Kern, Thomas, Howard, & Bass as “a planned educational experience” (1998, p. 1) encompasses more than the course textbook, but includes all that occurs in the online classroom experience, planned or unplanned. Planned curriculum includes course materials as well as how internet tools will be used in the online classroom. Unplanned curriculum might include those teachable moments that happen during student-instructor communication that not only help students learn, but also build a relationship with the instructor.

When planning the curriculum to encourage social presence, which in turn may improve the learning of course objectives, instructors must make decisions how to communicate and build an online connectedness with students using internet tools available to build motivation, satisfaction with the course, and persistence (Ali & Smith, 2015). Communication and feedback to students, to be affective in building social presence, must be respectful, encouraging, positive, and frequent (Plante, 2014). These communication options, in the asynchronous online environment, may include the use of written communication such as email, phone texts, and discussion boards, as well as video technology.

**Communication Strategies**

In the online world, social presence which builds community, requires action. This means instructors must develop and initiate consistent patterns of communication, make themselves accessible, provide quick and frequent feedback, and encouraging support in both content and technology used in the course (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012). And, do all of this with various internet tools using the written word or video technology.

**Text Based Communication**

The use of email, text, and discussion boards have been used in online courses for many years and Garrison & Arbaugh, (2007) found that social presence can be established through this written word. But, one of the difficulties with written communication in the online environment is the lack of non-verbal communication cues such as tone of voice and facial expression (Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014). Solutions to this struggle in communication have been found in the timeliness of instructor responses to student comments, questions, and submitted work. In addition to timeliness, instructors can also provide constructive feedback, emotional cues, humor, and personal notes in their correspondence (Alman, Frey, & Tomer, 2012).

Instructors who write to communicate with students can create social presence by responding to students quickly. With the use of smartphones, instructors can set ‘office hours’ and be available via email or text almost immediately. This active interest helps to validate students, making them feel an important part of the course being taught (Robb, 2014) and plays a key role in their learning and satisfaction with the instructor and the course (Preisman, 2014).

The struggle with text driven communication in an online course is the ability to communicate emotion and care without the traditional non-verbal cues such as tone of voice, facial expression, and body posture. Literature suggests that emotion can be displayed using several types of written cues (Plante, 2014). Costley (2016) found that when instructors expressed personal tone in their communication, social presence increased. The expression of personal tone includes being familiar with students, using humor, and inserting emotional symbols and phrases.

In order for instructors to become familiar with students, time is necessary. Instructors must be willing to invest in student’s lives (Alman, 2012). Being sensitive to non-academic issues that come up, and remembering these issues are personal touches an instructor can include in communication that will increase social presence in a course (Alman, 2012).

It is very common during a course, for a student to have personal issues develop that affect their academic persistence. These issues can be family, job, or health related. And when an instructor knows about these issues and offers help to students by modifying assignments or showing empathy, connectedness occurs (Hagenauer, 2014; Plante, 2014). It is then important to continue communication with these students to monitor progress and continued struggles with the situation that had arisen in order to encourage and connect. At the heart of this communication is the building of relationships (Dunlap, 2014) and therefore a social presence between the struggling student and the instructor.

Ladyshewsky’s (2013) research suggests that humor between course participants not only demonstrates the humanity of students and instructor, but also increases social presence. Humor can be used by making jokes, moderate teasing, or telling funny stories in emails and discussion boards.

Another way to encourage the building and presence of the online community is to use emotional symbols and phrases to express non-verbal communication in the written environment (Nunez, 2005). These symbols and phrases include emoticons, side-remarks, and capitalization when writing.

Emoticons are small icons that can be added throughout communication in email and discussion boards that quickly and effectively display the emotion of the writer. With so many “emotions” of emoticons available, they can be used to effectively communicate almost any emotion.

When using text in communication, other methods to express emotion besides emoticons can be used. Adding statements to indicate surprise, emphasis, or confusion are very helpful to both students and instructors as they navigate the communication struggles of online correspondence (Alman, 2012). These statements may be short and simple such as “Joking!” or more complex such as, “Wow-I would be so excited to…”. They can also communicate emphasis by capitalization or exclamation points. The key to using ‘phrases of emotion’ is to allow others to hear the ‘voice’ of the speaker (Preisman, 2014).

