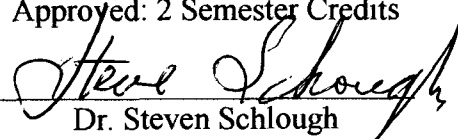An Analysis of Social Presence

In Online Learning

by

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ABSTRACT

The Internet offers a low cost, flexible medium for distance learning, and, therefore, the number of online courses at colleges and universities is increasing rapidly. Unfortunately, without face-to-face contact, distance learners often feel a sense of isolation and loneliness. To be truly effective, the goal of online learning should not be to only provide instruction but also to help participants become more successful, satisfied online learners.

The purpose of this study was to determine if incorporating specific personal elements into an online course would increase social presence and, as a result, affect learner satisfaction. The study included a comprehensive review of literature including the history of distance learning, an analysis of effective instructional methods for online learning, and the necessity of creating social presence in online learning environments.

Review and analysis suggested that although participants enjoyed the online course and the elements that were included to create social presence, there was no significant correlation of those items to overall course/learner satisfaction.

Recommendations were made that online instructors continue to monitor student satisfaction through course evaluations and feedback; that instructors/facilitators continue to incorporate personal items to create social presence with the goal of helping even one learner achieve higher success or overall course satisfaction; and that further studies are conducted on the effect of social presence in online learning environments.

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Chapter I: Introduction

The United States Distance Learning Association (USDLA) defined distance learning as: "The acquisition of knowledge and skills through mediated information and instruction, encompassing all technologies and other forms of learning at a distance" (USDLA, n.d. n.p.). Historically, distance learning can be traced to the early 1900's and the use of correspondence courses (Morabito, 1997). Since then radio, television, and teleconferencing have been used to offer distance students greater access to education. Today with the evolution of the Internet, online learning has become the newest form of distance learning and has quickly gained a tremendous amount of popularity. Online learning uses Internet technology to deliver course content in either an asynchronous format, with interaction occurring at different times, or a synchronous format, with interaction occurring at the same time. With unique characteristics, both formats or a combination of the two are frequently used by distance learning programs.

Online learning is affecting the way courses are taught as well as the future of the traditional classroom setting. Professor Peter F. Drucker, a well-respected business strategist and perceptive observer of modern age, predicted that university campuses will become obsolete in the next 25 years because universities can deliver more lectures and classes off campus at a fraction of the cost (cited in Lau, 2000). According to Horton, the predictions for online teaching environments state that by 2007 more than half of all university students will take courses online (cited in Falvo & Solloway, n.d.). Some campuses are now requiring that every student take at least one online course or a course with an online component (Varvel, 2001).

The majority of online learners are nontraditional adults age 26 years or older, who study part-time and work full-time (Cappelli, 2003). These adult learners have a variety of reasons to pursue distance learning: constraints of time, distances and finances; the opportunity to take courses that would otherwise be unavailable; and the ability to encounter students from different social, cultural, economic, and experiential backgrounds (Willis, 1992). When used correctly, the Internet offers a low cost, flexible, and highly effective medium for distance learning, and the flexibility of scheduling enables many non-traditional students to acquire an education.

Despite its continued growth and popularity, online learning is not without criticism. A common complaint of distance education learners is that without face-to-face contact, they feel a sense of isolation and loneliness. This isolation combined with anxiety and confusion, lack of feedback, and frustration with technology all contribute to a higher dropout rate in Internet-based distance learning (King, 2002). Undeniably, frustration with technology will continue to be a problem for many. However, according to Kaye, research indicates that social factors are the main determinants of success or failure in an online course (cited in King, 2002). Therefore, the goal of online learning should be to not only provide the instruction necessary to accomplish instructional objectives, but more importantly, to help participants become more successful, satisfied, online learners.

According to the American Distance Education Consortium, the learning environment must ensure that the learners are provided with a specific context, clear goals and objectives based on defined needs, and instructional strategies that reflect their needs and interests (cited in Powley, n.d.). The learning process must integrate life, work,

and educational experiences, generate continuous dialog, and utilize a minimal amount of memorization. The learning outcomes must be achievable and applicable to practical, everyday situations (*Key Elements*, n.d.).

Effective and consistent communication and personal interaction is an extremely important component of the educational process and must be considered in the development of online courses (Roberson & Klotz, 2002). Interaction does not just happen in distance learning courses but must be deliberately planned into every lesson (Steele, n.d.). Successful distance learning involves interactivity between teacher and students, between students and the learning environment, and among students themselves (Sherry, 1996).

A key indicator of success with online learners is a well-designed course that fosters interactivity through the creation of a learning community (Salmon, 2001). An online learning community, described as a culture of learning that allows individuals to work together, exchange resources and ideas, and collaborate in real time (Donovan, Smith, & Stanford, n.d.), can greatly influence student learning and course satisfaction. Students must feel they are members of a learning community with strong professor-student and student-student interactions (Deubel, 2003). In addition, social presence, or the outward projection of participants and resulting interaction in distance learning, is a potential predictor of instructor effectiveness and student success. Social presence can help form stronger relationships, build a sense of community, and lead to higher student satisfaction with the overall learning experience (Woods & Keeler, 2001).

