

Social Presence and Online Learning Communities

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Abstract

Online learning continues to grow rapidly in higher education. As institutions of higher education develop online courses and students participate in those courses, various issues arise: retention rates, feelings of isolation, and a decrease in feelings of success. By assisting students in establishing both a social presence as well as a learning community through various digital literacies, teachers can help combat these issues. The broader phenomenological study consisted of three in-depth interviews with each of the 12 study participants, all undergraduate, pre-service teachers, regarding their experiences with online courses.

Keywords: online learning, pre-service teachers, undergraduate, social presence

Introduction

“Enhancing student's perception of social presence increases instructional effectiveness and learning in an online learning environment” (Amundson, 2021, p.13). When instructors establish learning systems that possess characteristics of social presence, they are able to enhance learner experience. Social presence theory is “the degree to which a person is perceived as a real person in mediated communication” (Gunawardena, 1995, p. 151). Social presence can be defined as connecting and interacting with others and being seen as ‘real people’ through the communication medium is in use. (Garcia-O’Neill, 2016). Through this communication and interaction with others using digital literacies, learning communities can form.

According to the American Library Association’s digital-literacy task force, digital literacies can be defined as, “the ability to use information and communication technologies to find, evaluate, create, and communicate information, requiring both cognitive and technical skills” (ALAIR, 2011, p. 1). Additionally, within institutions of higher education, digital literacy is comprised of three buckets: “1) finding and consuming digital content; 2) creating digital content; and 3) communicating or sharing it” (Loewus, 2016, para. 5). In understanding digital literacies in this manner, educators are able to rely on these various tools to assist in building learning communities and support students in building social presence in their online courses.

Research indicates that community is foundational to learning (Black et al., 2008; Chapman et al., 2005; Cherrstrom et al., 2018; Cleugh, 2013; Lear et al., 2010; Rovai, 2002; Tu & Corry, 2001; Vlachopoulos & Cowan, 2010). As learning and teaching drastically changed in 2020, administrators, educators, students, and parents were met with new, challenging circumstances. Educators were thrust into teaching within online learning spaces. As students engage in online learning environments, the tools available to them through an online learning management system (LMS) are digital in nature. These technologies and digital literacies afford

students new modes to communicate and learn. While it can be difficult to establish community in an online space, it is not impossible. By developing learning communities in online courses, educators are better able to assist students in cultivating relationships and establishing a social presence in their courses. These connections and notions of social presence through learning communities may combat issues regarding retention rates, feelings of isolation, and a decrease in the feelings of success. Community stems from collaboration within a group while including features of trust, connectedness, and common goals. When learning communities are successfully generated, there is an increase in the effectiveness of the learning environment (Kucuk & Sahin, 2013). Not only do learning communities provide spaces in which learning can occur, but they also afford students with a means to engage and explore with one another in a socially appropriate manner by relying on various digital literacies to do so.

Methodology

To better understand experiences of learning community within online courses, the author conducted a phenomenological study using in-depth interviews. Participants for the broader study were chosen using a snowball effect, where prior students of the author provided potential participant contact information. The data derived from the broader study identified three main findings in which participants perceived learning community within their online courses: learning communities are relationship-based, learning communities are generated by communication, and learning communities are technologically bound. For this article, the focus will be on the finding that participants experienced learning communities to be technologically bound by exploring how different technological tools impacted social presence. By implementing these digital literacies, participants experienced increased participation and social presence.

The following tools can be used to assist in establishing a social presence within online learning communities: synchronous chats, video-conferences, various collaborative tools, images, and audio recordings. Each of these tools offered a method for finding and consuming digital content, creating digital content, and communicating and/or sharing with classmates and instructors, which again, directly ties into the Loewus definition of digital literacies.

Synchronous Chat

Utilizing synchronous chats was one-way participants in the author's study experienced a sense of learning community and helped establish social presence. Synchronous discussions happen in real time, while asynchronous discussions do not (Evans et al., 2014). Yuan and Kim (2014) developed the subsequent when, who, where, and how guidelines to be cultivated to help build community in an online learning space. The third guideline (where), stated the importance of using both synchronous and asynchronous technologies to create a shared space in which students and instructor are able to interact.

