

A Holistic Approach for Establishing Social Presence in Online Courses and Programs

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Abstract

In this feature article, a case study of the holistic efforts to foster social presence and student success in online courses and programs at a mid-sized rural university in central Texas are described from an instructor's point of view as well as from an administrator's point of view. Specific instructional and support strategies are described. These synergistic efforts are used to foster an atmosphere of support and success for students enrolled in online courses and programs.

Keywords: Online learning environment, learning management systems, instructional design, instructional support, social presence theory, social networks.

Introduction and Background

The Internet has transformed the way in which people relate and feel close to one another - all without the necessity of close physical proximity. This was not always perceived to be the case for online learning environments, as early critics believed that the absence of social cues would interfere with teaching and learning (Berge & Collins, 1995). However, this stigma of a sterile online learning environment has diminished with the development of complex social networks and virtual worlds, advanced online instructional tools, and the prevalence of high-speed Internet connections that allow for meaningful real-time connections. Researchers are now beginning to move beyond the question of whether the online learning environment allows students to feel connected, and are now delving into how the connections students form relate to learning (Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Fung, 2010; Dow, 2008; Kehrwald, 2008).

The shift in perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the online learning environment as a communication medium is attributed to a better understanding of behaviors (instructor/student) in the environment as it relates to feelings of connectedness, and in part to the improvement in the tools that are inherent to most Learning Management Systems (LMS) such as asynchronous discussions and synchronous chat tools. When used appropriately, these tools allow students and faculty to interact in a way that closely mimics face-to-face interaction. Even still, students and faculty have to log-in to an LMS and navigate to several different locations in the course to engage in discussion, collaboration, and sharing, thus the communication is sometimes forced out of the day-to-day, hour-to-hour, and minute-to-minute experience (Dunlap & Lowenthal,

2009). Many instructors are now leveraging tools that are *outside* of the LMS to find ways to keep students connected to the course and the content. The current popularity and growth of web-based social networking tools is prompting educators within organizations and institutions, including higher education, to consider how these tools can enhance online learning (Salaway, 2008; Weekes, 2008; Wexler et al., 2008; Young, 2007).

Another shift of perception has to do with the support structure and online learning community that develops as students and instructors co-navigate through typical roadblocks (i.e. technical, how-to, and informational) inherent to online learning. Providing both instructors and students with a strong support structure throughout this process is vital to the development of social presence in an online course or across an online program of study. Positive integration of student and faculty support, as well as the use of effective technology encourage meaningful interaction between students and college professionals, and can provide a successful model for effective teaching and learning that helps to ensure student success (Floyd & Casey-Powell, 2004).

A theory that connects both the need for intentional instructional strategies for communication and intentional support strategies from the institution for building community is Social Presence Theory [i]. The conceptual underpinnings of social presence in online learning environments were derived from Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) community of inquiry model and have been described as the feeling that group members communicate with people instead of impersonal objects. As communication channels are restricted, social presence may decrease. When social presence is low within a group, group members often feel disconnected and cohesion levels are low. When social presence is high, however, each group member has the feeling of joint involvement. Aragon (2003) noted that the overall goal for creating social presence in any learning environment, whether it be online or face-to-face, is to create a level of comfort at which people feel at ease around the instructor and the other participants. Without this goal being achieved, the learning environment can turn to one that is not fulfilling or successful for the instructors and the learners. While research is rich with regard to broad instructional strategies that can be used to foster social presence, practical strategies and examples for faculty and the institution to use are lacking in the literature. The purpose of the two case studies presented here is to describe specific social presence related instructional and support strategies used to foster an atmosphere of support and success for students enrolled in online courses and programs in a large rural university.



Figure 1, Tarleton, Cushing Library (Credit: Texas A&M University Archives, 2009)

With slightly over 7,500 students, the university is a member of the Lone Star Conference and is classified as a Carnegie Master's Large institution. While most of the students who attend are Caucasian American (83.4%), 7.5% of the students are Hispanic American, 6.3% are African American, 1% are Native American, and .9% are Asian American. Over 21.3% of the students have part-time enrollment status and 35.8% receive Federal Pell Grant funds (Educational Trust, 2007). Within a four-year time frame (Fall 2007 to Fall 2010), the number of online courses offered has increased

138% from 266 in 2007 to 634 in 2010 (<University's Institutional Research Office>, 2010).

The rest of the article is organized as follows: the two sections following present in detail the experiences and practices of the authors with regard to infusing social presence in the online learning environment. The concluding section provides recommendations and directions for further research based on the findings.

