Handbook of Research on Strategic Management of Interaction, Presence, and Participation in Online Courses

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Chapter 6
A Mixed Methods Examination of Instructor Social Presence in Accelerated Online Courses

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ABSTRACT

Social Presence theory seeks to explain how people present themselves as being "there" and "real" while using a communication medium. Most studies on social presence focus on how students present themselves and/or are perceived as being "there" and "real" in computer-mediated environments. However, to date, very few studies have focused on how instructors establish and maintain their own social presence in online learning environments. The following study explored the phenomenon of instructor social presence in accelerated online courses. The results suggest that the construct of presence is more complicated than previously thought and that future studies should employ multiple methods to further explore the concept of instructor social presence.

INTRODUCTION

Many people, faculty included, remain skeptical of online learning (Jaschik & Lederman, 2014). While most of the critics of online learning focus on whether or not students learn as much in online courses as face-to-face courses, there is a deep seated fear that online learning will eventually replace the "teacher" and that students will end up taking teacherless courses online (Shank, 2008; Wilson & Christoper, 2008). Proponents of online learning, however, have been arguing for some time that there is a successful instructor behind every high quality online course (Dunlap, 2005; Wilson, Ludwig-Hardman, Thornam, & Dunlap, 2004). High quality online courses are designed and taught by real people. However, this is often overlooked because the role of an instructor changes in online courses (Kearsley, 2000; Palloff & Pratt, 1999, 2001, 2003). Online instructors are often no longer at the center of every interaction. Instead, they often find themselves intentionally acting more as a moderator or facilitator of learning (Dabbagh & Bannan-Ritland, 2005)--becoming more of a "guide-on-the-side." This approach, though, can become problematic when students

begin to question an instructor's presence in the online classroom (Smith & Taveras, 2005).

Previous research on online learning has shown that students can feel isolated and alone in the online classroom (Kilgore & Lowenthal, 2015; McInnerney & Roberts, 2004). Students need to get a firm sense that they are not alone and that there are other real people in the class with them; that is, students need to get a sense of social presence. Research on social presence has illustrated the importance of being perceived as being "there" and "real" in the online classroom (Lowenthal, 2009). For instance, researchers have shown that there is a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003; So & Brush, 2008), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2001; Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Caspi & Blau, 2008; Richardson & Swan, 2003) to name a few. However, despite the growing body of research on social presence, very little research has focused specifically on the unique role of instructors and the arguably even greater need for instructors to establish their own social presence in the online classroom. Immediately establishing an instructor's presence can be challenging because it takes time to develop presence—especially in completely text-based environments (Tidwell & Walther, 2002; Venable, 2011; Walther, 1996). Establishing social presence then becomes even more challenging in accelerated online courses that are offered in abbreviated formats (e.g., an 8-week as opposed to 16-week format). As more and more institutions begin to offer accelerated online courses—whether during the fall and spring semesters or only during the summer—instructors and instructional designers need to better understand how instructors establish their own instructor social presence in accelerated online courses. Given this, the purpose of this study was to explore the construct of instructor social presence in accelerated online courses.

BACKGROUND

The theory of social presence was developed in the 1970s by Short, Williams, and Christie (1976). Short et al. were interested in how media influences how people communicate. They posited that some media have a higher social presence than others. However, they completed most of their work long before the rise of computer-mediated communication. Text-based computer-mediated communication (e.g., email and threaded discussion forums) did not begin to be used on a regular basis until the 1980s for business and then the 1990s for education (see Lowenthal, 2009). And while early research by Gunawardena and others (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) began to explore the concept of social presence and text-based computer-mediated communication, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer's (2000) work on the Community of Inquiry (CoI) Framework is what ultimately pushed the concept of social presence in the forefront of the research and practice of online learning. Garrison et al. posited that a meaningful educational experience consists of three presences—social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence—that result in a community of inquiry.

