Using Social Presence to Increase Student Engagement in Online Learning

Amanda B. Lambert

Purdue University

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Dr. Sunnie Watson

Abstract

Online learning is growing in popularity and is a powerful way to increase education accessibility. However, it also has a high attrition rate and concerns around student engagement. Research shows that "adding the human element" through personality and social presence has the opportunity to mitigate this problem and take learner experience to a new level. Researchers have discussed a variety of strategies to implement social presence, mostly relating to developing interpersonal relationships or to using technology to express personality. Little research has been done on the effectiveness of these strategies and there are logistical considerations that must be understood for successful implementation.

Introduction

Many people believe that online learning is the future of education. In 2017, 32% of students at public institutions took at least one class online (Bastrikin, 2020). According to CNN, 83% of executives in a survey believe an online degree from an established institution is as credible as one from traditional in-person classes (Zupek, 2010). In 2018, 47% of online learners selected online learning because of commitments that would not allow for in-person attendance and 21% chose it because it was the only option in their field of interest (Bastrikin, 2020). As Daphne Koller, cofounder of Coursera, explains in her Ted Talk, online learning opens up incredible opportunities to "establish education as a fundamental right," "enable lifelong learning," and "enable a wave of innovation because amazing talent can be found anywhere" (Koller, 2012).

Despite this potential there are some disheartening statistics. In 2010, online courses had a 10-20% higher attrition rate than in-person classes. 40-80% of all online students dropped out of classes (Bawa, 2016). There is limited data in more recent years, yet in April 2020 following the COVID-19 crisis, 81% of college and university professors believe maintaining student engagement in online learning is a challenge (Bastrikin, 2020). Koller explains that Coursera provides high quality courses using experienced instructors, active learning, and peer discussions (Koller, 2012). However, even Coursera has only around 5% of students complete a course, though founders Daphne Koller and Andrew Ng explain this is due to the variation of "learner intent" in MOOC's (Koller et al., 2013). Many people believe that the human element is what is missing in online learning. During an interview, an instructional designer for University of Washington Extended Campus explained she loved being a part of the mission of online learning

yet prefers in-person learning for herself. She stated, "getting personality built into coursework is the challenge we have to tackle next," (personal communication, May 26, 2020).

Promoting Social Presence

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) define social presence as "the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as 'real' people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used," (p. 94). When designing an online course to promote social presence, instructors focus on building relationships and two-way communications with learners. This is known to increase engagement and foster high level critical thinking skills. Collaborative constructivists consider cognition part of social context and educational goals should be meaningful in the real world. Skills such as sharing opinions, discussing ideas, and developing problem-solving require social interaction to develop (Garrison et al., 2000).

Regarding learner engagement in online classes, in 2010, Marcia D. Dixson surveyed 186 students, finding that multiple communication channels between peers and the instructor correlated with higher engagement. Furthermore, Richardson and Swan (2003) found that social presence contributed to both student and instructor satisfaction with a course. Conaway and Schiefelbein (n. d.) explain that relationships formed in online classes impact student learning and motivation and learning details about the instructor as a person can increase retention and engagement. Online courses with social presence use technology to create active participation by the student. Conaway and Schiefelbein describe this as part of "Web 2.0", popularized by Tim O'Reilly in 2005, which refers to advanced technologies allowing for a collaborative, innovative, highly accessible online experience.

Strategies to Implement Social Presence

There is a wide range of specific strategies for implementing social presence in online learning. Strategies often include a mix of social, collaborative, and relationship-building activities and self-focused actions, where learners reflect on their experiences and include aspects of their identity. The Garrison, Anderson, and Archer article (2000) states emotional expression, group cohesion, and open communication as the elements of social presence. They list strategies to facilitate this such as interpersonal actions including continuing threads, quoting others, complimenting others, asking, agreeing, and inclusion. For example, instructors could use discussion boards where students must comment on each other's posts agreeing, disagreeing, or questioning. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer also list personal actions like using emoticons, humor, and self-disclosure. This could include encouraging students to share personal experiences, create introduction posts, or personalize projects. Instructors might also share information about their personal lives or include humorous comments in announcements.

Other researchers also discuss applicable strategies. Dixson's survey (2010) assesses emotional activities such as "applying course material to my life," "really desiring to learn the material," and "helping fellow students." Conaway and Schiefelbein (n. d.) focus on identity by encouraging instructors to share their "digital personality" by adding in audio clips or videos, revising introductions and announcements for each course, and sharing personal photos. Sung and Mayer (2012) include both personal and interpersonal strategies with five factors of social presence: social respect, social sharing, open mindedness, social identity, and intimacy.

Effectiveness of Strategies to Implement Social Presence

There is limited discussion in how effective these strategies are at increasing student engagement. Similarly, Richardson and Swan' (2003) question whether social presence *causes* increased satisfaction or if a student's willingness for social participation correlates with

individual effort and satisfaction. Lowenthal and Dennen (2017) explain that to foster action, educators need consistent language, solid empirical evidence, and guidance for facilitating social presence.

There is also little discussion around logistical constraints and appropriate ways to create social presence. Sangmin-Michelle Lee (2013) references concerns that social presence does not always correlate to cognitive benefits and can distract learners from learning objectives. Additionally, one of the current explanations of poor online learning retention is inequality in technological skills (Bawa, 2016). Many of the examples of social presence described above in the "Web 2.0" environment would increase the number of software applications learners would have to learn and use. When Conaway and Schiefelbein (n. d). mention the fun ways to mix instructors and students' personal and professional lives, they do not consider how some people might have prior experience in this social professional setting, while others do not. Finally, it is important to consider if social communities are not structured correctly, they could result in feelings of otherness and isolation, demotivating students rather than engaging them (Tomei et al., 2008).

Conclusion

Promoting social presence is known to increase learner engagement and skill development. There are a variety of strategies instructors can use to implement this, though more research must be done on effectiveness. Going forward, researchers must focus in on specific strategies to implement social presence and gather data on best practices, logistical constraints, and unintended consequences, giving instructors actionable ways to incorporate social presence into their courses.

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