An effective distance educator can employ a number of strategies that focus on planning, student understanding, and interaction to ensure a successful course (Willis,

1992). Moreover, less often used and rarely suggested, an instructor can also incorporate social elements to enhance an online course. To create more social presence, an instructor can provide an audio welcome message; designate a welcome conference where teachers and learners post biographies and digital pictures; create a discussion forum for friendly, casual conversation that enables participants to communicate about any areas of interest (*Activities to Promote Online*, n.d.); provide online office hours; and make telephone calls as needed. These are the types of elements that will create social presence in the online environment and may improve learner satisfaction.

Statement of the Problem

With the dramatic increase in the number of distance learning programs, it is necessary to explore strategies that will provide the greatest benefit for learners participating in online learning. Limited research has been conducted that identifies the effect of social presence in an online course.

Purpose of the Study

One issue online educators are facing is a lack of research related to the online learning environment: simply offering online courses is not sufficient to meet the needs of online learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine if incorporating specific personal elements into an online course will increase social presence and, as a result, affect learner satisfaction. Specifically, a web survey will be given to 18 graduate students participating in a Web Design for Educators online course July 5-August 1, 2005, at the University of Wisconsin-Stout to determine if incorporating instructor and participant photographs, including an audio welcome message, and posting personal biographies will improve student satisfaction.

Research Questions

The following research questions will guide this study:

1. Does incorporating personal elements into an online course create social presence?

2. Does social presence enhance a learner's educational experience and thus improve overall satisfaction?

3. Can online learning be improved by creating social presence and including personal elements in the course design?

4. What is the difference in perceptions of social presence in an online course based on age, gender, and experience with online courses?

Significance of the Study

This study is important for the following reasons:

1. This study will evaluate current methods used in online learning. Higher education has always been characterized by change. By researching and evaluating the success, or lack thereof, of different methods currently used by online instructors, online learning can be adjusted to fit the diverse needs of distance learners.

2. The findings will provide recommendations to better serve students participating in an online course. If it is determined that incorporating personal elements into an online course does improve learner satisfaction, more institutions and instructors may include personal elements in their online courses. By maintaining a commitment to personal relations and effective practices in online courses, instructors can provide a better learning environment for online learners.

3. The information can be used by administrators to make decisions regarding the implementation of online courses. Specifically, the results of this study can provide guidelines for course design and how instructors are trained to improve learner satisfaction.

Limitations of the Study

This study has the following limitations:

1. This study was limited to the students enrolled in one pre-selected course during the summer session of 2005 at UW-Stout in Menomonie, Wisconsin. The results were established by these learners and may not adequately represent all online learners.

2. The coursework and stated elements of the study were implemented by a university faculty member thereby limiting control of the researcher over other course delivery methods.

3. Participation in the researcher-prepared survey was optional. Additionally, the survey was given at the end of the course and excluded any learners who had withdrawn from the course. Therefore, the results may not adequately represent the opinions of all course participants.

4. The course represented a diverse group of learners and did not take into account the varying technical abilities and online experience.

5. No measure of validity and reliability was conducted on the survey instrument.

Definition of Terms

The following terms are defined for clarity of understanding:

Active learning—instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking

about what they are doing (Bonwell & Eison, n.d.).

Experiential—relating to, derived from, or providing experience (Merriam-Webster

Online, n.d.).

Internet—electronic communications network that connects computer networks and

organizational computer facilities around the world (USDLA, n.d.).

Medium—a means or instrumentality for storing or communicating information

(google: define).

Nontraditional—something done in other than the usual or traditional way. In

education, refers to learning and degrees completed by methods other than

spending many hours in classrooms and lecture halls (Degree.net, n.d.).

Social presence—the outward projection by participants into their online learning

communities and resulting interpersonal interaction (CMC Resource Site, n.d.).

Teleconferencing—the use of sophisticated telecommunications to link remote sites;

examples are audioconferencing and videoconferencing (USDLA, n.d.).

Chapter II: Review of Literature

Introduction

This review of literature will provide a history and overview of distance learning, followed by effective methods for online learning, and the importance of social presence in an online environment.

History and Overview of Distance Learning

The terms distance education, distance learning, and online learning are used interchangeably and have been applied by many different researchers to many different programs. Sherry (1996) stated:

> Its hallmarks are the separation of teacher and learner in space and/or time (Perraton, 1998), the volitional control of learning by the student rather than the distant instructor (Jonassen, 1992), and noncontiguous communication between student and teacher, mediated by print or some form of technology (Keegan, 1986; Garrison and Shale, 1987). (p. 2)

Contrary to popular belief, distance learning is not a new concept. Rather it began in 1840 when Sir Isaac Pitman began to teach shorthand instruction by mail correspondence. This was followed in 1873 by the Society to Encourage Studies at Home in Boston, Massachusetts (*History of Distance Learning*, n.d.). Many other institutions quickly followed suit including the University of Wisconsin that established a distance extension program in 1906. By 1965, the University of Wisconsin had progressed to offering courses based on telephone communication. The United Kingdom's Open University, established in 1969, had a tremendous impact on distance education because it used a multi-media approach to teaching: incorporating texts, audio and video

materials, and filmstrips (Aronovitz, n.d.). In the next twenty years, four other open

universities were established in Europe and more than 20 were established around the

world. In 1985 Connected Education was founded and began utilizing the first online

programs (*History of Distance Learning*, n.d.).

