



# **Building an Effective Online Learning Community – Strategies for Promoting Virtual Teams and Social Presence**

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# I. Introduction



- ❖ *Online learning-cost effective and convenient*
- ❖ Exponential development of Internet
- ❖ Volume of *content* and in the number of *users*



- ❖ Too much attention paid to *recruitment* and not enough to *retention*: Attrition rates average about **10%** higher in online courses than face-to-face classes and course completion rates are typically about **10%-20%** lower (DiRamio & Wolverson, 2006).
- ❖ Major challenges identified (Middleton, 1997; Wiesenbergs & Hutton, 1996)
  - Creating a sense of online community
  - Limited interactions between students, instructors, and course materials
  - Appropriately motivate online students



❖ Social Presence

❖ Virtual Team

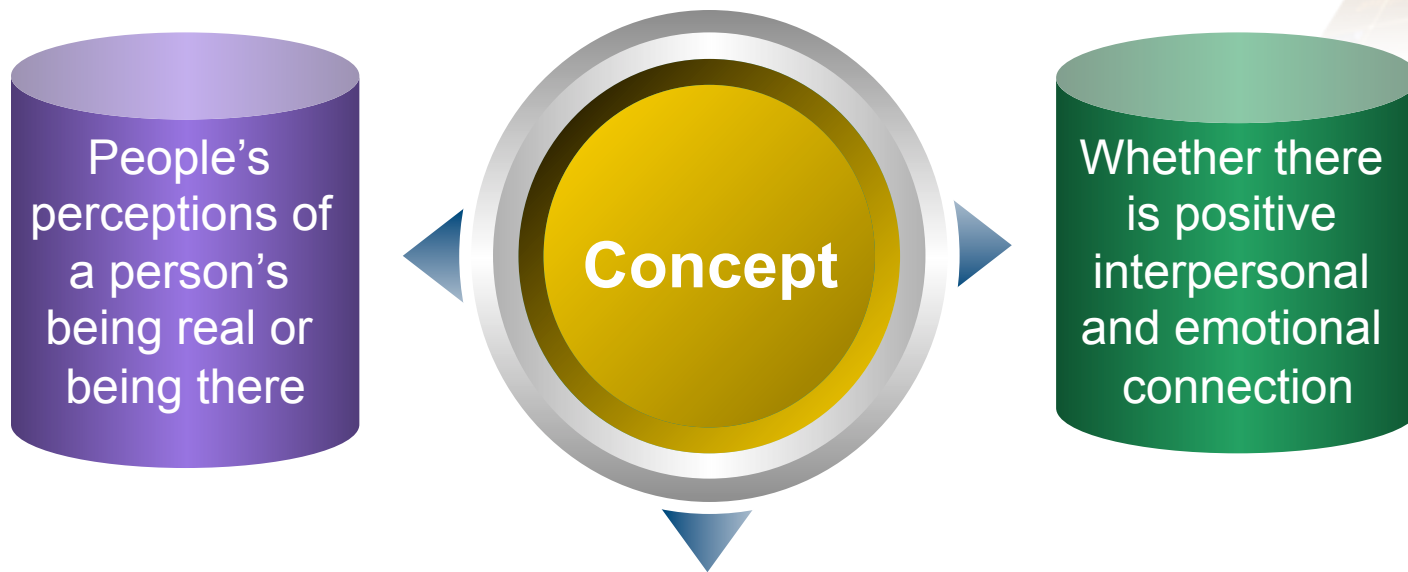


# Social Presence



- ❖ The *lack of physical presence* and the *inadequate communication* between instructors and learners in online learning could lead to students' frustration, dissatisfaction, less participation or even higher dropout rates in online courses (Reio & Crim, 2006).
- ❖ Social presence is an essential place to investigate how students feel online, especially considering its asynchronous nature (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007).
- ❖ As an essential factor in online environments, social presence needs to be studied in relation with the effectiveness of online instruction (Tu, 2001).

