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Problem/Need For Study

As technology evolves and changes the landscape of our classrooms, it is important to note that research studies suggest that learning with computer technology is no longer an exclusive one-to-one process between user and machine, but is evolving into a much broader, socially integrated experience-- a connection of people and ideas within a community of learners. Current researchers (Im, Lee 2002), emphasize the importance of a community as a key element of the learning process where it provides the environment for a variety of types of communication. These online learning communities serve a several purposes—the exchanging of information, social support, and companionship (Kling, 1996; Wellman and Gulia, 1998).

Although the promise of online learning communities may be appealing for our school systems, there are a few obstacles that may interfere with the adoption and integration of this type of instructional delivery method. In addition to the potential myriad of technical and infrastructure configuration problems, system compatibility issues, and bandwidth limitations, the seemingly obvious problem may simply be a lack of understanding of what it is and why it is perceived as such a huge *change* from the traditional model of instruction.

While clear connections have been made in recent years to the importance of online communities (Hiltz, 1994; Kiesler, 1997; Bruckman 1998;) and its human interaction, little research has been done on the extent in which teachers feel socially present in a professional staff development online learning community. What is the relationship of social presence to teachers participating in online learning communities?

Within this contextual framework of online communities and professional staff development for teachers, this presentation explores the significance of social presence and its relationship to online learning.

It focuses on a study within Carroll County Public Schools (MD) which analyzes the threaded discussion responses of twenty-six teachers enrolled in one of three online courses in terms of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's indicators of social presence. It then compares their responses to the responses of sixty-eight teachers enrolled in the same online courses in order to confirm or deny their reported online behaviors. Interpretation of teacher online behaviors and recommendations for instructors on how to create and sustain social presence within their online communities are also presented. This presentation concludes with recommendations for online course moderators or facilitators and modifications and methodological adjustments for future research.

Methods

Twenty-six participants comprised the *Social Presence Study Group* who were enrolled in one of three online courses offered by Carroll County Public Schools during the summer and fall of 2005. They were asked to complete two online surveys that focused on their use of technology in the classroom and their experiences in online courses. The second group, the *Discussion Thread Study Group,* had 68 participants who also were enrolled in one of the three online courses. The discussion threads of both groups were analyzed and the phrases classified into one of the three categories of responses that broadly categorize social presence: affective, open communication, and group cohesion.

Coding

Within these categories--affective, open, and cohesive, fifteen specific indicators were designed and created to gauge the degree of social presence in the discussion threads. The indicators were created for each of the respective categories were based on the research of Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003).

Affective

Expressing Emotion—Using text to describe personal feelings ("I just love it when that happens").

Expression of Values—Personalized expressions of a value or opinion ("I think this is a terrible idea.").

Unconventional Punctuation—Textual display of excessive or conspicuous punctuation or emoticons ("LOL!!!!!!!!!! That make me ☺").

Use of Humor—Textual responses to make jokes, tease, or indicate that something or someone is humorous ("Hahahahahahaha! You are a hoot!").

Self Disclosure—Providing personal information not required by the community ("I stayed out really late last night and was really tired first period").

Personal Advice—Statements made to others to offer personal advice which may not be related to particular topic ("If I were you, I wouldn't go to the meeting.").

Open Communication

Continuing a Thread—The continuance of an existing discussion thread. May be software specific (Usually achieved by clicking a "Reply" Button).

Expressing Agreement—Expressing agreement with the statements of another ("I agree with what Devon said.").

Expressing Appreciation—Expressing appreciation or giving a compliment to

another ("I really like the way you handled that response Joanna!").

Asking Questions—Asking questions to the moderator or other member of the

community ("How do you save that file as a pdf?").

Factual Responses—Providing factual responses (usually to questions) to other

members of the community ("The answer is on the last page of the sheet.").

Group Cohesive

Vocatives—Addressing other community members by their name ("Hey,

Michille, how are you today?").

Greetings and Salutations—Using text to greet or say goodbye to others ("Dear

Barb, thanks for the note.").

Group Reference—Referring to the community members by reflexive pronouns

such as "we" or "us" ("We did a great job on that assignment.").

Phatics—textual statements that are purely social in nature and not related to the

topic ("The weekend is finally here and I am so ready to get out of my office!") .

Each discussion thread was studied in detail to determine how many of the

indicators were present and then totaled and the percentages organized by indicator and

category. The total percentage of all the indicators of the *Social Presence Study Group*

was then compared to those of the *Discussion Thread Study Group* in order to confirm or

deny their online behaviors as observed in their threaded discussion responses.