Today the evolution of technology has created a variety of distance learning

opportunities. In particular, the Internet and use of the World Wide Web have enabled

many courses to be offered online thereby allowing distance learning to gain widespread

popularity. There were an estimated 3,077,000 participants in distance education courses

offered by two-year and four-year institutions during the 12-month 2000–2001 academic

year. Of these institutions, 27% offered 10 or fewer courses, 25% offered 11 to 30

courses, 15% offered 31 to 50 courses, 19% offered 51 to 100 courses, and 15% of the

institutions offered more than 100 distance education courses. Incredibly, 88% of the

institutions indicated plans to increase the number of Internet courses using asynchronous

computer-based instruction. In addition, 62 % of institutions indicated that they planned

to start using or increase the number of Internet courses using synchronous computer-

based instruction as a primary mode of instructional delivery (United States Department

of Education, n.d.).

Each year hundreds of new online courses are added at colleges and universities

around the nation. However, tools for evaluation and assessment are limited (DiRamio &

Jordan, 2003) and little is known regarding the instructional goals and design features

preferred by adults with different personal and learning backgrounds in online learning

environments (Ausburn, 2004).

With the increase of online learning primarily utilized by nontraditional adult students, instructors and administrators who understand adult learners' preferences and needs and who create learning opportunities that appeal to their unique characteristics can make significant contributions to the success of online learning (Ausburn, 2004).

Every student deserves a quality teacher whether online or in a traditional learning environment. With the dramatic increase in the number of distance learning programs, it is critical that instructors examine and employ effective methods for online instruction.

Effective Methods for Online Learning

Chickering and Gamson suggested the following principles for facilitators that support effective online instruction: encourage continuous contact and communication between students and faculty; develop an open, sharing, and cooperative environment; encourage active learning; provide prompt and relevant feedback; emphasize time on task; communicate high expectations; and respect diverse talents and ways of learning (cited in *Tips for Teaching Online*, n.d.).

Similarly Thach and Murphy surveyed 103 distance education experts to develop a competency model for faculty and identified the following competencies: be clear and well organized; plan and prepare; be competent in subject matter; establish learning outcomes; be personable and enthusiastic; provide timely feedback; facilitate information presentation; utilize technology in a competent manner; monitor and evaluate student performance; collaborate with technical and support staff; provide a variety of learning activities; initiate and maintain interactive discussions; know audience learning styles and needs; encourage peer learning; advise and counsel students; lead instructional design

effort; introduce student support services; and facilitate guest experts (cited in Powley, n.d.).

Therefore, effective online facilitation should engage, guide, and motivate learners, and provide a safe and conducive environment for learning and communication exchange for all learners regardless of prior experience. Online instructors should discover students' learning preferences, integrate technology tools, apply appropriate instructional techniques, put them all into practice, and generate the most suitable method for individuals (Yang & Cornelious, 2005).

When organizing the content for online courses, the learners' needs must be taken into account. Adults need to know why they are learning something; will learn best from hands-on, problem-solving approaches to learning; have lifetime experiences that should be utilized and built upon; and will expect to apply new knowledge and skills immediately (Kruse, 2000).

To function effectively, students must quickly become comfortable with the nature of teaching and learning at a distance. Online instructors must keep things simple: one place for memos; one place to post assignments. Too many tools and multiple processes are overwhelming and confusing. Instructors should use a variety of media including text, graphics, audio narration, and video to appeal to different learning modalities.

Interface design should be consistent and aesthetically pleasing to orient the learner and gain his/her attention. Specific suggestions include: organizing information so that it facilitates information processing and reading; placing important information at the top of the page; using white space to increase the page's visual appeal; chunking content

and organizing meaningfully for those with limited time; making web pages printable so learners can take information with them; carefully designing navigation devices to provide a sense of direction and security; using contextual references to clearly tell users where they are and how to move forward and backward; and being aware of the limitations of computers and software. When special plug-ins or software are needed to view multimedia elements on a web site, explain exactly what is needed, how to access, and instructions for installing.

Instructors should not assume that all students are at the same level of experience with technology. On the contrary, effective instructors will plan for the most naïve users. A good design will follow the three-click rule. This rule specifies that any piece of information should be viewable by no more than three clicks of the mouse. Placing more information on the page may cause the student to lose interest or the information to lose its cohesiveness (Varvel, 2001). Often instructional designers and curriculum developers focus on the latest technologies and do not deal with the underlying issues of learner characteristics and needs, the influence of media upon the instructional process, equity of access to interactive delivery systems, and the new roles of teacher and student in the distance learning process (Sherry, 1996).

Clearly stated objectives help students by informing them of what to expect of the course and from the course; what they are expected to learn; what they will be required to do; and how they will be assessed. Informing the learners of the objectives also initiates the internal process of expectancy and helps motivate. Participants must believe that their online learning experience will be time and money well spent. Good instructors are clear

and upfront about course expectations but still flexible enough to meet the individual needs of students.

Including a clear syllabus with course description, assignments, grading criteria, resources, etc. is crucial as it helps learners plan for the course. It is also important to include a class list of names, information on library resources, and information on how to receive technical support. Facilitators must be comfortable with technology and familiarize themselves with the tools that will be used in the course. However, technical support is vital to the success of an online course: technical issues should not interfere with the learning process.

Among instructional design elements of online learning, interactivity and communication have been identified as important features of online courses (Ausburn, 2004). Unlike the correspondence courses that preceded them, online learning provides greater opportunities for interaction (Misanchuk & Dueber, 2001) and ongoing interaction is one of the principal components for a successful and engaging online course (Edelstein & Edwards, 2002). Using effective interaction and communication will enable the instructor to identify and meet the needs of individual students, strengthen the relationship between student and instructor, and will provide for a more successful online learning experience.