Garrison's early work suggests that the CoI was ultimately an attempt to describe any learner-centered "constructivist" learning experience—not simply, those learning experiences that happen solely online (see Garrison, 1989; Garrison & Shale, 1990). The CoI clearly places the learner at the center of the educational experience. And while the CoI highlights the importance of teaching, through the inclusion of teaching presence as one of three core parts of a meaningful educational experience, Garrison and his colleagues did not see the act of teaching being done solely by instructors—which they explain is why it is called teaching presence and not teacher presence (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

They defined teaching presence as,

the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile outcomes. Teaching presence begins before the course commences as the teacher, acting as instructional designer, plans and prepares the course of studies, and it continues during the course, as the instructor facilitates the discourse and provides direct instruction when required. (p. 5)

Simply put, teaching presence involves instructional design and organization, direct instruction, and the facilitation of discourse in the goal of establishing social presence and cognitive presence. Research suggests that teaching presence—both when designing and facilitating online courses—is a key component of an effective online course and a meaningful educational experience (Anderson et al., 2001; Garrison et al., 2000; Shea, 2006; Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, & Pelz, 2003; Shea, Li, & Pickett, 2006; Shea, Swan, & Pickett, 2005). However, I contend that how instructors establish their own social presence—not only through their instructional design, direct instruction, and facilitation of discourse—but also through their interactions with students, both within and outside of a learning management system as well as within and without of the discussion forums, is equally important (see Baker, 2010; Dennen, 2005; Mandermach, Gonzales, & Garrett, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Swan & Shih, 2005).

As an initial step into studying this larger phenomenon, this study explores how instructors establish their own social presence (i.e. "instructor social presence") through *facilitation* in asynchronous threaded discussions. While effective instructional design and direct instruction are key components of a meaningful and successful educational experience, these are components of a course that a growing number of faculty have little control over. At many universities, like the one where this study was conducted, faculty (especially adjuncts) teach courses designed by others (see Lowenthal, 2012; McCluskey, 2006; Patton, 2014). So while effective instructional design and direct instruction are critical, more and more faculty find themselves teaching courses they did not design and cannot modify (Lowenthal, 2012). Therefore, it is important to investigate the nature of instructor social presence in situations likes these where facilitating discourse might be the primary method to establish and maintain an instructor's own social presence.

The design or format of an online course can influence how faculty and students develop and perceive social presence. For instance, having online faculty meet his/her students face-to-face before a course begins can effect a student's perception of presence (Lowenthal, 2009). In addition, whether or not a student is part of a cohort can also influence how presence is developed and perceived (Lowenthal, 2009). However, past research on social presence and teaching presence has not focused enough on how details like these can influence someone's perceptions of presence (Lowenthal, 2009, 2012; Lowenthal, Lowenthal, White & 2009). This study set out to explore instructor social presence in completely online asynchronous courses where students never meet face-to-face and are not part of a cohort.

The issue of time also needs to be considered when researching presence. Time, similar to course format, can and should influence an instructor's presence (Tu & Corry, 2004). For instance, whether faculty and students spend 5 weeks, 8 weeks, or 16 weeks communicating online should influence how social presence is developed, maintained, and perceived (see Walther, 1996). However, often these details are glossed over in research on presence (Lowenthal, 2009, 2012; Lowenthal, Lowenthal, & White, 2009). More and more institutions are beginning to offer accelerated online courses (i.e., courses that are less than a traditional 10 week quarter or 15 week semester) (Ross-Gordon, 2011; Tiley, 2014; Wlodkowski, 2003). For instance, in the state of Colorado, public institutions like Colorado

State University, non-profit private institutions like Regis University, and for-profit institutions like the University of Phoenix all offer accelerated online courses. More research needs to be conducted on how social presence and teaching presence develop in accelerated online courses.

METHODS

To study the nature of instructor social presence in accelerated asynchronous online courses, three accelerated, 8-week long, online courses were randomly selected from a pool of online graduate teacher education courses offered in a school of education at a private nonprofit university. I will refer to this university as Private University (P.U.). Students in these courses were predominantly fulltime working adults who were working on obtaining a teaching license. Following the work of Anderson et al. (2001), one week of each course was purposefully identified for analysis.