Analysis and Findings

Indicators were confirmed if a high percentage of the members of the Social Presence Study Group reported they used examples of these indicators and there was also a high percentage of the same indicator within the Discussion Thread Study Group. There were seven indicators reported by the *Social Presence Study Group* that were confirmed by the *Discussion Thread Study Group*. Those indicators were: *Expressing Values or Opinions, Conspicuous Punctuation*, *Expressing Emotion*, *Self-Disclosure*, *Continuing a Thread*, *Vocatives*, and *Greetings and Salutations*.

By examining these seven social presence indicators of the *Social Presence Study Group* that were supported in the discussion threads of the *Discussion Thread Study Group,* some interesting behavioral patterns of the were observed.

When examined in total, the confirmed indicators can provide some information to actually create and sustain social presence in online communities. If we can identify the positive behaviors of what people do when they are in an online community, then we can seek ways to ensure that they are continued and nurtured so that communities in the future can be successful. In order to do that we must re-classify the indicators into terms that more easily describe the behaviors of the teachers and then look at ways to make sure these behaviors are promoted by the instructor/moderator of the community. Each confirmed indicator and its redefined descriptor is listed below along with a brief description of the study's findings.

Expressing Emotion and Conspicuous Punctuation: Emotional

If we consider expressing emotions as the "what", then we may also be able to consider the related expressive punctuation the "how". Teachers expressed their emotions to each other and used excessive or conspicuous punctuation to do it.

Expressing Values: Strong-willed/determined

Teacher were observed to frequently express their values or opinions to each other. This was done in a non-threatening, professional manner and provided them a great deal of feedback regarding specific topics that were discussed.

Self-Disclosure: Private

When we examine the lack of self disclosure exhibited by the teachers, we can also redefine it as "private". Teachers in the online community were not observed to disclose information about themselves to others in the online community.

Continuing a Thread: Willing to Communicate

Teachers were observed to be active communicators and offer their insights in an array of topics, but most importantly for the online community, they were willing to keep talking and responding to what each one of them had said.

Factual Responses: Factual

Teachers provided factual responses to each other within the various topics of the discussion threads. Many times this was in response to a question but they also were very willing to provide each other information that they felt would help others.

Vocatives: Polite

The teachers called each other by name and did it frequently. This "politeness" of the teachers helped them to establish a good base of trust within their online community and helped them be accountable for their actions and behaviors.

Greetings and Salutations: Formal

The author of each discussion thread was clearly identified by name, and the teachers seemed to go out of their way to remain formal in their addressing of each other by including a greeting or ended with a salutation and their name.

These indicators describe a variety of behaviors that would be highly desirable in classroom teachers. These characteristics exhibited by the teachers in the online communities most likely are the same ones they exhibit face to face in their classrooms.

Interpretation

When viewing the study in its entirety, several preliminary conclusions can be made which will serve as a basis for refinement and further exploration. Within a professional development course, teacher's communication and online behaviors strongly align with the research of Erickson (2001) when they feel that they are visible in the online community, aware of their actions and the actions of others, and finally that they are accountability for their actions and responses.

Additionally, teachers also display behaviors that are consistent with Preece's (2001) description of an online community components: *people*, *purpose* and *policies*. The people were members of the online community of professional staff development

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where they all had specific goals and purposes to achieve during the time the course was offered. They also had to adhere to the policies that were in place regarding how they addressed each other and the language that they used.

Conclusion

The findings form this study may help online instructors create and sustain positive social presence in online communities in a number of ways. First, they can acknowledge the concept of online learning may be a completely different learning modality for many of the community members and that may cause uncertainty and apprehension for some participants --even for experienced technology users.

Second, instructors should be aware of what social presence is and how it affects the way people behave and interact online. As seen in this study, teachers tend to behave online in ways that are similar to their real personalities—in this case they were private, formal, polite, gave factual answers, and displayed their emotions and opinions freely. Teachers of online courses can model these behaviors that they want to see in other community members as well as providing them a variety of communication modalities to meet their needs such as synchronous chat, question and answer forums, and discussion boards.

The establishing of clear purposes and policies is also important in creating and sustaining social presence. A goal—such as the completion of a graduate class or the sharing of curriculum content, can serve as a catalyst for online interactions by teachers in the online community. It can be the common ground for the community itself and serve as the foundation for the emotional and intellectual support of the members. Participants may be willing to help each other achieve their goals if the climate of the

community allows them to freely express their feelings, ask questions, and communicate with others in a positive environment.

Recommendations

One area for future studies would be the administrator's or supervisor's expectation of the use of technology by the teacher and if this translates into more individual use or into their involvement in online courses. Are the teachers taking online courses because they wish to participate in professional development courses that are offered in a non-traditional fashion or is their an influence from their administrators or supervisors to do this?