Infusing Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment: A Faculty Member's Perspective

As a faculty member for five years, student services practitioner for four years, and a millennial college student who took a plethora of online courses, Dr. Jennifer Edwards has a view of the online teaching environment that many faculty may not possess. Over the years, learning management systems have changed, but the online teaching practices/methods she's incorporated have generally remained the same. It seems that the faculty members who strive to remain socially present with their online students are more successful than their counterparts who do not strive for social presence. In the online learning environment, Dr. Edwards strives to establish social presence in the courses she teaches by employing the following practices: 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.

Providing Virtual Office Hours

Traditional office hours are usually restricted to times and days that accommodate the professor's teaching and research schedule (Wallace & Wallace, 2001). Students who enroll in online courses might not live on campus and this provides an opportunity for online instructors to support these students by hosting virtual office hours (Edwards & Helvie-Mason, 2010). Virtual office hours provide opportunities for students to communicate with their professor without the constraints of traditional office hours. In addition to the student benefits, professors can conduct their office hours from virtually any location (e.g. , while on vacation) and through a variety of communication media (e.g. smart phone, iPad®). These benefits are support mechanisms for both professors and students to communicate with one another in real-time while working, on vacation, or while completing an assignment/paper on their computer.

Since 2007, Dr. Edwards has provided virtual office hours for students in both online and face-to-face classes facilitated by Yahoo® Instant Messenger. She hosts five virtual office hours per week and usually has two to three students communicate with her during this hour-long period. Most students like having the option to communicate with their professors during virtual office hours in addition to traditional communication methods (Edwards & Helvie-Mason, 2010). The 81 students who were enrolled in four past classes during the Spring 2009 semester contributed 51 favorable responses regarding virtual office hours. The following response categories emerged: easier to contact professor (15), increased opportunity (11), virtual office hours are more convenient (22), virtual office hours provides students with an immediate response (3). Virtual office hours provide support for all students who need real-time help from their online instructor without actually having to visit their office.

Sending Weekly Checklists and Grading Rubrics

Checklists and grading rubrics are additional practices that online instructors can adopt to support their online students. Every Monday, Dr. Edwards sends a checklist of items (action items) that need to be completed by the following Friday (the day that all online assignments are due). In the e-mail, Dr. Edwards forms check boxes by each of the “action items” and their locations on Blackboard® (the platform used by the university LMS). Most of the online students print this check list and post the list on their computer or refrigerator. Checklists provide students with an easy mechanism to see the pending assignments for the week and the due dates and make them aware that the professor is keeping up with their required activity from week to week.

Grading rubrics also provide support for students by enabling them to become familiar with the grading criteria for each assignment when it is assigned. Usually utilized for online assignments and discussion questions (Penny & Murphy, 2009), grading rubrics can be used for all assessment types and online presentations. Online evaluation tools (grading rubrics) are usually available in content management systems such as Blackboard®.

Using Social Media for Announcements and Forming Professional Relationships

Online instructors can use Twitter® to send announcements and form professional relationships with their students. “Twitter®, a micro-blogging service, has the potential to function as a teaching tool which can bring students and professors together in real-time applying classroom content to current events” (Helvie-Mason & Edwards, 2010, p. 35). In her online courses, Dr. Edwards embeds a Twitter® widget on the Blackboard® course homepage. This widget enables students to see each of the professor’s tweets without having to create an account. On average, she sends over 250 tweets per semester. Most of the tweets are focused on announcements, grading updates, and student encouragement.

Collaborative Group Assignments



Figure 2, “Faculty At Work”. (Credit: UoB Special Collection, 2006).

Google Documents® provides faculty and students with a wealth of collaboration opportunities. In an upper-level undergraduate course taught online, Dr. Edwards developed an activity which required groups of four to five students to write a group research paper using Google Documents®. This assignment enabled these students to learn how to use Web 2.0 software (Google Documents®) and how to remain accountable to each other. She spends an average of four to six hours a week managing and grading the group documents. This time investment provides the students with critical social interactions that serve as an essential part of a student's educational foundation (Roschelle & Teasley, 1995). Computer-mediated communication and collaborative learning equips students with interactive abilities and problem-solving skills within small groups.

Infusing Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment: An Administrator's Perspective

Dr. Credence Baker has worked with online students and faculty for over seven years in various support roles, and now serves as the director of a central university wide support structure - the *Center for Instructional Innovation*. Like her colleague and co-author, she comes from the millennial generation of college students, and has taken online and hybrid courses throughout her undergraduate and graduate studies. Her focus from an administrator's perspective is to provide faculty and students with holistic support in the online learning environment. Thus, she believes it is critical to provide faculty and students with technical, how-to, development and liaison-type support in order for them to be successful and to feel connected to the online learning community. The staff at the *Center for Instructional Innovation* seek to foster a sense of "online learning community" among students and faculty using the LMS by applying the strategies such as a dedicated helpdesk, creating communities with the LMS, personalized welcome messages, training and development services, and obtaining and acting upon faculty and student feedback.

