
Enhancing Social Presence in Online Learning: Mediation Strategies Applied to Social Networking Tools

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Abstract

An exploration of the mediation strategies applied to social networking tools for purposes of enhancing social presence for students participating in online course work. The article includes a review of the literature, specific examples from the authors' professional practice and recommendations for creating a positive social experience for online learners.

Introduction

This article explores and explains mediation strategies applied to social networking tools. Focus is placed on how utilizing social networking tools (e.g., MySpace or Facebook) may enhance social presence for students participating in an online course.

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) defined social presence as the belief the group members are communicating with people instead of objects. When communication channels are reduced, social presence decreases in a group. As a result of this reduction, group members feel disconnected with one another. Conversely, an increased sense of presence leads to a better perception of social connection.

The current popularity and growth of Web-based social networking tools is prompting many educators within organizations and institutions, including higher education, all over the world to consider how these tools can enhance online learning (Salaway, 2008; Weekes, 2008; Wexler, Hart, Karrer, Martin, Oehlert, Parker, Schlenker, & Thalheimer, 2008; Young, 2007). As we move forward into this new century, technology enhancements provide learners and facilitators an opportunity to expand social presence within distance education courses. Employing these new technologies, we can expand our ability to communicate with classmates and other professionals across the world. The new collaborative approaches build off previous tools often utilized by a new generation of learners, such as discussion boards and instant messaging. Establishing tools for communicating in distance education programs should align themselves with the multiple devices and applications available. Not only will this help with communication, but may offer opportunities to enhance other qualities.

Using social networking tools to enhance social presence places responsibility of the students to participate by creating a personal space (e.g. a Facebook page) and using it to connect with others. However, key guidance must be provided to ensure that they are used as an educational tool and not merely a photo album or message board. Social presence as it relates to distance learning courses should encompass social networking technologies, but only when these technologies can provide opportunities for challenging and appropriate discourse.

Rovai (2002) stated, "online learners who have stronger sense of community and perceive greater cognitive learning should feel less isolated and have greater satisfaction with their academic programs, possibly resulting in fewer dropouts." Enhancing social presence with the use of social networking tools should provide a stronger sense of community.

Vrasidas and McIsaac (1999) found that "social presence could be promoted in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) setting by employing strategies that encourage interaction." The instructional designer of tomorrow needs to be prepared for properly using tools to help motivate and encourage learning using

applications common to the new learner. These commonplace tools, with proper mediation should encourage more opportunities for interaction.

Social Presence in Computer-Mediated Communication and Online Learning

To better understand mediation strategies employed within distance learning environments that increase the learner's sense of social presence, it is important to first understand social presence as it currently applies to the computer-mediated communication and its historical antecedents in distance learning.

With the advent of new communication technologies, the world is facing a technology paradigm shift. "Information and communication technologies have an enormous power and effect on a networked society," (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007) which provides new mechanisms and concepts to be integrated into the distance learning environment. "Virtual classrooms, two-way interactive audio, video, synchronous and asynchronous computer based interactions are being added on distance education" (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007).

Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy and Shea (2007) suggested "that contemporary media culture in this country is the primary mechanism for socialization of our young people and the major incubator for change." Interaction with the various media available helps to define the learner in terms of their social, ethical and political views. At the center of media influence, Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy and Shea (2007) highlighted the role of the Internet where "sites such as YouTube make images from around the world instantly accessible." Other media elements that exist also influence learners, which include blogs and wikis.

Kesim and Agaoglu (2007) noted the ways distance education environments have changed through the years. Starting around the 1880s to present, online course developers were primarily passive in their development options. These included audio, videotape and radio correspondence. Around the 1960s, the first shift occurred from passive to moderately active online learning opportunities. The options included two-way communication audio/video tools, emails, computer-based trainings and satellite video training. Around 1990s, the movement with distance education has developed into a highly interactive, virtual classroom. The highly interactive environment is defined as digital-TV, online/web-based video, multimedia computer-based trainings and resources that provides continual links between business, home, and travel.

Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy and Shea (2007) noted "in the digital information world, students' personal communication and social networking primarily center on cell phones, iPods, MP3s, personal computers, text messaging, and recently, video blogging." With the growth and popularity of social networking sites, such as Facebook, learners find themselves with instant access to information. Many of today's students use the Internet for research more often than the library.

As a result of these new technologies and social networking tools, students utilize technologies that are "virtual, digital, and personal; therefore, they expect immediate access and response" (Dziuban, Moskal, Brophy and Shea, 2007).

Social Software: Web 2.0 and Social Networking Sites

This most recent shift in distance education is playing a key role in the emergent, knowledge-based society. One of the more interactive and engaging approaches employed is through the use of social software. Social software, also known as Web 2.0, "is a kind of software that users can contribute their content," (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007).

With the increased interest in social networking sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, Boyd and Ellison (2007) noted that millions of people have integrated these networks into their lives. Social networks are built with many similar features; however, the cultures that emerge from the various social networks vary. These variations can be aimed at helping strangers meet and communicate, connection with pre-existing friends, meeting place for people of similar religion or sexual preference (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). Other social networks are available due to their incorporation of specific technologies, such as video or photo sharing (i.e., Flickr).

Boyd and Ellison (2007) provide the following definition for a social network site (SNS):

“We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site.” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 211)

Once an individual joins a social network site, they are provided the opportunity to welcome other “friends” into their network. These relationships must be accepted by other members unless one is joining a group or becoming a fan of a particular interest or topic (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Outside the networking with friends, the social networks sites also provide different features, which attract a different user base. For example, some social networking sites put their emphasis on photo or video sharing technologies; on the other hand, some focus on instant communication tools, such as blogging or instant messaging. The means in which individuals communicate via social network sites also varies. Boyd and Ellison (2007) noted that most social network sites are computer-based interaction; however, others provide a mobile interaction component.

Historically, the first “recognizable social network site launched in 1997,” (Boyd and Ellison, 2007) which was called SixDegrees.com. With this first social networking site available, people were able to connect to one another through sending messages. From 1997 to 2002, various social networks emerged with different aims. For example, LinkedIn was a popular resource of the business community. After 2002, three social networking sites evolved to help flourish social networking as a popular communication avenue – Friendster, MySpace and Facebook.

Social Networking Software and College-Level Online Learning

With distance learning becoming more commonplace in higher education, there is a greater opportunity to capitalize on existing technologies, such as social networking sites that are familiar to a new generation of learners. Tsai, Kim, Liu, Goggins, Kumalasari and Laffey (2008) stated that “online enrollment increased from 1.98 million in 2003 to 2.35 million in 2004.” Smith (2007) found that “over 80% of 18-34 year olds have an online presence.” Additional interesting statistics provided show that social networking is a resource that should be strongly considered. “On the first day of college, 85% of college students have a Facebook account. By the end of the first semester, 94% of college students have a Facebook account” (Smith, 2007). With the staggering number of college students using this social networking tool by the conclusion of the first semester in college, the argument can be made that faculty who want to extend or further develop relationships with their students may find it easier by accessing the tools used by the students. Using tools already familiar with students “may mean the difference between instruction and engagement” (Smith, 2007).

As online learning continues to become a more prevalent part of higher education, institutions and faculty members must better understand online learner’s needs, such as addressing isolation, dropout percentages, dissatisfaction with teaching methodologies, and other influences that impact student satisfaction. Hara and Kling’s (2000) research supported that many online learners were frustrated by the methods of communication and technical impediments to social interaction among peers. Arbaugh (2000) stated the reduction of social interaction was a factor that negatively impacted student satisfaction in distance education. As a result of the high dissatisfaction among students, Chyung (2001) provided support for the high attrition rate among online learners.

