Increasing Social Presence in Online Learning

Associate Professor of Finance
Sahar Bahmani, Ph.D.

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UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN PARKSIDE

INTRODUCTION

This poster highlights innovative and effective online teaching and learning practices in higher education, specifically at UW-Parkside, by promoting ways to increase social presence in online courses

WHAT IS SOCIAL PRESENCE?

Social presence is defined as the feeling of community a learner experiences in an online environment where learners express their emotions and feelings and interact with one another in a way that promotes their learning. Socially interactive learners leads to them being engaged learners.

WHY SHOULD I CARE?

Learning management system developers, instructional designers, instructors, practitioners, researchers and scholars all recognize that a major growing trend right now is improving the social presence experience in online learning. With the growing number of online courses being offered, improving social presence helps stimulate learner experiences in the course, thereby improving learning and course satisfaction.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROJECT

This study focuses on how increasing social presence in online courses increases overall student satisfaction with the course. The logic behind this is because improved social interaction in online courses will enhance learner to learner interactions as well as learner to instructor interactions. To increase student engagement, structuring online courses so that students have the opportunities for regular interaction with each other is vital.
Seven methods are introduced in order to increase social presence in online classes through more effective social interactions.

1. Introductions
2. Creating a Safe Space
3. Encourage usage of emotions
4. Give students empowerment
5. Feedback
6. Discussion Boards
7. Collaborative Group Work

There are 4 online courses being examined. Two are undergraduate level courses 15 weeks in length: Principles of Macroeconomics and Financial Institutions & Markets. Two of the online courses are graduate level courses taught in the online MBA program: International Finance and Foundations in Statistics & Economics and are both 7 weeks in length.

MAIN RESULT

It is found that increasing social presence by incorporating these seven practices increases overall *student satisfaction* with the course.

FUTURE RESEARCH

This has major implications on *student retention* in online courses.

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METHOD and DATA COLLECTION

Online Courses with *LOW* Social Presence	Online Courses with *HIGH* Social Presence
1. Cyber Course Café	1. Cyber Course Cafe
2. Promptly answer e-mail	2. Promptly answer e-mail
3. Weekly course announcements	3. Weekly course announcements
4. Audio recorded PowerPoint slideshows for all chapters	4. Audio recorded PowerPoint slideshows for all chapters
5. Post personalized teacher profile introduction with photo and expectations document before students are given access to the course	5. Post personalized teacher profile introduction with photo and expectations document before students are given access to the course
6. Discussion boards require 1 substantive prompt and 2 responses to peers, all due at the end of the week • *Problem*: Students flood the discussion board all at once on the due date only	6. Provide suggested due dates for initial postings that promote mid-week engagement as opposed to participation by the majority of students flooding the discussion board on the due date only
7. Students post in the first week to "Personal Introductions" discussion board (not worth any points) *not* encouraged to use pictures and videos	7. Students post in the first week to "Personal Introductions" discussion board (worth points) and are encouraged to use pictures and videos
8. Provide numerical scores and only minimal feedback should a student be deducted points	8. Provide frequent feedback
Students were *not* encouraged to use expressions of emotions	9. Students are encouraged to use expressions of emotions
Instructor did *not* use exclamation marks and did not express emotions	10. Instructor also uses expressions of emotions, e.g. smile
Did *not* address students by name	11. Address students by name
	12. The sharing of personal stories and professional experiences was highly encouraged of the students
	13. Post introduction video: who I am, my credentials, welcoming students and going over all course details
	14. Send progress reports on participation and quality of postings
	15. Incorporate reflective activities
	16. Develop open-ended, critical thinking discussion questions
	17. Utilize group work strategies
	18. Structure collaborative learning activities
	19. Instructor posts/participates in the discussion boards regularly and provides a summary once it closes
	20. Offer virtual office hours weekly in addition to face to face office hours

MBA 512 Foundations in Statistics & Economics	Low Social Presence	Low Social Presence	Low Social Presence	Low Social Presence	High Social Presence	High Social Presence
End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question	MBA 512 Fall 2018 1st term	MBA 512 Fall 2018 2nd term	MBA 512 Spr 2019 1st term	MBA 512 Spr 2019 2nd term	MBA 512 Summer 2019 1st term	MBA 512 Summer 2019 2nd term
Instructor respects rights of students to express their own ideas	4.50	3.33	3.50	4.50	5.00	5.00
Instructor stimulates involvement	4.50	3.67	3.50	5.00	5.00	5.00
Instructor provides timely feedback on student performance	5.00	3.00	4.50	5.00	5.00	5.00
Quality of assessments/course activities	4.50	2.67	2.50	4.25	5.00	5.00
Overall satisfaction	4.50	2.67	3.00	5.00	5.00	5.00
Responded/total students enrolled	4/18	3/10	2/11	4/18	7/8	7/15

MBA735 International Finance	Low Social Presence	High Social Presence
End of Online Course Student Evaluation Question	MBA 735 Online Spring 2017	MBA 735 Online Summer 2019
Instructor respects rights of students to express their own ideas	4.50	4.80
Instructor stimulates involvement	4.33	4.40
Instructor provides timely feedback on student performance	4.80	5.00
Quality of assessments/course activities	4.67	4.80
Overall satisfaction	4.50	4.80
Responded/total students enrolled	13/15	7/11

DISCUSSION

- Methodologies for high social presence: a Cyber Course Café, promptly answer student e-mails, weekly course announcements, post all audio recorded PowerPoint slideshows for all chapters, virtual office hours offered weekly (in addition to face to face office hours)
- Go beyond posting personalized teacher profile introduction with photo and expectations document instead with an introduction welcome video on who the instructor is, their credentials, welcoming students and going over all course details
- Similarly, students post to "Personal Introductions" discussion board and are encouraged to use pictures and video, worth points this time to communicate to students that it is an important way to start of the semester properly
- Higher social presence courses include well developed open-ended, critical thinking discussion questions in the discussion boards so that the participation is impactful
- Instructor provides due dates for initial postings that promote mid-week engagement as opposed to participation by the majority of students flooding the board on the due date only and a different due date exists for responses to several peers (not just 1)
- Instructor posts and participates in the discussion boards regularly too, providing a summary once it closes
- Instructor is sure to address students by name and provides frequent feedback whether they get full points or not
- Instructor sends progress reports on participation and quality of work to students, keeping the gradebook accurate regularly
- Students encouraged to use expressions of emotions throughout the term and the sharing of personal stories/professional experiences
- Instructor incorporates reflective activities, structures collaborative learning activities, and utilizes group work strategies
- These interactive opportunities need to be spaced evenly throughout the course

CONCLUSION

- Faculty, departments and colleges at each university must assess the quality of their online course offerings to make sure that there is plenty of opportunities for social presence to exist and grow between learner to learner and learner to instructor
- The results of this study not only benefit my own teaching in the online classroom as well as the learning of my students, but also the work of my colleagues within my department and discipline, helping us all to improve teaching and learning outcomes in online courses
- This project helps students reflect on our lessons and delve into a deeper type of learning that is more comprehensive, by having more fruitful discussion boards, plenty of opportunities to work with others in an online setting and to be socially present with other learners and their instructor
- These findings can help others teaching online classes when the results are presented/shared across the UW system
- As a result of this project, this can lead to higher quality online course offerings in **all** fields
- Students feeling socially present in their courses is a very important part of our university mission, therefore, we need to increase the quality of online course offerings that are adopting more ways to increase social presence throughout the term of the course
- Data shows we must promote the social presence of our students because of the many student benefits that are exhibited upon completion of the course, including increasing overall course satisfaction