Supporting Students - A Centralized, Dedicated Helpdesk

A centralized helpdesk serves as the communication hub for faculty and students to get help with the LMS and all of the university's online instructional tools (among them, Turnitin®, Web 2.0 tools, e-Portfolio software). Helpdesk services include technical support, password help, and "how do I" questions. In the last long semester, the helpdesk assisted users with ten different instructional tools via 4198 support calls, 1095 remote sessions, and 1420 support e-mails. Because of the helpdesk's mono-focus on online instructional tools, faculty have come to trust its personnel as a source of information and reliable form of support for their students, who can get help over the phone, via remote desktop support, or via e-mail. Social media channels are also used at the university for communication purposes, and include Facebook®, Twitter®, and YouTube®. Another part of the success of the helpdesk has been the in-depth online training and FAQ materials developed with student needs in mind. These materials can be utilized no matter what stage a student is at in using the LMS, and are updated each semester.

Supporting Students - Opening E-Mail

Just before a new semester, 1200 online students receive a personalized e-mail from the helpdesk welcoming them to the online learning community and pointing them to resources/assistance. It has sections for logging-in, getting to know the LMS, course availability, and getting help. The e-mail is designed to be warm and welcoming, and has been well received by students at the university.

Supporting Students – Online Learning Communities

The helpdesk has set up over fifteen different student and faculty learning communities for academic and non-academic programs where students can utilize the LMS as a forum for information and resources related to their specific interests and research areas. Some of these learning communities last throughout a student's entire academic program, and allow students to remain connected even when a semester has ended. The hope is that students will begin to view the LMS as a place to collaborate, rather than just a place to take online classes.

Supporting Faculty - A Centralized, Dedicated Helpdesk

The same centralized helpdesk that is available for students is also available for faculty to contact for help with the LMS and its ancillary tools/plugin. Services for faculty include technical support, account creation, “how do I” questions, multi-media creation, test bank requests, etc. Faculty can also get help over the phone, via remote desktop support, or via e-mail. Online FAQ materials were also developed for faculty, and serve to supplement the face-to-face and remote desktop training offered in both group and individual sessions.

Supporting Faculty - Faculty Training and Development Services

Besides extensive “how-to” training offered online and in group settings, faculty have access to development services in the areas of teaching and learning through an initiative started in 2009. These services include faculty round table discussions, faculty learning communities (online and hybrid models), instructional mentoring, and event/conference offerings. The idea is to provide faculty with a trusted place to discuss the very private issues of improving teaching methods, thus all services are offered on a voluntary basis. Two faculty fellows were selected to lead the initiative, and work closely with the help desk to find out what kinds of issues faculty and students are running in to.

Continually Improving Support – Getting Faculty and Student Feedback

The support services provided for faculty and students have evolved with the increase in the number of faculty and students using online instructional tools not only for online courses, but for hybrid and face-to-face component courses as well. Since 2006, the university has seen an increase in fully online courses from 102 per semester to 570 per semester, and for hybrid/component courses, an increase from 162 per semester to 828 per semester. Staffing for the services has grown from one full-time equivalent (FTE) position and a graduate assistant, to five FTE positions, two graduate assistants, and four part-time student technicians.

Funding for the growth in staffing was provided through distance education fees generated during the exponential growth in enrollment. The *Center for Instructional Innovation* has been strategic about infusing a climate of customer service and respect for the user, whether they are a faculty member or a student. In order to continually meet the needs of our users, feedback is solicited from both faculty and students each year via an online satisfaction survey. While it is very encouraging to see that the results are consistently in the 98-99 percentile in terms of satisfaction, the open-ended questions about suggestions for improvement and ideas for innovative new tools are perhaps the most beneficial. Giving users the chance to provide input into where the university heads with regard to instructional technology only enhances an overall sense of inclusion and community.



Figure 3, “eLearn”. (Credit: Wolfgang Greller, 2006).

Concluding Remarks

Creating an atmosphere where online students feel supported and connected to both the institution and their instructors as a framework for promoting social presence and student success

is a shared and interconnected responsibility. Faculty need to feel confident that they can rely upon a support structure that assists their students, is a trusted liaison, offers instructional tool training and support, and provides avenues for exploring best practices. When the latter points are met, faculty can focus on incorporating strategies for more effective online teaching. It is important to note that the strategies mentioned in this article are not comprehensive and are continually evolving, and each instructor and institution is different. Future research regarding social presence theory and establishing social presence in the online learning environment and about holistic approaches of providing students with a more connected experience should be explored, including which specific strategies of mutual responsibility between faculty and the institution are related to student success and learning.

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