## II. What is Social Presence



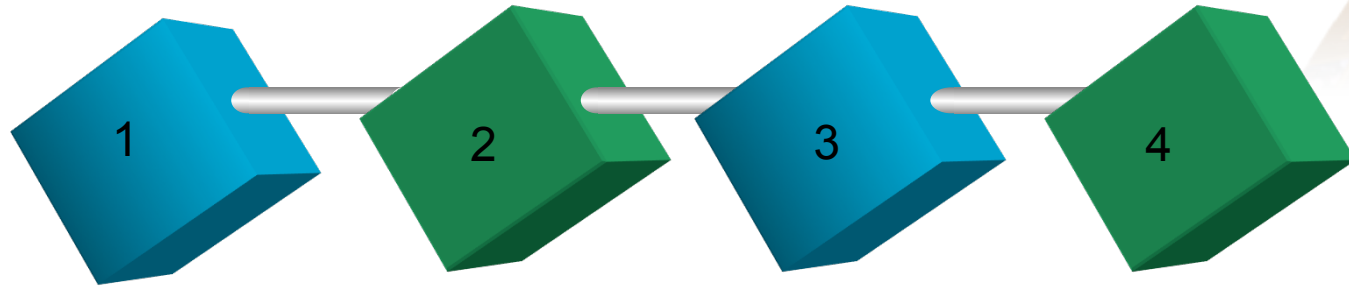
According to Lowenthal (2010), definitions of social presence tend to fall on a continuum



- ❖ The *degree of salience* of the other person in the interaction and the *consequent salience* of the interpersonal relationships (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976);
- ❖ The degree to which a person is perceived as a “*real person*” in mediated communication (Gunawardena, 1995);
- ❖ The degree of *feeling, perception, and reaction* of being connected by CMC to another intellectual entity through a text-based encounter (Tu & McIsaac, 2002).



# III. Effectiveness of Social Presence



Satisfaction

Perceived  
Learning

Interactivity

Sense of  
Community

# 1. Social presence and satisfaction



- ❖ Social presence is a *strong predictor of satisfaction* in a text-based computer conference and social presence appears to have a strong positive impact on students' satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997);
- ❖ Students with *high* perceptions of social presence have *high* perceptions of learning and satisfaction towards the instructor. (Richardson & Swan, 2003);
- ❖ *Significant correlations* between social presence and satisfaction with online discussions. Specifically, they found that online students' perceived instructor presence is the real determinant of their satisfaction towards the course instructor (Swan & Shih, 2005).

## 2. Social presence and perceived learning



- ❖ Social presence is one of the most *significant factors* in improving instructional effectiveness (Aragon, 2003);
- ❖ When information is presented in a way that *increases* social presence, it is *more* engaging and *better* remembered by learners (Homer, Plass & Blake, 2008);
- ❖ Perceptions of overall social presence contribute *significantly* to the *predictor* equation for students' perceived overall learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003);
- ❖ A *strong correlation* between students' perceptions of social presence and their perceptions of the quality and quantity of their learning (Picciano, 2002).

### 3. Social presence and interactivity



- ❖ Social presence is *directly related to* learner-to-learner interaction, and interactivity is one important dimension of online social presence, along with social context and online communication (Tu, 2000);
- ❖ Social presence is a *vital* element in determining online interaction and it positively influences students' online interaction behaviors (Tu & McIsaac, 2002);
- ❖ A *strong correlation* between sense of social presence and online interaction (Tung & Deng, 2006);
- ❖ A *positive relationship* between the degree of interactivity and the social presence (Fortin & Dholakia, 2005).

## 4. Social presence and online community



- ❖ Feeling of connection encourages students' *engagement in materials and communication with other people*. This connection within a community leads to a higher completion rate of online classes (Russo & Benson, 2005);
- ❖ Through social presence, learners project themselves *socially and affectively* into a community of inquiry (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000);
- ❖ Social presence is one of the important factors that *positively correlate* to the sense of community, along with other factors such as social equality, group activities, and community size (Rovai, 2002).