Heath, Lilly, and Cathy (all pseudonyms, as are all names that follow), who were participants in the author's study, discussed the idea of a chat room, drawn to the idea of a chat room to communicate with classmates in a "non-school" setting. They believed these types of

communications helped establish learning communities and build social presence, while also providing a space for students to share ideas and resources. Cathy liked the idea of a synchronous chat room, which students could use to type questions into in real-time, perhaps even while an instructor was logged into the course. She thought this type of chat room could act as virtual office hours, too, assisting in growing learning community among members of the course and the instructor.

Cathy additionally offered the idea of interactive, synchronous chats, which would allow classmates to talk with one another in real time. She felt this tool would provide a space in which classmates could participate in discussions similar to those they experienced in a seated course. Cathy proposed that these chats could help build a stronger sense of learning communities in an online learning environment.

By incorporating a synchronous chat option, instructors can better respond to questions immediately, clarify any misunderstandings, and simply engage in conversations with students. This accessibility could positively impact students' perceptions of community while completing an online course.

Videoconferencing

Videoconferencing, a type of synchronous communication using audio, video, and data between two or more different locations, can be implemented in various ways within an online course (Simonson et al., 2012). Resources like YouTube have the capability to send and watch videos; Skype, FaceTime, Zoom, and others can be used to communicate using both video and audio. Wagner et al. (2016) found that video conferences assisted in building rapport between instructors and students. In online courses, video conferencing can be applied to facilitate personal relationships and create familiarity among group members (Wagner et al., 2016). According to Saw et al. (2008), the features of video-conferencing enhanced interactions between learners and the instructor as well as providing tools to communicate and collaborate, which can positively impact social presence in online courses.

In addition to the live chat, Cathy, Sonya, Lucy, Steph, and Lilly thought using video-conferencing more often would be extremely beneficial for students as they built learning communities. Their ideas drifted from using Skype to record a group project and submit it as an assignment, creating videos as introductory posts at the beginning of the semester, and using FaceTime to simply communicate face-to-face with one another. They believed implementing video-conferencing would enhance students' social presence through communication.

Beth, Lucy, Sonya, and Steph all voiced their desire for more video-conferencing opportunities. Beth and Sonya specifically suggested Skype; Sonya wondered if there was a way to record a group Skype conversation over a topic and then submit it to an instructor for grading. She and Beth both contemplated how Skype could provide a way for classmates to get to know one another better while collaborating on assignments, which would positively influence the formation of learning communities within an online course.

Collaborative Tools

Another facet of online learning which participants found to be helpful in developing social presence was being able to effectively collaborate using technological tools within their online courses. While most participants agreed discussion boards allowed for small amounts of collaboration, they disclosed using Google Drive or email was more efficient and afforded more opportunities for growth regarding learning communities. Participants were drawn to Google Drive for multiple reasons. One of the main reasons being all their work saved automatically within the document, which created a sense of security. Secondly, all students working on an item within Google Drive could access and work on the document at the same time. This synchronous work was valuable to participants because they felt a sense of accountability and learning community within the group while working together. Lastly, participants appreciated the various ways in which they could use two components of Google Drive to establish learning communities: Google Docs and Google Slides. Google Docs allowed participants to create and edit different text documents, and Google Slides allowed participants to create and edit online presentations which are similar to PowerPoint, a presentation software available through Microsoft Office. Heath shared his appreciation for Google Slides, while Steph and Lucy shared their experiences with Google Docs. All three participants found Google Drive to be beneficial to their learning, as it created a space for them to collaborate with ease, which aided in building social presence and learning communities.

Email was another tool mentioned by participants used to build learning community. Sarah and Lucy expressed that to email another student, they needed to feel comfortable with that student, which positively correlated with feelings of learning community. Sarah explained that while at times getting an email response from someone could take longer than she desired, it was still an effective collaborative tool and a simple way to build learning communities. Lucy found herself emailing instructors more than classmates. She articulated how email allowed her to communicate with her online instructors in a timely manner and she felt a greater sense of learning community with them by communicating in that way.

