8-2017

Social Presence, Identity, and Online Learning Research: Research Development and Needs

Patrick R. Lowenthal
Boise State University, patricklowenthal@boisestate.edu

Vanessa P. Dennen
Florida State University

Social Presence, Identity, and Online Learning Research: Research Development and Need

Patrick Lowenthal
Boise State University

Vanessa P. Dennen
Florida State University

Scholars across many disciplines have grappled with questions of what it means for a person to be and interact online. Who are we when we go online? How do others know we are there and how do they perceive us? Within the context of online learning, scholarly questions tend to reflect more specific concerns focused on how well people can learn in a setting limited to mediated interactions lacking various communication cues. For example, how can a teacher and students come to know each other if they cannot see each other? How can they effectively understand and communicate with each other if they are separated by space and, in many instances, time? These concerns are related to issues of social presence and identity, both of which are complex, multi-faceted, closely interrelated constructs.

Social Presence

The theory of social presence dates back to the work of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) in the 1970s. Short et al. (1976), like many still today, were interested in how media influences how people communicate. They believed that some media were better at establishing the quality or state of being "there" than other media. Over time, though, as people began participating in online learning environments, online educators began questioning Short et al.'s technologically deterministic understanding of social presence. Those early online educators were still interested in how media influences the way people communicate but they were more interested in the ways that instructors and students make up for the loss of visual cues in online learning environments, that relied completely on text based communication, while still being able to share who they are as "real" people.

Identity

Identity is a fluid construct, one that is negotiated both with our interaction partners and within the context in which it is being performed (Seargeant & Tagg, 2014). We construct our identities through the stories that we tell (Deumert, 2014), and that construction is a lifelong process in which we "become the narrator *of our* own *story* without completely becoming the author of our life" (Ricoeur, 1986, p. 131). In other words, we tell others who we are, but we are not entirely in control of who we are or how others see us.

Social Presence and Identity in Online Learning

Establishing one's social presence and identity in online learning environments can be difficult due to limited communication channels and transactional distance (Moore, 2007). Text-based communication is used heavily in many online learning settings, including the ones discussed in this special issue, leaving learners to establish both social presence and identity in the absence of substantial visual and aural cues. Online learners have varying degrees of social presence, based largely on how much they contribute to class; whether they are socially anonymous depends not on their volume of contributions but rather the degree to which they share identity cues within their course communications (Christopherson, 2007).

The contextual nature of identity means that people share versions of themselves in the different online settings they encounter. Of concern to many online instructors and learners is not only the identity one shares while being present in a class, but also the identity that is refined and developed within the class – an identity that may be focused on entry into a profession. For example, students in a teacher education class are not just college students, but are becoming teachers. Similarly, students in an organic chemistry class may be starting to form their identities as research scientists or physicians – or distancing themselves as they determine that their future profession will not be related to that discipline.

The Special Issue

The purpose of this special issue is to try to stimulate or reignite a conversation between scholars examining social presence as well as those examining the role of identity in online learning environments. This special issue pushes us to consider how online learning has developed and changed over time in terms of technology, pedagogy, and familiarity. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, online instructors and learners were pioneers, and relatively little was known about how to foster social presence in online learning environments. The communication and course technologies used in early online courses were still fairly rudimentary in terms of the interactions they enabled. Over time, though, with advancements in technology and pedagogy, coupled with increased experience of instructors and students communicating online, issues with social presence and identity continued to evolve.

The articles in this special issue take up various such themes. By doing so they bring together researchers working in these two areas and, in turn, various perspectives, whether focused on formal or informal learning, and whether situated in private or public discourse contexts. In the first article in this issue Lowenthal and Snelson report on an investigation of how highly cited researchers define social presence. They illustrate how differently researchers define social presence and how this continues to change over time. They specifically found that while researchers tended to define social presence in terms of the behaviors one uses (e.g., immediacy behaviors) and/or the degree to which one perceives another person(s) as being a 'real' person (and to a lesser degree, 'there'), about 20% of the time researchers in highly cited articles defined social presence more in terms of connection, belonging, and community. Further, they conclude that social presence, collaboration, and community are three important, but different constructs in the online learning literature and that researchers must make a concerted effort not to confuse them.

In the next article, Phirangee and Malec investigated the interrelationship between social presence, identity, and community. More specifically, they focused on how some students feel disconnected or othered in online courses. Through a series of in-depth semi-structured interviews, they identified the three ways students are othered in online courses--(a) professional, (b) academic, and (c) ethnic--each of which can lead to feelings of disconnection and isolation when learning online.

One way that instructors attempt to address feelings of isolation is to leverage social networking platforms. In the third article in this issue, Dennen and Burner report a study of traditional college-aged students' perceptions of using Facebook in their coursework. They found that while a majority of students used Facebook for social purposes, most students were not comfortable being "friends" with their instructors on Facebook. As a result, students reported that they would self-censor or adjust their privacy settings to avoid context collapse between their social identities and their classroom identities when using Facebook as a part of their coursework.