# IV. Strategies for Creating SP



1

Course Designers  
(course design)

2

Instructors (delivery  
and management)

3

Participants  
(participation)

# 1. Course Design



- ❖ Develop Welcome Messages
  - video
  - written welcome statement
- ❖ Include Student Profiles
  - earlier pages of the course web site
  - picture, email, instant messenger ID, a brief bio
  - visual or written
- ❖ Incorporate Audio or Video
  - reflecting emotions
  - different forms of audio or video



## ❖ Limit Class Size

- significantly influences the establishment of social presence (Aragon, 2003);
- student-instructor ratio  $\leq 30:1$  (Rovai, 2001)

## ❖ Structure Collaborative Learning Activities

- collaborative learning activities can increase learner-to-learner interaction leading to social presence (Rovai, 2002; Whiteman, 2002);
- planned in advance;
- group work, group discussions, brainstorming, group assignments, group projects, and online group debates;
- ensure equal opportunities

## 2. Instructors



### ❖ Contribute to Discussion Boards

- discussion board  $\approx$  face-to-face classroom;
- actively involved

### ❖ Promptly Answer E-Mail

- social presence-real %;
- timely responses are valuable to the establishment of social presence in the online environment (Newberry, 2001);
- students need to feel that their messages are valued

### ❖ Provide Frequent Feedback

- personalized feedback and addressed to the individuals;
- check in with students on some regular schedule

### ❖ Strike Up a Conversation



- ❖ Share Personal Stories and Experiences
  - illustrating that the instructor is credible
  - present the human side of online course
- ❖ Use Humor
  - invitation to start a conversation (Gorham & Christophel,1990);
  - reduces social distance and conveys goodwill
- ❖ Use Emoticons
  - facial expressions created through the use of punctuation marks
  - help convey the nonverbal cues of the communicator
- ❖ Address Students by Name
- ❖ Allow Students Options for Addressing the Instructor



# 3. Participants



- ❖ **Contribute to Discussion Boards**
  - helps students get to know each other and helps the instructor get to know the students
- ❖ **Promptly Answer E-Mail**
- ❖ **Strike up a Conversation**
  - participants can contribute to the social presence;
  - camaraderie be built by all;
  - private chat features
- ❖ **Share Personal Stories and Experiences**
  - contributes to active participation



## ❖ Use Humor

- reduce social distance

## ❖ Use Emoticons

- help the instructor accurately interpret participants' messages

## ❖ Use Appropriate Titles

- Addressing someone in a way you are uncomfortable will decrease the level of social presence between the two of you.

# Virtual Team



# Virtual Team



- ❖ In virtual teams, a group of people work at different geographic sites on a shared purpose using technology (Lipnack & Stamps, 2000).

# Why Virtual Teams



- ❖ There is an increasing use of virtual teams in both academic and business (Filo, 2005, Picolli, 2004)
- ❖ Increasing reliance on technology makes more possibilities for teams to meet virtual.(Criffith &Neale, 2001)
- ❖ Student learning can be enriched through team interaction (Soller, 2002)



# Literature Review



- ❖ Problems / Issues
- ❖ Variables
- ❖ Findings
- ❖ Best Practices

# Problems / Issues



- ❖ Without or limited face to face interactions
- ❖ Cultural Differences (Individual or Group)
- ❖ Hard to get a consensus
- ❖ “free rider effect” (Hakkinen, 2004)
- ❖ Team conflicts
- ❖ Lack or delay feedback

# Students' Feedback (Positive)



- “Our group was full of very capable, responsible students who all pitched in extra in order to get the job done.”
- “I enjoyed working in a virtual team. Everyone on the team takes the accountability of finishing the assignment”
- “Sometimes I forgot to even go on the course website to complete my work online, but working as a team to achieve a best grade in the class, which make me want to come in and discuss about my work.”
- “I love the thoughts of having groups because I learned different perspectives when solving problems.”

# Students' Feedback (Negative)



- ❖ I have not had any luck getting my team members to communicate at all on the topic. Although I have posted several discussion topics, I have only had one reply from one person asking to clarify the topic.”
- ❖ “I feel like I am working by myself. I have not had this problem in the past.”
- ❖ “In this class you are researching on, my team members are habitually procrastinate that it is making my work difficult.”
- ❖ “I don't feel that it's fair that some people have to pick up the slack and do more than their fair share of the work, but don't get compensated for it in that they don't get extra points ...”