Online instruction and learning, without the benefit of being face-to-face, requires modifications for successful interactions to occur. Many online courses encourage interaction through online discussions, electronic bulletin boards, email, and instructor and peer feedback. The success of online courses often depends upon the nature of this interaction (Picciano, 2002).

Swan (2001) found interaction with instructors and active discussion among course participants significantly influenced student's satisfaction and perceived learning of the course material. Clow (1999), Phillips and Peters (1999), Roblyer (1999), and Hacker and Wignall (1997) all concluded that sufficient interaction with instructors and other students was important based on their studies of the student perceptions of particular online college learning experiences.

Moore and Kearsley (1996) identified interaction and feedback as specific components that influence student motivation and course completion. In contrast, Wilkinson and Sherman (1991) found that lack of personalization or humanization and infrequent interaction between students and instructors were among the reasons given by students for not completing distance education courses. Interaction and involvement also lessen the psychological distance of students at remote learning sites (McGreal, 1996).

Research has shown that students' sense of isolation and remoteness are significant barriers to online distance education (Everhart, 1999). The formation of an online learning community—in which participants communicate regularly and develop relationships—can help overcome these barriers. Community has been defined by various authors and has focused on different elements of community including trust, spirit, connectedness, belonging, membership, and support. (Rovai, 2002; Wenger, 1997). Rovai (2002) suggested a strong sense of community is essential in higher education learning environments and that community helped reduce feelings of isolation associated online learning. Community membership also encouraged student support, commitment to goals, cooperation among members and satisfaction with group efforts (Bruffee, 1993; Dede, 1996).

Given the benefits associated with community, successful online instructors

realize that bringing the students and their ideas together in the online classroom is

necessary for successful learning outcomes.

Social Presence

In examinations of interaction and community, the concept of social presence has

also received attention. The simplest definition of presence in an online course refers to a

student's sense of being in and belonging to a course and the ability of students and

instructors to interact without physical contact (Picciano, 2002). Social presence is

viewed as the ability of students to project themselves socially and affectively into a

community learners (Shea, 2003). In other words, social presence is interpreted as the

degree to which a person is perceived as real in distance learning (Richardson & Swan,

2003).

Although similar in nature, interaction and presence are distinct terms. Interaction

may indicate presence, but interaction is also possible without presence. Since they are

independent, it is likely that interaction and presence can affect student performance

differently (Picciano, 2002). Raising social presence then in online environments may

help to create impressions of quality related to the experience on the part of the student

(Newberry, 2001).

The overall goal for creating social presence in any learning environment is to

create a level of comfort in which people feel welcome and at ease around the instructor

and the other participants (Aragon, 2003). When the environment is lacking social

presence, the participants see it as impersonal, the amount of information shared with

others decreases and the learning environment is not successful or satisfying (Leh, 2001).

It is a challenge in online learning environments to provide this degree of social presence with the instructor and other participants because individuals are separated by physical or geographical location (Aragon, 2003).

There are several effective ways instructors can establish interaction, build a sense of community, and create social presence in online courses. To start building community from week one, instructors can ask students to post their background information or student profile. This puts the students at ease and provides the instructor and students information upon which to begin interactions (Deubel, 2003). This is a great opportunity to include humor and personal stories to make the learning environment more personable and social.

Many online facilitators suggest incorporating photographs of both instructor and students as a low-cost option for raising social presence by allowing participants the opportunity to put a face with a name and, therefore, become more real.

Similarly, incorporating audio or video can create social presence by establishing the atmosphere of the learning environment and reflecting the personality of the instructor (McLellan, 1999). Some instructors have used audio messages as email attachments to build student/faculty relationships and a sense of online community (Woods & Keeler, 2001) while others include video welcomes. Audio and video elements can introduce additional communication cues in the online learning process that have been positively associated with immediacy in face-to-face settings (Woods & Ebersole, 2003).

Another recommendation is to use an internet café for non-related discussions. These social chats can reduce feelings of isolation, minimize students' frustration and help to maintain student motivation (Alley & Jansak, 2001).

An easy yet effective way to establish social presence is to answer email as promptly as possible. As few as three personal emails sent to students throughout the course of the semester have been positively associated with students' sense of online community and overall satisfaction with the learning experience (Woods, 2002).

A simple strategy that can enhance a sense of connectedness but is often overlooked by online instructors and students is making telephone calls. In one distance education study, off-campus students felt as thought hey had learned more when their instructor used phone calls to express caring and provide specific feedback (Hackman & Walker, 1990).

Virtual office hours can help instructors to connect with some students as it makes it possible for questions to be answered immediately (Woods & Ebersole, 2003). Some instructors offer late evening online office hours to best accommodate students with young children.

Practical suggestions for course management also include establishing a class size of ten to thirty participants; providing frequent feedback; using students' first names in discussions; and incorporating collaborative learning activities to increase learner-to-learner interaction.