Students participating in online courses often have a sense of isolation, which can impact a learner’s success within a distance learning program. Tsai, Kim, Liu, Goggins, Kumalasari and Laffey (2008) “recognized community as an important factor for fostering interactivity or interaction among participation in an online learning environment.” To build a sense of community, Tsai, Kim, Liu, Goggins, Kumalasari and Laffey (2008) argued that the institution or faculty must facilitate interaction among students.

To help combat isolation and create a greater sense of community among learners, McInnerney and Roberts (2004) suggested a “greater use of synchronous communication facilities, the deliberate design and inclusion of a ‘forming stage,’ and a greater emphasis on the provision of guidelines for successful online communication.”

With consideration of these three management strategies related to distance learning, a reduction in the belief that one is isolated in a distance education environment should occur. The findings of this research help to better

describe factors that can inhibit isolation, which is a primary concern related to social presence.

With face-to-face communication, people are able to enjoy the verbal and nonverbal cues that provide instant feedback. Distance education removes these instant cues and can create a cold environment. As a result McInerney and Roberts (2004) noted that participant attrition rates are often negative due in large part to the feeling of isolation.

Many distance learning researchers recognize the importance of having a sense of community within a distance learning environment. McInerney and Roberts (2004) states that community is often seen as a “place-oriented concept;” however, in today’s global market, the word community must expand beyond a specific place. McInerney and Roberts (2004) noted the “term of ‘community’ is changing from a geographic specific to relationship specific” meaning.

Wegerif (1998) provided an interesting perspective as to student’s roles related to distance learning. Students fall into two groups: insiders or outsiders. Wegerif (1998) defines an insider as one who “is comfortable with the medium being used during the course and is confident in its use.” An outsider, as noted by Wegerif (1998) is one who “is uncomfortable with the medium being used during the course and is not confident in its use.” This dichotomy is important as all students should arrive as an “outsider,” but once a sense of community is established (or reduction in the feeling of isolation), the individual should shift toward being an “insider.”

McInerney and Roberts (2004) noted that the use of particular communication strategies, such as chat rooms may make the transition from “outsider” to “insider” much easier as would “tighter control on the communication guidelines required for any structured online course.” As stated earlier, McInerney and Roberts (2004) indicated that three protocols exist that can aid online social interaction between learners (use of synchronous communication, introduction of a forming stage, and adherence to effective communication guidelines).

Learner support is a key factor to help promote effective learning in both distance and face-to-face settings. McLoughlin (2002) provided ten dimensions for successful online learning design to help promote learner support. These ten principles are important as they can provide guidance for utilizing social networking tools in ways that will help to encourage collaboration and effective learning.

McLoughlin (2002) bases these ten principles on scaffolding, which was “originally coined as a metaphor to describe the effective intervention by peer, adult or competent person.” The promise of scaffolding, according to McLoughlin (2002) is that “it directs attention to the need for support in the learning process.” As we will explore through the ten principles, this is key to ensure a successful social networking experience.

Scaffolding research is plentiful; however, most research lies within the traditional face-to-face setting. Employing scaffolding principles to the distance learning environment can be problematic. McLoughlin (2002) noted that with reference to distance learning, learners need access to learning materials, library resource, and teachers; however, they also need resources that work within the realm of distance education. In other words, the media and technology used must support the concept of scaffolding.

McLoughlin (2002) stressed “it should be possible to systematize the design of scaffolds and develop dimensions that can be applied across a range of learning environments.” These dimensions include: goal orientation, adaptability, accessibility, alignment, experiential value, collaboration, constructivism, learning orientation, multiplicity, and granularity.

The exact meaning of each of these dimensions is not the primary interest; however, the function of supporting social networking as a viable option for distance learning is something that they do provide. Each of these dimensions can be incorporated into various social networking mediums to support learning activities. As a result, not only is the environment for learning structured and managed, but learners may find a reduction in the feeling of isolation or a stronger sense of community. McLoughlin (2002) noted that learners need more control over their learning environment. “Designing scaffolds for learning involves conceptualizing new roles for learners and teachers in fostering task engagement, social interaction and peer feedback.”