Images

Implementing audio and visual recordings in online courses was another way in which participants experienced learning community through the implementation of technological tools. Whether these recordings were made by the instructor, the students, or an expert outside the course, participants enjoyed learning and connecting to the course through the use of recorded videos, lectures, and webinars. Sonya recalled a webinar she watched in one of her online courses, and she still remembered the in-depth conversations she and her classmates engaged in after its viewing. She reflected on her enjoyment surrounding those conversations and her classmates seemed to be just as engaged as she was in the content and conversations. These conversations, based on the webinar, established learning community as classmates engaged in conversations with one another. Cathy, Heath, and Lucy discussed their experiences with recorded lectures. Heath shared that while he worried the lectures would not engage him, he

ended up enjoying most of the lectures because they were significant learning tools within the course itself. He explained that,

The instructor recorded lectures; it was new and different. You would get most of the information you needed from that lecture. There would be directions about the assignments in the lectures, so it...uh, forced us to watch them. The ones that didn't [contain assignment information] were dry, but it also could've been the material. (Heath, interview 3, December 30).

Participants enjoyed when instructors implemented videos, as it was different than reading and typing a response to a chapter out of the textbook, which is what they disclosed was typically encountered in their online courses. They especially appreciated when the instructors were in the videos, as it added a layer of learning community and connectedness to the course.

Phone

Lastly, Sonya proposed using a phone to communicate. She offered you did not necessarily need FaceTime to communicate; sometimes it would just be nice to speak to someone else. Sonya compared the conversations you might have to our interviews. She said, "It would be hard to get my thoughts on some of your questions across to you in writing, but since I'm able to say them to you...it's just easier to talk about" (Sonya, interview 2, January 11). The desire for constant and effective communication was a constant theme throughout the interview process.

Wish List

While participants shared their experiences of social presence and community through various modes in their online courses, they also discussed things they wished had occurred in their courses. These conversations turned into Wish Lists and are helpful for educators as these ideas can easily be implemented into online courses.

Heath confessed he liked staying "in-the-know" (Heath, interview 3, December 30). He suggested online courses adopt a notification system more like social media sites. He appreciated being notified on Facebook or Instagram of people commenting on his posts, and he thought receiving those same notifications for an online course could be helpful as well. Heath proposed that notifications in online courses resembling notifications on social media could potentially make students more involved in their online courses. This increased involvement could also lead to improved experiences of learning communities.

Lastly, Lilly thought if instructors merely explained the tools available to students in an online course she might be more willing to explore those offered. Lilly clarified that she noticed different tools available to her in Blackboard, but had never clicked on them because no one ever referred to them. Lilly disclosed her instructors relied on the same few tools, and it seemed like there were more available to people in online courses. She considered how the implementation of

different tools might cultivate learning communities and create more opportunities for knowledge and collaboration.

Implications for Educators

As digital literacies continue to evolve, in order to better help students navigate these technologies, educators must be able to draw from a wide variety of tools. Digital literacies contain more of a social component than traditional literacies. In understanding this, instructors may want to provide opportunities where students are able to engage in dialogue, especially as learning communities rely on social interactions to build relationships.

Additionally, digital literacies are multimodal, and participation through communicative technologies is important for literacy within a global community. Given that communication is not one directional, access and understanding of a variety of digital technologies is a way to increase student success in an online learning environment. By exposing students to a multitude of digital literacies, educators can help their students feel more comfortable in using these new tools.

Conclusion

Generally, participants shared positive experiences concerning their online courses. While a few participants shared difficulties they encountered while learning in an online setting, most participants recalled positive experiences and worked to establish their own social presence using various digital literacies. Participants discussed how their sense of joy and motivation was often impacted by the sense of learning community within online courses. Participants also collectively discussed their desire to establish personalities online. In developing these online personalities, participants sensed they were learning alongside a real person rather than a robot on the other side of a computer screen. While feelings of disconnect within their online courses led to frustrations among participants, the ability to collaborate in an effective way appeared to combat those negative feelings. Almost all participants stated that developing a social presence and a strong sense of learning community were beneficial for pre-service teachers.

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