The progression of distance learning from correspondence to online learning has been stimulated by the many interactive opportunities available in the online environment, and by the belief that interaction, especially that which promotes create

social presence, can have positive effects on the learning experience (Woods & Baker, 2004). Fostering interactions, establishing a community atmosphere for learning, and creating social relationships between students and instructors is essential to facilitate learning and maintain student satisfaction (Mason, 1991). Failure to consider these elements and their effect on online learners and distance learning may produce greater feelings of isolation, poor performance, and reduced levels of student satisfaction among the fast growing population of non-traditional adult distance learners.

Summary

The information presented in this chapter will provide the foundation for the methodology. Chapter three and will include information on how the sample was selected, as well as procedures for data collection and data analysis.

Chapter III: Methodology

Introduction

With the dramatic increase in the number of distance learning programs, it is necessary to explore strategies that will provide the greatest benefit for learners participating in online learning. This study will determine if creating social presence in online learning will affect learner satisfaction.

This chapter will include information about how the sample was selected, a description of the sample, and the instrument being used. In addition, procedures for data collection and data analysis will be given. The chapter will conclude with the methodological limitations.

Subject Selection and Description

The 18 subjects in this study were graduate students participating in an online web design for educators course offered at the University of Wisconsin-Stout. The course was offered during a four-week accelerated summer session and taught by an experienced UW-Stout adjunct instructor recognized by the investigator for creating social presence in online instruction. The participants in the course had a variety of levels of computer expertise and had taken a range of online courses prior to the survey. The age of participants ranged from 20 to 60 or greater and included 6 males and 6 females.

Instrumentation

To determine the effect of social presence in online learning, a 21 question web-based survey was created by the investigator to gather data from participants in a pre-selected online course. The survey attempted to measure whether incorporating personal biographies, audio messages, and photographs into an asynchronous online course would

build community and create a sense of social presence. Moreover, did social presence increase overall learner satisfaction with the course? Responses were measured using a five-point Likert scale identified with the following categories: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree. Demographic data was also collected to determine if perceptions varied based on age, gender, computer expertise, and number of online courses previously taken. Participants were also provided the opportunity to add comments.

Since this survey was designed specifically for this study, no measures of validity and reliability have been documented.

Data Collection Procedures

A brief description, consent and contact information, and a link to the web-based survey were sent to all course participants by the instructor via the instructor's class email list during the final week of the course (Appendix A). Participants were asked to complete the survey (Appendix B) prior to the course ending on August 1, 2005. Data was collected using an Internet based software program. Of the 18 participants, 12 responded to the survey within the designated time.

Data Analysis

All appropriate descriptive statistics will be run on the data to address the research questions.

Limitations

The limitations of the methodology and survey include:

1. This study was limited to the 18 students enrolled in one pre-selected course during the accelerated summer session of 2005 at UW-Stout in Menomonie,

Wisconsin. The results were established by these learners and may not adequately represent all online learners.

2. Participation in the researcher-prepared survey was optional. Additionally, the survey was given at the end of the course and excluded any learners who had withdrawn from the course. Therefore, the results may not adequately represent the opinions of all course participants.

3. Since the survey was designed specifically for this course, no measures of validity and reliability have been documented on the survey.

Summary

The results from the information presented in this chapter including the sample selection and description, data collection, and data analysis will be presented in chapter four to determine if creating social presence in online learning will affect learner satisfaction.

Chapter IV: Results

Introduction

This chapter will provide the demographic information regarding the subjects who

participated in the study, an analysis of all items included in the survey, and will

conclude with the data collected to address each of the research questions.

Demographic Information

Consent information and a link to the web survey were sent via instructor email to

18 UW-Stout graduate students on August 1, 2005. Of the 18 students, 12 completed the

22 item survey. This represents a 66.7% return rate.

Of the 12 participants, 2 (17%) were between the ages of 20 and 29; 3 (25%) were

between the ages of 30 and 39; 3 (25%) were between the ages of 40 and 49; 3 (25%)

were between the ages of 50 and 59; and 1 (8%) was 60 or older. In regards to gender, 6

participants (50%) were male and 6 participants (50%) were female. Of those completing

the survey, 3 (25%) students had completed no online courses; 5 (42%) had completed 1-

2 online courses; 1 (8%) had completed 3-4 online courses; and 3 (25%) had completed 5

or more online courses. No (0%) participants rated their level of computer expertise as

beginner; 11 (92%) rated their level of computer expertise as intermediate; and 1 (8%)

rated their level of computer expertise as expert.

Item Analysis

Item number one on the survey stated, "I enjoyed this online course." The results

were as follows: 67% (n=8) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 33%

(n=4) agreed and 0% (n=0) indicated they were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed

with this statement.