An increasing number of online educators are experimenting with using synchronous communication technologies to improve social presence in online learning environments. In the next article, Walker reports on an investigation of how bilingual students used language to establish social presence and identity positions in an international context. These participants relied on both humor and cultural signs to communicate with each other as they switched between languages throughout their conversations. A sense of play and personal sharing was productively used by participants in this study.

Two of the articles examined how social presence, and specifically peer interaction, shapes identity in collaborative learning situations. Jaber and Kennedy, like Walker, studied students in an international context, examining how students from four different continents experienced group work in an online program. Interviews revealed that trustworthy social interaction was important to these students, who felt it supported them emotionally and helped them learn. By sharing with each other, some students began to think of themselves differently. In contrast, Xie, Lu, Cheng, and Izmirli examined conflictual presence in peer-mediated online collaborative settings. Through discourse analysis, they found that tensions play an important role in the establishment of identity among students in an online class. Specifically, students may explore their own identities by contrasting them with or distancing them from classmates' identities, and in so doing also ascribe identities to others in the class community. Together, these two articles suggest that all types of peer interactions, whether supportive or conflictual, play an important role in student identity formation.

Grounding their work in the Community of Inquiry framework, Maddrell, Morrison, and Watson investigated the relationship between social presence and student learning. They conducted a study with 51 graduate students in five distance education courses but found no relationship between the students' perceptions of social presence and student learning. This finding is noteworthy given the number of studies that have assumed that social presence is necessary for learning to occur, and demonstrates that the relationship between social presence and learning is one that still needs exploration, for example to tease out whether there is a minimum threshold of presence that is beneficial to learning but beyond which learning will not be enhanced.

Öztok and Kehrwald bring this special issue full circle, arguing, like Lowenthal and Snelson, that the lack of clarity on how researchers define social presence is problematic. In particular they illustrate that researchers often confuse what social presence is with what social presence does. They conclude by arguing that we should focus on the salience of interpersonal relationships if we are to understand the relational aspects of being online.

Collectively these articles show the diverse ways that educational researchers have explored social presence and identity. They also highlight some of the nuanced concerns online educators might have in these areas. The lack of an agreed upon definition of social presence makes it difficult for researchers to build upon each other's work and for educators to synthesize and act upon empirical recommendations. At this time, it is safe to say that social presence within online courses is important, but less certain is whether educators should focus on how social presence is being performed versus how it is being perceived. The performance vs perception tension is apparent in the various definitions of presence, and also in the many ways that social presence has been researched. In terms of identity, these articles make apparent that identity in an online class is much more complex than playing the general role of a student or an instructor. Instructors should remain alert to the role that ethnicity and gender play in online settings, and the various ways that students might perform expertise. Additionally, at times it may be important to consider not only the identity that students present formally to a class, but also who students are becoming professionally, and the various on and offline identities they are juggling concurrently with the class.

Both of these areas – social presence and identity – remain relevant topics of exploration for online learning researchers. Some of the critical work that remains to be done includes negotiating and refining the current nomenclature and definitions related to these constructs to a point where a common language can be adopted among educational researchers; greater empirical exploration of the relationship between social presence and student learning gains; and generating a deeper understanding of how identity performance and development in online courses is related to both social presence and learning. In terms of educational practice, addressing these areas is not trivial. Educators will benefit from research literature that uses consistent language, as well as solid empirical evidence that both demonstrates the forms of social presence and identity sharing that support student learning in different distance education contexts and provides guidance for facilitating social presence and fostering identity sharing and development.

References

Christopherson, K. M. (2007). The positive and negative implications of anonymity in Internet social interactions: "On the Internet, Nobody Knows You're a Dog". *Computers in Human Behavior, 23*(6), 3038-3056. doi: https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2006.09.001

Deumert, A. (2014). The performance of a ludic self on social network(ing) sites. In P. Seargeant & C. Tagg (Eds.), *The language of social media* (pp. 23-45). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Moore, M. G. (2007). Theory of transactional distance. In M. G. Moore (Ed.). *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 89-101). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Ricoeur, P. (1986). Life: A story in search of a narrator. In M. C. Doeser & J. N. Kraay (Eds.), *Facts and values: Philosophical reflections from western and non-western perspectives* (pp. 121-132). Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands.

Seargeant, P., & Tagg, C. (2014). Introduction: The language of social media. In P. Seargeant & C. Tagg (Eds.), *The language of social media* (pp. 1-20). London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan.

Short, J., Williams, E., & Christie, B. (1976). *The social psychology of telecommunications*. London: John Wiley & Sons.