**Video Based Communication**

Sometimes students are seeking only a short answer to a quick question, but other times are confused and need clarity or would like feedback on an assignment so they can do a quality job. Also, after an assignment is submitted, students are concerned not only with a score, but constructive comments on their work so improvement can be made on future assignments. When this happens, a prudent instructor with a desire to connect with students and build presence in the online environment takes the time to address these student concerns (Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, & Stevens, 2012). Typically, the instructor addresses students using online text in emails or discussion boards, but as technology continues to increase options for communication, the use of video to connect with others is available.

The use of video may be a viable and sensible option for the online community to combine human presence with the flexibility of the asynchronous online environment. The use of this medium of communication has as a strength, the flexibility of being used as often or as little as seen valuable by the instructor when designing the course. It also allows students to hear and see vocal and visual cues and strengthen the perception of instructor care and student learning (Borup et al., 2012). Through the use of video technology, students can better perceive the instructor and other students as real people because personalities can be portrayed better on video than through text, helping both the student and instructor develop an emotional connection with one another. Facial expressions, movement, and emotional tones in the voice allow non-verbal communication to be shared with each viewer. Overall, video communication helps to improve the social presence of students and the instructor in the online classroom (Borup et al., 2012).

Mayne (2012) heavily encouraged instructors to write to students prior to the beginning of an online course to introduce themselves and share instructor course information. He found that this initial contact with students quickly developed a sense of belonging and attachment to the instructor which, in turn, developed social presence prior to the start of the course. Since using video as a method of communication appears to increase the amount of an emotional connection and presence between class participants, creating a video as a course introduction may provide a higher level of social presence than a text written introduction.

Evans believes feedback to student questions and assignments has a social dimension even when focusing strictly on course content (2013). But when one adds non-verbal cues to the feedback, the social dimension is even more enhanced thus improving social presence (Borup, 2014).

When an instructor offers written feedback on student submitted assignments, oftentimes students feel hurt and criticized by the often hurried and curt remarks made by the instructor. When the feedback is carried out using video, the instructor is able to point out errors and offer suggestions for improvement in a kind manner exhibited by both verbal and non-verbal cues that help prevent misunderstanding. This again, draws the student and instructor together and builds a personal connection and rapport (Borup, 2014).

**Conclusion**

The purpose of asynchronous online learning, like other learning approaches, is to achieve the objectives developed prior to the beginning of the course. But, in order to make sure these learning objectives are met, students must remain enrolled in the course. Persistence, or continuing with a course to completion, is difficult for students if they do not feel part of the learning environment. If students feel isolated from other students and the instructor, chances are the student will drop out of the course (Nunez, 2005).

If students are to persist in the online environment and make the course experience positive, social presence must be introduced and maintained throughout the course. This social presence, or ‘connectedness’ between participants in the online environment (Mayne & Wu, 2011) has been shown to motivate students, increase their satisfaction with the online experience and build a classroom community. Social presence though, is dependent on teacher social presence, and is initiated by the instructor. The instructor has the responsibility in the development and implementation of the curriculum, to facilitate and direct the course to create an effective learning environment through social presence. In the online environment, this can be challenging since communication is limited to an ‘online presence’. Using available technology, the instructor must develop the course in a way that creates a caring, trusting, and comfortable environment through online communication for students to feel connected to one another and part of a learning community.

Through the use of email and video technology, instructors and students can communicate with one another in ways that encourage social presence. Although email lacks non-verbal cues, the use emoticons, short phrases defining emotion, and immediacy in response time, can be quite useful in the developing of social presence. In addition to email, a more recent technological tool, video, has been shown to create social presence through its ability to communicate verbal cues as well as non-verbal cues. These non-verbal cues, which include facial and emotional expressions, have been shown to greatly affect the satisfaction and motivation of online learners (Borup, 2014).

As instructors continue to integrate online communication tools into course design and make it a priority to spend the time necessary to build relationships within the asynchronous online community, it is possible for students to enjoy a sense of satisfaction with the course and successfully meet the learning objectives developed for the class.

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