Previous research on social presence tends to either try to identify observable indicators of social presence by analyzing course discussions—usually with only one method of analysis—or survey students about their perceptions of social presence (Lowenthal & Leech, 2009). Researchers of online learning, and specifically those who focus on social presence, need to spend more time employing multiple methods of analysis (Lowenthal & Leech, 2009). Henceforth, multiple methods of analysis were used to explore the data in an effort to get a detailed understanding and an accurate depiction of instructor social presence in accelerated courses.

A mixed methods exploratory methodology (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005) utilizing both quantitative and qualitative methods was used in this study. Exploratory methods have traditionally been related to qualitative methods and confirmatory methods to quantitative methods. However, Onwuegbuzie and Teddlie (2003) illustrate that both quantita-

tive and qualitative data analyses can be used to understand a phenomena. In order to explore instructor social presence effectively, online course discussions were analyzed with multiple forms of data analysis—specifically, word count, content analysis, and constant comparative analysis.

The course discussions from all three courses were compiled and downloaded from the learning management system. Names were changed to protect anonymity. The transcripts were initially explored with word count to get an overall sense of the data. Then the online discussions were analyzed using content analysis. Finally, constant comparative analysis was used to search for themes and trends that did not emerge with the previous forms of analysis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multiple methods of analysis were used to explore the data in an effort to develop a better understanding of how, if at all, instructors at P.U. establish their instructor social presence when teaching accelerated online courses. The first type of analysis used was a *type* of word count. Traditionally word count involves identifying deductively a word or words from the literature on a subject or inductively identifying from the data specific words that seem out of place or hold special meaning and then counting the frequency of these words (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012). Instead of counting the frequency of specific words, the total number of discussion postings and words posted by faculty and students were collected and compared. The numbers were collected and compiled from the discussion forums in the LMS for each course. Analyzing discussions posts in this manner was common in early research of online learning (Henri, 1992). However, over time researchers of online learning began to move beyond this basic level of inquiry. While simply counting words is limited in explanatory value, word count remains

a helpful way to *initially* explore data when used in conjunction with other methods of analysis (Lowenthal & Leech, 2009).

Word count revealed that students were responsible for 88.78% of the postings and 94.45% of the words posted in these accelerated online courses (see Table 1 and Table 2). While these results do not address the quality of the postings, they do illustrate the quantity or frequency of participation of students compared to their instructors in the online discussion forums. While faculty had a higher frequency of postings (averaging 11.37 per faculty member) compared to students (averaging 7.69 per student), faculty posted fewer words in the discussion forum (1464 words used by faculty compared to 24,912 used by students), which coupled with the overall larger number of student postings, resulted in an overall perception that the discussions were student ran and student focused. These results show that students posted more as a whole than the faculty in the courses in this sample. While there has been some research on accelerated or intensive courses—most of which has focused on nursing programs (see Cangelosi & Whitt, 2005; Driessnack et al., 2011; Lindsey, 2009, Penprase, 2012; Penprase & Koczara, 2009; Rico, Beall, & Davies, 2010; Rafferty &

Lindell, 2001; Seamon, 2004), there has been very little research conducted specifically on accelerated online courses. In fact, in one of the only books on accelerated teaching, Wlodkowski and Ginsberg (2010) are quick to point out that their accelerated teaching principles only address face-to-face courses. This paucity of research on accelerated online courses only leaves previous research on non-accelerated online courses as a point of comparison. As a whole the breakdown of participation in this sample is similar to previous research on non-accelerated online courses (see, Hara, Bonk, & Angeli, 2000; Picciano, 2002; Rourke et al., 1999).