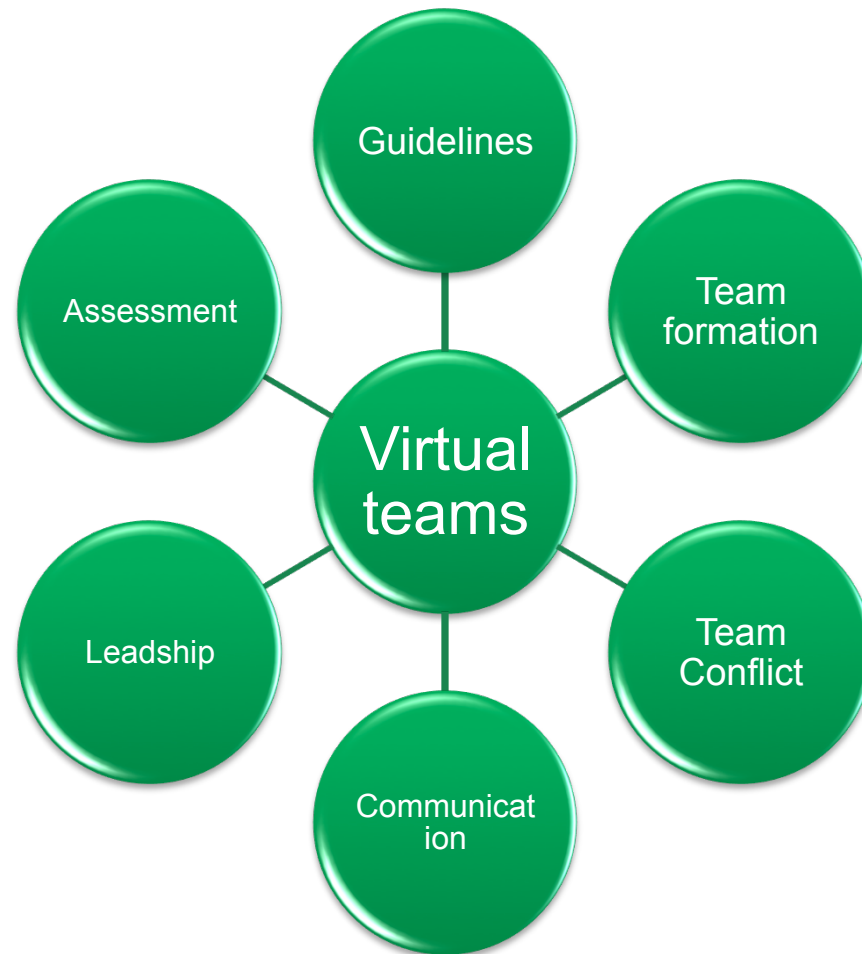
# Results and Discussions



- ❖ Guidelines for virtual teamwork
- ❖ Team formation
- ❖ Team Conflict
- ❖ Communication
- ❖ Team Leaders and Roles
- ❖ Assessment



# Results and Discussions



# Best Practices



- ❖ Provide teamwork training
- ❖ Emphasize the importance of frequent interaction
- ❖ Team size
- ❖ Design group work
- ❖ Encourage using Web 2.0 technologies to support collaboration
- ❖ Consider collaborative evaluations (individual, peer, instructor)

# Course Design Recommendations



- ❖ Provide multiple synchronous and asynchronous communication technology options.
- ❖ Match the technology to the desired learning outcome.
- ❖ Provide education and support to ensure that students know how to use available technologies
- ❖ Take advantage of evolving Web 2.0 technologies to support collaboration (e.g., blogs, wikis, instant messaging, social networking, video chat, virtual worlds, etc.).

# Course Design Recommendations



- ❖ Provide clear goals and guidelines on learning activities and assessments.
- ❖ Use small group sizes (3-5 students per group)
- ❖ Emphasize the importance of frequent, regular interaction
- ❖ Specify a process for mediation conflict(e.g. personality conflicts, lack of participation)
- ❖ Consider using collaborative assessment integrating individual, peer and instructor evaluations.



Questions  Comments?

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**Thank You !**