Item number two on the survey stated, "Even though we were not physically together, I still felt like I was part of a group." The results were as follows: 25% (n=3) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, while 42% (n=5) agreed, 33% (n=4) were neutral and 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number three on the survey stated, "This online course allowed for social interaction." With one participant not answering this question, the results were as follows: 27% (n=3) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 55% (n=6) agreed, 18% (n=2) were neutral and 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number four on the survey stated, "I felt comfortable posting my personal introduction." The results were as follows: 50% (n=6) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 50% (n=6) agreed and 0% (n=0) indicated they were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number five on the survey stated, "I enjoyed reading other classmates' personal introductions." The results were as follows: 58% (n=7) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 42% (n=5) agreed and 0% (n=0) indicated they were neutral, disagreed, or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number six on the survey stated, "The introductions helped me form a sense of community with my peers." The results were as follows: 33% (n=4) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 50% (n=6) agreed, 17% (n=2) were neutral and 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number seven on the survey stated, "The use of introductions improved my overall satisfaction with the course." The results were as follows: 33% (n=4) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 33% (n=4) agreed, 33% (n=4) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number eight on the survey stated, "I enjoyed listening to the instructor's audio introduction." The results were as follows: 33% (n=4) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 17% (n=2) agreed, 50% (n=6) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number nine on the survey stated, "The audio introduction helped create social presence (made the instructor seem more real)." The results were as follows: 25% (n=3) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 25% (n=3) agreed, 42% (n=5) were neutral, 0% (n=0) disagreed, while 8% (n=1) indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number ten on the survey stated, "The use of an audio introduction improved my overall satisfaction with the course." The results were as follows: 17% (n=2) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 17% (n=2) agreed, 58% (n=7) were neutral, 0% (n=0) disagreed, while 8% (n=1) indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 11 on the survey stated, "I was comfortable submitting my photograph to the instructor." The results were as follows: 42% (n=5) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 50% (n=6) agreed, 8% (n=1) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 12 on the survey stated, "I was comfortable having my photograph posted on the 'class yearbook' website." The results were as follows: 50% (n=6) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 42% (n=5) agreed, 8% (n=1) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 13 on the survey stated, "The use of photographs created social presence in this class (made it more real)." The results were as follows: 42% (n=5) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 42% (n=5) agreed, 17% (n=2) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 14 on the survey stated, "The use of photographs improved my overall satisfaction with the course." The results were as follows: 25% (n=3) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 50% (n=6) agreed, 17% (n=2) were neutral, 8% (n=1) disagreed, while 0% (n=0) indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 15 on the survey stated, "In comparison to other online courses I have taken, the element of social presence was evident." The results were as follows: 17% (n=2) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 25% (n=3) agreed, 50% (n=6) were neutral, 8% (n=1) disagreed, while 0% (n=0) indicated they strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 16 on the survey stated, "In comparison to other online courses I have taken, the element of social presence improved my overall satisfaction with the course." The results were as follows: 0% (n=0) indicated they strongly agreed with this

statement, 25% (n=3) agreed, 75% (n=9) were neutral while 0% (n=0) indicated they disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Item number 20 on the survey stated, "I would take another online course if available." The results were as follows: 92% (n=11) indicated they strongly agreed with this statement, 8% (n=1) agreed and 0% (n=0) indicated they were neutral, disagreed or strongly disagreed with this statement.

Research Questions

Research Question #1 – Does incorporating personal elements into an online course create social presence? Survey items 6, 9, and 13 addressed this question. The results for survey item 6 indicated that 33% of the participants strongly agreed, 50% agreed, and 17% were neutral in that the use of personal introductions helped form a sense of community. Results for survey item 9 indicated that 25% strongly agreed that the instructor's audio message helped create social presence while 25% agreed and 42% were neutral. Results for survey item 13 indicated that 42% strongly agreed and 42% agreed that the use of photographs helped create social presence while only 17% were neutral.

Research Question #2 – Does social presence enhance a learner's educational experience and thus improve overall satisfaction? Survey items 7, 10, and 14 addressed this question. The results for survey item 7 indicated that 33% of the participants strongly agreed, 33% agreed, and 33% were neutral in that the use of personal introductions improved overall course satisfaction. Results for survey item 10 indicated that 17% strongly agreed that the instructor's audio message improved satisfaction with the course while 17% agreed and 58% were neutral. Results for survey item 14 indicated that 25%

strongly agreed and 50% agreed that the use of photographs improved overall course satisfaction while 17% were neutral and 8% disagreed.

Research Question #3 – Can online learning be improved by creating social presence and including personal elements in the course design? Survey items 15 and 16 addressed this question. Results for survey item 15 indicated that 17% strongly agreed that in comparison to other online courses the element of social presence was evident while 25% agreed, 50% were neutral, and 8% disagreed. Results for survey item 16 indicated that 0% strongly agreed and 25% agreed that in comparison to other online courses taken, the element of social presence improved overall satisfaction with the course while 75% were neutral.

Research Question #4 – What is the difference in perceptions of social presence in an online course based on age, gender, and experience with online courses? A cross-tabulation between survey items 18 (age), 19 (gender), 20 (number of online courses) with survey items 6, 9, and 13 addressed this question. The results for the cross tabulation between item 18 and 6 indicated that in regard to age, of those who strongly agreed (4) that the introductions helped form a sense of community, 2 (50%) were age 20-29; 1 (25%) was 40-49; and 1 (25%) was 60 or over. Of those who agreed (6), 2 (33%) were age 30-39; 2 (33%) were 40-49; and 2 (33%) were 50-59. Of those who were neutral (2), 1 (50%) was 30-39 and 1 (50%) was 50-59.