Institutions need to prepare for the changes in organization structure to accommodate for this new flexible and rich learning environment (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007). Social software is a new component to distance education. As a result, learners are presented with an “anytime, anywhere flexible and high-quality learning environment containing well organized support services (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007).

Kesim and Agaoglu (2007) provide a list of social software communication tools, which include:

- Internet messaging
- Text chat
- Internet forums
- Discussion forums
- Mobile
- Podcasts
- Games
- Blogs
- Weblogs
- Wikis
- Social networking search engines
- Social network services
- Social guides
- Social bookmarking
- Social libraries
- Peer-to-peer social networks

Key characteristics of social software and its use for distance education can be best described as: “delivers communication between groups, has new tools for creation of knowledge, enables communication between many students, and provides sharing resources” (Kesim and Agaoglu, 2007). These new strategies for sharing information to the current distance learning student is powerful, and provides an opportunity for individuals to work together within a defined learning community to support one another.

Woods and Ebersole (2003) stressed the importance of building a web of communal scaffolding to help with building a strong community of online learners. These communities can be incorporated into various online programs to help better establish a sense of community. As the list of community building activities is listed, some of these activities are central to the social networking tools available. This should help support the value of social networking as an option for distance learning programs to ensure a greater sense of social presence/community.

Woods and Ebersole (2003) noted the following activities that support building a community of online learners. First, personal discussion folders, which we all more commonly refer to as discussion rooms or forums where people enter a defined topic to discuss it in more detail. Walden University’s online doctoral-level courses in the university’s The Richard W. Riley College of Education and Leadership require course instructors to post an average of 30% of the messages the comprise a week-long, asynchronous discussion (personal communication, Walden University (M. Shepard, personal communication, July, 2008).

The second activity for building a community is immediacy. Immediacy, as noted by Woods and Ebersole (2003) “refers to the extent to which selected verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors enhance intimacy in interpersonal communication.” By quickly responding to emails or discussion forums assist in establishing a strong sense of immediacy. Woods and Ebersole (2003) found that responding within 24 hours helps to produce a stronger sense of immediacy in an online environment. One of the authors makes consistent use of this strategy, posting an explanation of his response policy in the instructor-profile section of the course’s learning management system (ie Blackboard). The policy states messages sent to the instructor during the week should receive a response within 24 hours; messages sent after 3:00 PM on a Friday, however, receive a response by Monday afternoon.

A third activity for building a community is through the use of live chat. Live chats offer an opportunity to provide a less formal, more personal style of communication, which is often favored by students (Woods and Ebersole, 2003). Plus, the reduction of time dependent communication is something that individuals seek when communicating on certain topics or have specific questions. Woods and Ebersole (2003) identified that instructors who participated in chat sessions were considered more salient or real compared to those instructors that do not participate in live chat sessions.

Another action step that can be taken to enhance community in an online learning environment is to provide personalized emails. Wood and Ebersole (2003) found that personalized emails create an impression that the instructor is warm and involved. One author uses personal email to follow up with students who have not participated in course discussions or who have not submitted an assignment. The response from students to this simple follow-up (the message is typically brief and ends with the question, “Is everything okay?”) is overwhelmingly positive with students often explaining their circumstances and concluding their response with a thank-you for showing a caring attitude.

A fifth activity that can help to enhance an online community is to incorporate audio/video in-lieu of all text-based content. This can include audio or video welcome statements, videocams for use during live chat

sessions, and personal video communication tool. Wood and Ebersole (2003) stressed that employing audio/video into online learning can help to enhance communication and involve cues normally found in the face-to-face environment. One author uses video and audio to supplement both content presentations and to promote social presence in his online courses. Video and audio files have repeatedly proven themselves beneficial in terms of the reaching students in a way that standard text cannot (Brown, Brown, Fine, Luterbach, Sugar, & Vinciguerra, 2009; Brown & Green, 2008). One must be careful, however to control the file size of the video or audio because a significant number of students use relatively low-bandwidth network connections (e.g. dial-up) and have trouble downloading large files.

