Creating Instructor Presence in an Online Course

Sharon Stoerger
Instructional Design Consultant
University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee

Introduction

In online courses, teaching and learning can happen anytime and anywhere. This may create greater learning independence, but the technology itself is not a replacement for the teacher. In an online course, the primary mode of communication is often asynchronous and text-based. The lack of physical cues associated with lean communication media (e.g., Daft & Lengel, 1986) used in many online environments can lead to misunderstandings and feelings of isolation. Feeling comfortable communicating in an online environment and perceiving members of the class as “real” are other factors that may impact participation in an online learning community (Kear, 2010).

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) are examples of education scholars who emphasize the importance of teaching presence and its role in designing effective learning environments. For online courses, there is typically no opportunity for face-to-face interaction among the students and the instructor. While this design is convenient for the students and offers opportunities for reflection, it can pose challenges in developing effective teacher presence. This work investigates an instructor’s use of rich media, in particular video content, to create a sense of presence in a fully online course.

Presence and Online Instruction

The research suggests that social presence is an important concept in online learning (e.g., Gunawardena & Zittle, 1996). While scholars claim that a sense of social presence is key for instructional effectiveness (Tu, 2002), a single commonly accepted definition of this complex concept is lacking (Kehrwald, 2008). Nonetheless, the work by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) is frequently cited in discussions related to social presence. According to the work of these authors, the lack of cues may impact a communicator’s awareness of an interaction partner. Stated another way, Short et al. believed that the media was an important influence on social presence.

In today’s technology-rich environment, many media compete for our attention. Because the theory developed by Short et al. (1976) was constructed prior to the wide-spread adoption of the Internet, involves a complex set of variables, and is not rooted in the context of online learning, some educational scholars argue that it fails clarify the concept of social presence (Tu, 2002). Further, the research on presence came out of a diverse set of disciplines (e.g., cognitive science, communication, computer science, engineering, philosophy, psychology), which serves to further fragment its importance (Lombard & Ditton, 1997). Some scholars also suggest that the fewer number of media choices, the closer the communicators may feel toward one another (Korzenny, 1978). However, empirical studies have failed to support this idea (Korzenny & Bauer, 1981).

While individuals are exposed to an almost constant stream of media, Goffman (1974) recognized that attention impacts the ability to perceive an experience as “real.” One aspect that is emphasized in many definitions of social presence conveyed via computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools is the notion that the user’s perception of the mediated experience is in fact not mediated; rather, users are provided with the illusion that the experience is “natural, immediate, direct, and real” (Lombard & Ditton, 1997, n.p.). Stated another way, the technology becomes transparent to the point that the users no longer perceive the medium and its existence in the learning process. Or as Lee (2004) suggested, a sense of presence is established when the virtual nature of the experience is no longer recognized. Rourke et al.
(2001) added to these definitions by noting that with an increased sense of presence, learners are able to project their personal characteristics into the community of inquiry, thereby presenting themselves as “real people” (see also Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2003).

Based on Fontaine’s (2002) assessment of the research, both individual and group learning and performance improve when there is a greater sense of presence (see also Garrison, Anderson, and Archer, 2000). Picciano (2002) agrees and contends that there is “a definite, consistent and strong relationship among student perceptions of interaction, social presence, and learning” (p. 30). In addition to transactional distance, social equality, small group activities, group facilitation, teaching style and learning stage, and community size, social presence has been identified as a factor that contributes to sense of community (Rovai, 2002). Because of the complexity of the presence concept, as well as the lack of consensus on its definition, more research is needed to understand the importance of presence, particularly in online and blended courses.

This Study

Kehrwald (2008), who conducted studies of social presence in online courses, noted that research on social presence beyond solely text-based media was important. In his study, the respondents indicated that information such as personal histories, personalities, and current circumstances contributed to social presence. The combination of these variables enabled the instructor to become real and present in these discussions. This idea served to guide the design and use of video described in this paper.

For the purpose of this study, video content was created for a fully online course. The majority of the students in this course were at the graduate level. Four types of videos were created by the instructor: (a) a personal introduction; (b) modular introductions; (c) video check-ins; and (d) modular “cool tools” introductions. The personal introduction was designed to set the tone for the course and to help students connect with the instructor. In this course, there were seven modules that were introduced via videos, as well. The purpose of these videos was to introduce the readings to the students, highlight key concepts, and present questions for the students to think about as the class moved into the discussions. Another type of video created for this course was a video check-in. While the focus of these videos was less on the content of the module, they provided the instructor the opportunity to clarify misunderstandings, address questions that surfaced during the week, and present related materials that could supplement students’ understanding. The function of the video check-ins was to enable the instructor to maintain a connection with students as they moved through the multi-week modules.