Results for the cross tabulation between item 18 and 9 indicated that in regard to age, of those who strongly agreed (3) that the audio introduction create social presence, 3 (100%) were age 40-49. Of those who agreed (3), 1 (33%) were age 30-39; and 2 (67%) were 50-59. Of those who were neutral (5), 1 (20%) was 20-29; 2 (40%) were 30-39; 1

(20%) was 50-59; and 1 (20%) was 60 or older. Of those who strongly disagreed (1), 1 (100%) was age 20-29.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 18 and 13 indicated that in regard to age, of those who strongly agreed (5) that the use of photographs created social presence, 2 (40%) were age 20-29; 1 (30%) was 30-39; 1 (20%) was 40-49; and 1 (20%) was 60 or over. Of those who agreed (5), 1 (20%) was age 30-39; 2 (40%) were 40-49; and 2 (40%) were 50-59. Of those who were neutral (2), 1 (50%) was 30-39 and 1 (50%) was 50-59.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 19 and 6 indicated that in regard to gender, of those who strongly agreed (4) that the introductions helped form a sense of community, 4 (100%) were female. Of those who agreed (6), 4 (67%) were male and 2 (33%) were female. Of those who were neutral (2), 1 (100%) were male.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 19 and 9 indicated that in regard to gender, of those who strongly agreed (2) that the audio introduction helped create social presence, 2 (67%) were male and 1 (33%) was female. Of those who agreed (3), 1 (33%) was male and 2 (67%) were female. Of those who were neutral (5), 3 (60%) were male and 2 (40%) were female. Of those who strongly disagreed (1), 1 (100%) was female.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 19 and 13 indicated that in regard to gender, of those who strongly agreed (5) that the photographs helped create social presence, 1 (20%) were male and 4 (80%) were female. Of those who agreed (5), 4 (80%) were male and 1 (20%) was female. Of those who were neutral (2), 1 (50%) was male and 1 (50%) was female.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 20 and 6 indicated that in regard to number of online courses taken, of those who strongly agreed (4) that the introductions helped form a sense of community, 3 (75%) had taken no online courses; and 1 (25%) had taken 1-2 online courses. Of those who agreed (6), 4 (67%) had taken 1-2 online courses; 1 (17%) had taken 3-4 online courses; and 1 (17%) had taken 5 or more online courses. Of those who were neutral (2), 2 (100%) had taken 5 or more online courses.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 20 and 9 indicated that in regard to number of online courses taken, of those who strongly agreed (3) that the audio introduction helped create social presence, 1 (33%) had taken no online courses; 1 (33%) had taken 1-2 online courses; and 1 (33%) had taken 3-4 online courses. Of those who agreed (3), 1 (33%) had taken 1-2 online courses; 2 (67%) had taken 5 or more online courses. Of those who were neutral (5), 1 (20%) had taken no online courses; 3 (60%) had taken 1-2 online courses; and 1 (20%) had taken 5 or more online courses. Of those who strongly disagreed (1), 1 (100%) had taken no online courses.

The results for the cross tabulation between item 20 and 13 indicated that in regard to number of online courses taken, of those who strongly agreed (5) that the use of photographs helped create social presence, 3 (60%) had taken no online courses; and 2 (40%) had taken 1-2 online courses. Of those who agreed (5), 3 (60%) had taken 1-2 online courses; 1 (20%) had taken 3-4 online courses; and 1 (20%) had taken 5 or more online courses. Of those who were neutral (2), 2 (100%) had taken 5 or more online courses.

Summary

Based on the results presented in this chapter, chapter five will provide

discussion, conclusions, and recommendations for this study.

Chapter V: Discussion

Introduction

This chapter will include a discussion of the findings in this study, provide

conclusions based on the results, give recommendations for use of this research, and

finish with concluding remarks.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to conduct an analysis of social presence in online

learning. Because of technological advances and the advantages it offers, online learning

has become increasingly popular and colleges and universities are offering more online

courses. However, limited research has been conducted that identifies the effect of social

presence in an online course and whether social presence improves course satisfaction.

Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that although 100% of participants either

strongly agreed or agreed that they enjoyed this online course, and 92% strongly agreed

they would take another online course, the reason and/or explanation for their enjoyment

could not be directly related to including the elements intended to create social presence.

The three items designed to increase social presence included posting personal

introductions, including an audio message from the instructor, and posting photographs.

Of these three, participants seemed to get the greatest benefit from the use of photographs

while the audio message from the instructor seemed to be least beneficial.

The results also indicated that females (67% strongly agreed) were more

comfortable posting a personal introduction than males (33% strongly agreed) and that

100% of both male and female participants either strongly agreed or agreed that they

enjoyed reading other classmates' personal introductions. Similarly, of the 6 females, 4 (67%) strongly agreed that the use of photographs created social presence whereas only 1 of 6 males (17%) strongly agreed. As to whether the use of photographs improved overall satisfaction with the course, 3 (50%) of the females strongly agreed while none of the males strongly agreed. This could be indicative of learning and personality differences and gives merit to the need for instructors to implement and utilize a variety of teaching techniques and strategies.

In general those who had had fewer online courses (less than 5) were more comfortable submitting their photo, felt the photograph helped create social presence and that the photographs improved overall satisfaction. Similarly, those with fewer online courses were more likely to strongly agree or agree that the introductions helped form a sense of community. A possible explanation for this situation is that those who have had more online experience may have grown accustomed to the usual delivery of online courses and are less likely to welcome something new and different albeit beneficial.

Although the results of this study were not conclusive, there were some participants who felt incorporating personal elements did create social presence in online learning and did appreciate the effort by the instructor to make the distance learning seem more real. In the researcher's opinion, if adding these simple elements improves the learning environment for even one online learner, then it is worth the effort.

Recommendations

The researcher recommends establishing guidelines for online instructors and facilitators as well as training on effective methods of instruction. This includes, but is not limited to, incorporating the following methods for effective online learning: clearly

stated objectives; consistent communication and personal interaction; prompt and relevant feedback; clear and well-organized instruction; and creating an active learning environment where social presence is evident. Trained instructors can make a significant contribution to the success of online learning.