A sixth activity is to provide regular updates and feedback. These regular updates and feedback sessions provide a high degree of faculty interaction, which can enhance other activities noted, such as immediacy (Wood and Ebersole, 2003). One author notes the need to provide at least minimal feedback to the entire class daily during the week. This serves as an indicator to students that the instructor is “listening” as asynchronous discussions continue.

A seventh approach that is being used by many online institutions is group discussions. A group discussion is basically a threaded dialogue where members of a group can carry discussion on a variety of topics or interest. Wood and Ebersole (2003) stressed that “dialogue introduces students to one another at a cognitive level.” If faculty establishes clear guidelines, this environment can be perceived as safe and will support community development. One of the authors has found through experience that discussion forums comprise an important part of his students feeling of connectedness to other members of the course, the instructor, and the course content itself (Brown & Green, in-press).

The final strategy offered by Wood and Ebersole (2003) is the notion of creating private places, which is “a separate private area for your students apart from general class discussion.” This area should be a student only area where instructors do not enter unless invited. By restricting who can participate, Wood and Ebersole (2003) found that this encourages hyper-personal communication, which provides “unique affordances of the medium that allow users to achieve more favorable impressions and greater levels of intimacy than those in parallel face-to-face environment” (Wood and Ebersole, 2003). One of the authors finds creating two discussion forums, “The Hallway” and “Course Q&A,” which remain active through the duration of a course, is particularly helpful in creating private areas for students. Although the two discussion forums are not themselves private spaces, the type of communication that occurs within these spaces fosters separate communication among classmates through email or the establishment of private discussion spaces to which the instructor does not have access.

Another avenue for connection is to utilize course management software (CMS) to help provide additional outlets for communication. These tools are often found in resources, such as Blackboard; however, these tools are not as commonly sought out as other means of communication on the web. On the other hand, communities of practice or social networks are areas that students often gravitate towards.

To utilize social networking within the higher learning arena, Smith (2007) encourages teachers to pinpoint the most popular social networking resource. Once the social networking tool is identified, at that point the teacher can focus their energy into using this resource as an extension of the class. Furthermore, Smith (2007) noted that “by gaining access to social networks in which students are comfortable and already established, connections with those students can be cultivated and developed to facilitate the engagement of students.”

Smith (2007) noted some strategies to encourage participation within a social network; however, the focus should be on the student and their learning and not the tool itself. A few strategies to encourage interaction are: sharing relevant news articles [or research articles], following up on conversations held in-class, and acknowledging a student’s birthday. Through these communication starters, the relationship between the teacher-student and student-student are enhanced. In return, Smith (2007) noted “social networks are a powerful foundation from which to develop group identity and cohesion.” In other words, enhance the learning community and enhance social presence. One author uses Facebook and Twitter to communicate with students who choose to “friend” or “follow” the author. Messages posted are typically related to the author’s educational discipline and include book reviews and conference participation opportunities.

Smith (2007) noted that “only by implementing the tools in use by today’s students can today’s teachers effectively communicate with them, and effectively teach them.” This is true due to the fact that many of the current students in higher education come with experiences not found with earlier traditional learners. This “net generation” has more experience and exposure to information-gathering than previous generations, which can be accredited to powerful web-based search engine tools (Smith, 2007).

Conclusion

The current research available provides a thorough definition of the social networking concept. Furthermore, the literature describes a number of strategies to support social networking within higher education. As faculty look for ways to connect with their learners, they should remember that many of today's college students have an online presence and communicate online in some form. When considering this, faculty should look to embrace these new communication media to enhance learning. Since the social networking means of communication is well established by a large pool of students, faculty should find ways to help engage learning through this online activity. Through the use of social networking resources, meaningful interaction among students and faculty can be enhanced.

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