One of the assignments associated with each module involved a “cool tools” presentation. For each of the module topics, students were instructed to select a cool tool to virtually present to their peers. These presentations, which investigated the positives, negatives, and pedagogical practices of the selected tools, took place in the course management system (i.e., D2L) discussion forum. Videos created to introduce this portion of the course activities were shorter and more “playful” than the other types created for this course and emphasized creativity over content. At the end of the semester, the students were surveyed to assess the effectiveness and to determine ways to improve this type of content.

In the initial stages of this study, the intent was to use a Flip digital camcorder to record the videos for this course. This device was used to create videos used during the first weeks of the course. Throughout the semester, rich media alternatives (e.g., Jing and Animoto) were investigated as the instructor became more comfortable with the video creation process. The announcement in April 2011 by Cisco to discontinue its production of the Flip camcorder, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, further encouraged this investigation.
Video Production

Digital Camcorders
Current digital camcorders such as Cisco’s Flip are small, versatile, and typically inexpensive. Flip, for one, has a USB plug that enables the user to transfer the content with minimal effort to social media sites such as YouTube or Facebook. Because of these reasons, a Flip camcorder was used to create videos that were used in an instructional technologies course. These videos (typically 5-7 minutes in length) were locally created - they were not produced and edited by a professional team. However, the unpolished appearance of the video content gave it an authentic quality that conveyed the presence of the teacher. While the recorded video was typically posted in its entirety, there were times when video clips were captured and integrated into other video check-in productions.

On April 12, 2011, Cisco announced that it planned to discontinue the production of the Flip camcorder (Grobart & Rusli, 2011). Because of the ephemeral nature of devices such as the Flip, alternative video production options were investigated. The screencasting site, Jing (http://www.techsmith.com/jing/), and the video slideshow maker, Animoto (http://animoto.com/), are examples of these sites. With Jing Pro, full-motion videos that captured information presented on a computer screen, sound, and voice could be quickly created. Animoto transformed pictures, video clips, and music into videos.

Through these videos, students were introduced to the course content but were also able to hear and sometimes see their instructor. In other words, the instructor not only conveyed course content but produced it, as well. Further, the consumption and creation of video content was aligned with the concept of digital literacy.

Video Publishing
The videos produced using the Flip digital camcorder, Jing, and/or Animoto can be easily uploaded to YouTube. To organize the videos and house them in a central location, a YouTube Channel (http://www.youtube.com/sois670) was established for this course. Students could access these videos in three ways: 1) The YouTube Channel for the course; 2) Links to the videos that were posted to the Announcements and Content sections of the D2L course management system (CMS); and/or 3) The embedded version of the video in D2L. To be accessible to all students, a transcript of the material included in the video was made available to all students in the course via D2L, as well.

Lessons Learned
Presence in online learning does not happen automatically; instead, it is something that is created (Lehman & Conceicao, 2010). While it is challenging for instructors to create a sense of presence in an online course, students watching these videos see, hear, and participate in a shared experience with their instructor. Video is a richer medium than text (Daft & Lengel, 1986), which gives students the opportunity to see their instructor’s body language and hear her tone and humor, which can add authenticity to the material. While creating these videos took minimal effort on the part of the instructor, their impact on the students’ perceptions of this course were positive in terms of managing instruction, building understanding, and directing instruction. It also gave students an opportunity to get to know the instructor as a real person.

Technological changes are occurring rapidly. Within the duration of this semester-long study, the Flip video camcorder went from a “hot” device to obsolete (Grobart & Rusli, 2011). The purpose of the videos was to convey a feeling of “being there” for a geographically dispersed group of students. For the most part, asynchronous, text-based media were used to support communication among the students and the instructor. The use of video to supplement the class communication enabled the students to get to know the instructor, feel comfortable approaching her with questions, and to view her as a “real person.” While
the technology used to create these videos changed during the course of the semester, the intent did not. The actual technology used to construct a sense of presence remained intentionally in the background. In the end, the focus of the video creation and publication process remained on the students rather than on the technology.

References


About the Presenter

Sharon Stoerger is an instructional design consultant in the Learning Technology Center at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM). She teaches online and face-to-face courses related to instructional technologies and professional writing at UWM and Mount Mary College. Sharon has presented her work on educational uses of technology at a number of different conferences including the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), EDUCAUSE, and the Plymouth eLearning Conference (UK). Sharon has also written articles and book chapters that have appeared in publications such as IRRODL, and The Handbook of Research on Practices and Outcomes in Virtual Worlds and Environments.

Address: Learning Technology Center, Golda Meir E-175
2311 East Hartford Avenue
Milwaukee, WI 53201
Email: stoerger@uwm.edu
URL: http://www.uwm.edu/Dept/LTC/
Phone: 414-229-4319
Fax: 414-229-6758