Creating Social, Cognitive and Teaching Presence in Online Learning
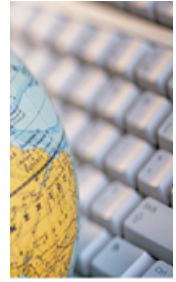by Meri MacLeod

Social Presence

Social presence is the degree to which we perceive we are interacting with other people. If the perception of social presence is high, we tend to interact in a collaborative manner that increases group cohesion and free expression of emotion, building trust among group members. Conversely if we perceive that social presence is low we feel disconnected, guarded, less involved and group cohesion and trust is low. Student satisfaction in online courses is repeatedly linked to high levels of trust and a strong sense of community among participants.

A key component in learning is interaction with others. A trusting relational climate in an online course is essential to support underline thoughtful participatory dialogue. The challenge in any learning environment is to involve students in learning activities that encourage a high degree of social presence. It cannot be assumed that all participants enter a course ready to engage in open dialogue that contributes to deeper understanding and strengthens critical thinking capacities.

Students often need to be guided through experiences of online social interaction such as risking one's ideas before the class or contributing substantively in group projects.

Recommendations

The following recommendations relate to the Sakai learning management software.

1. Require personal introductions at the start of the course. Create an announcement for the class to complete or update their "Profile" page in Sakai. Suggest the inclusion of pictures to help introduce the class to their place of work, ministry, fun activities, travel, special people, relationships in their life, and/or special accomplishments.

2. Add the "Roster" tool to your course site so students can view each other's profile. The week before the start of class make the course site visible to students and invite them to get acquainted with their classmates by using the Roster function. As a follow up assignment, ask them to find three other people in the course with whom they have something in common and to share that on the Community Life forum.

3. Using the Community Life forum students can get to know each other more fully during the course. The instructor could introduce a new "get-acquainted" low threat question for the first two to three weeks as a model and then invite students to suggest future questions that would foster their class community. Suggested questions: How has God been active in your life during the last three months? Describe one aspect of your local church that you appreciate. Encourage students to use the forum as a place to encourage and support each other. Monitor how this forum develops. Be prepared to guide but not dominate its development.

Cognitive Presence

Cognitive presence is the engagement of students with the course content in such a way that they progress deliberatively from understanding concepts, issues, and problems through exploration, integration, and application.

The cognitive presence is focused on fostering high levels of critical thinking in students. It involves a developmental process that moves students beyond the initial awareness of new information. Online courses typically make substantial use of discussions, either in asynchronous or synchronous formats. The structure, timing, and number of participants can adversely impact the cognitive engagement of students in the online discussion.

Substantive discussions require engaging questions, clear expectations and directions, self-confidence to propose new ideas and challenge others. In addition, an instructor needs to moderate and guide the discussion while providing a presence that fosters learner thinking.

The goal in online discussions is to ensure that communication is not merely a series of individual "monologues" where students share experiences or options without connecting them to other contributions.

Recommendations

1. Develop questions that facilitate higher order thinking in online discussions. Types of questions to consider when creating discussions include the following:
   - Exploratory questions: probe facts and basic knowledge
   - Challenge questions: interrogate assumptions, conclusions or interpretations
   - Relational questions: ask for comparisons of themes, ideas, or issues
   - Diagnostic questions: probe motives or causes
   - Action questions: call for a conclusion or action
   - Cause-and-effect questions: ask for causal relationships between ideas, actions, or events
   - Extension questions: expand the discussion
   - Hypothetical questions: pose a change in the facts or issues
   - Priority questions: seek to identify the most important issue(s)
   - Summary questions: elicit synthesis

2. If appropriate to the course, consider introducing or summarizing key concepts in a five minute "mini" lecture and conclude with an assignment that engages the students in reflecting on or otherwise cognitively working with the material. It could launch a discussion forum, blog where students must apply or synthesize the material, or a group project.

Teaching Presence

Teaching presence involves the structure, facilitation, and direct instruction in an online course. The special focus is the degree to which students experience the presence and engagement of the instructor throughout the course. Students that experience the instructor's presence through the course on a regular basis identified greater levels of satisfaction. Research also suggests that instructor presence contributes to deeper learning by students. Teaching presence is a multifaceted way of functioning that includes designing learning activities for students, facilitating deeper thinking by students and, in small segments, providing direct instruction.

Implications
1. Involves setting the direction of a course, choosing the curriculum and activities, guiding students in utilizing the online medium effectively, and facilitating constructive exchange among students.
2. Facilitation is a primary function of the teaching presence and includes setting a climate for learning, the ability to frame a thought in order to provoke discussion, drawing in participants and prompting discussion, identifying areas of agreement and disagreement, seeking to reach consensus and understanding, encouraging, acknowledging and reinforcing contributions.

Recommendations
1. Before the course begins have all components created in order to focus on communication with the students and facilitating their learning. Giving attention to students will also uncover any course design flaws to be adjusted mid-course and at the end of the course.
2. Structure appropriate individual and collaborative learning activities, and provide multiple formative feedback opportunities. Collaborative activities strengthen a student's sense of being part of a class; regular formative feedback reinforces the instructor's involvement and presence, and contributes to a student's increased learning.
3. Once the course is designed review each part to see that participants have all the information they need to feel oriented to the course. Consider including information on how they will get help, procedures in an emergency, and how to communicate if components of the course fail to work as expected.
4. Use media to communicate your enthusiasm, focus student attention and/or summarize important steps students have taken toward the course outcomes. For example, consider beginning each new unit or lesson with a short (~2 minute) video that focuses the student's attention on the central theme or concept while conveying your enthusiasm and expectations to the class. Or, record an audio file that summarizes your perspective on a just completed discussion forum and upload it so that students can hear your response.
5. Provide clear participation requirements in assignments including length of a blog or forum post, type of response to classmates, content expectations, and timelines. Incorporate some form of accountability for each expectation of students. This communicates an instructor's value for the assignment.