The researcher also recommends additional monitoring of student satisfaction in online courses through course evaluations and student feedback. By maintaining a commitment to learner success and satisfaction, instructors can utilize feedback to provide a better learning environment for online learners.

Lastly, the researcher recommends further research on social presence in online learning to determine its direct impact on adult learners and its implications for online learning environments. Although the results of this study were not conclusive, they did indicate a strong interest in the included elements and a strong desire by participants to take additional online courses. Because more than half of the participants had taken two or fewer online courses prior to participating in this study, additional studies may indicate a stronger desire or greater need for creating social presence particularly with learners who are engaged in only online learning.

Concluding Remarks

Currently Internet-based learning boasts a higher drop out rate than traditional classroom learning. Some researchers maintain this is due to a lack of face-to-face contact where students make a connection and form a sense of community with the instructor and peers. Feelings of isolation, lack of belonging, and infrequent interaction were among reasons given by students for not completing distance education courses. In other words, when the environment is lacking social presence, the participants see it as

impersonal, interaction decreases and the learning environment is not as successful or satisfying.

Because of the growing popularity of distance learning and the staggering predictions for continued online courses in the future, it is vital that educators explore different methods and implement strategies that can benefit distance learners and improve online learning. If creating social presence in an online environment can help reduce feelings of isolation, form stronger relationships, and, therefore, help participants become more successful, satisfied online learners, then every effort should be made to do so.

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Appendix A: Consent to Participate
In UW-Stout Approved Research

Consent to Participate In UW-Stout Approved Research

Title: An analysis of social presence in online learning

Investigator:	**Research Sponsor:**
Susan E. Steckbauer	Dr. Steven Schlough
UW-Stout graduate student	232B Communications Technologies
715-426-2656	715-232-1484

Description:
One issue online educators are facing is a lack of research related to the online learning environment: simply offering online courses is not sufficient to meet the social needs of many online learners. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to determine if creating social presence by incorporating specific personal elements into an online course will affect learner satisfaction.

Risks and Benefits:
The risks involved with the survey are minimal, if any.

Special Populations:
Participants will be from EDUC-744-830F Web Design for Educators ; July 5, 2005-August 1, 2005

Time Commitment and Payment:
This web survey should take approximately 5 minutes to finish.

Confidentiality:
Your name will not be included on any documents. We do not believe that you can be identified from any of this information.

Right to Withdraw:
Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may choose not to participate without any adverse consequences to you. However, should you choose to participate and later wish to withdraw from the study, there is no way to identify your document after it has been submitted to the investigator.

IRB Approval:

This study has been reviewed and approved by The University of Wisconsin-Stout's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB has determined that this study meets the ethical obligations required by federal law and University policies. If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact the Investigator or Advisor. If you have any questions, concerns, or reports regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact the IRB Administrator.

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Statement of Consent:

I understand that by completing and submitting this survey, I am giving my informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study entitled "An analysis of social presence in online learning." I understand the basic nature of the study and agree that any potential risks are exceedingly small. I also understand that there are potential benefits that might be realized from the successful completion of this study. I am aware that the information is being sought in a specific manner so that no identifiers are needed and that confidentiality is guaranteed. I realize I have the right to refuse to participate and that my right to withdraw from participation at any time during the study will be respected with no coercion or prejudice.

Appendix B: Web Survey

An Analysis of Social Presence in Online Learning

Before beginning this survey, please be advised to read the attached consent form. Also understand that by completing and submitting this survey, you are giving your informed consent as a participating volunteer in this study.

Your responses to the following questions should reflect your online experience for this course. Please select the number that best reflects your opinion based on the following scale: Strongly Agree(SA)=1; Agree (A)=2; Neutral(N)=3; Disagree(D)=4; Strongly Disagree(SD)=5

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree

I enjoyed this online course.

1   2   3   4   5

Even though we were not physically together, I still felt like I was part of a group.

1   2   3   4   5

This online course allowed for social interaction.

1   2   3   4   5

I felt comfortable posting my personal introduction.

1   2   3   4   5

I enjoyed reading other classmates' personal introductions.

1   2   3   4   5

The introductions helped me form a sense of community with my peers.

1   2   3   4   5

The use of introductions improved my overall satisfaction with the course.

1   2   3   4   5

I enjoyed listening to the instructor's audio introduction.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The audio introduction helped create social presence (made the instructor seem more real).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The use of an audio introduction improved my overall satisfaction with the course.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I was comfortable submitting my photograph to the instructor.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I was comfortable having my photograph posted on the "class yearbook" website.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The use of photographs created social presence in this class (made it more real).

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

The use of photographs improved my overall satisfaction with the course.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

In comparison to other online courses I have taken, the element of social presence was evident.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

In comparison to other online courses I have taken, the element of social presence improved my overall satisfaction with the course.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

I would take another online course if available.

| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |

Age:

20-29

30-39

40-49

50-59

60 or older

Gender:

Male

Female

Number of online course I have completed:

0

1-2

3-4

5 or more

I would rate my level of computer expertise as:

Beginner

Intermediate

Expert

SUBMIT ➤

An Analysis of Social Presence in Online Learning

Additional comments related to social presence in this course:

SUBMIT