While this initial descriptive data could be interpreted as suggesting that these discussions were student centered, it could equally suggest that the instructors were relatively inactive or absent from the discussions. Further analysis, however, is needed to better understand the instructors' role in these discussions. For instance, the variation in the frequency of postings could be due to multiple students asking the same question, which in turn leads to the instructor posting one answer for the entire course. Further, instructors each have their own style of facilitating discourse. Some instructors like to be heavily involved from the beginning

Table 1. Total Number of postings

	Courses			
	ED 501	**ED 502**	**ED503**	**Total**
Number of students	13	14	8	35
Number of student postings	109	103	57	269
Number of words in student postings	11228	11712	1972	24912
Number of faculty	1	1	1	3
Number of faculty postings	12	15	7	34
Number of words in faculty postings	1009	299	156	1464
Total number of participants	14	15	9	38
Total number of postings	121	118	64	303
Total number of words	12237	12011	2128	26376

Table 2. Frequency of postings as an entire case

	Total participants	% of Postings	% of Words
Student	35	88.78%	94.45%
Faculty	3	11.22%	5.55%
Total	38	100%	100%

of each week, others like to wait until a certain point in the discussions to begin participating, while others focus on simply summarizing the discussion at the end of the week (see Anderson, et al., 2001). More research, though, is needed to see how facilitation styles might change in accelerated courses. Further, additional research needs to be conducted about how the amount and content of instructors' postings influence students' behavior in online courses. There is a fine line between being involved in discussions and facilitating discussions versus leading or dominating discussions (Mazzolini & Maddison, 2003, 2007).

Classical content analysis was then used to explore the data in an effort to better understand the content of the instructors' postings. Classical content analysis is similar to constant comparison analysis. However, instead of creating themes, the focus of classical content analysis is to identify the frequency of specific codes in the data. This type of analysis is helpful when there are a lot of codes. Classical content analysis helps identify which codes are used most often and it is complimentary to constant comparative analysis (Onwuegbuzie, Leech, & Collins, 2012).

To conduct classical content analysis, the data are partitioned into small chunks, as in Table 3. Each chunk is labeled with a code, or descriptive label; due to the unique nature of online postings, descriptive coding was used to capture the type of posting. For example, "post chart here" and "using REPLY post bulleted list of points here" were both coded as "directions," whereas the following was coded as "questioning": "Do you think that parents often do not want to accept or acknowledge the problems that their children might have?"

As shown in Table 4, the codes are then counted to assess which concepts (represented by codes) are used most frequently; for example, "closing remarks" were used most frequently (see Table 5 for the complete list and frequency of the data coded).

Table 3. Example of chunking the data

Data Chunked	Code
Post chart here	Directions
Using REPLY post bulleted list of points here.	Directions
Using REPLY post your discussion here.	Directions
Since *there are eight students in the class,*	Number of students
our groups	Inclusion
will really be pairs.	Groups of two
Melaine,	Greeting
I need	Teacher request
an email address for you.	Contact information
Elden	Closing remark
Are you accustomed	Questioning
to *writing assignment in APA format*?	Writing style
If not, *I would like* you	Teacher request
to learn to use the APA format for citations and are references. Here is a	Writing style
wonderful website	Resource
that *makes that easy to do.*	Make easier
Here is a website that is a great tool for	Resource
helping you get your reference page correct	Make easier
according to APA. http://www.citationmachine.net/index.php	Writing style
Elden	Closing remark

Table 4. Results from a classical content analysis

Code	Number of Times Used
Closing remark	14
Directions	12
Positive feedback	11
Greeting	8
Questioning	6
Answering question	5
Elaboration / clarification	5
Writing style	3
Resource	3
Number of students	2
Inclusive language	2
Teacher request	2
Colorado law	2
Faculty seeking feedback	2
Empathy	2
Welcoming	1
Negotiation	1
Accommodation	1
Contact information	1

Classical content analysis revealed that "closing remarks" were used the most (14 times), followed by "Directions" (12 times), and "Positive feedback" (11 times). Table 4 illustrates the frequency of each descriptive code in the faculty postings. Greetings and closing remarks have been identified as an observable indicator of social presence (see Rourket et al., 1999). Working from the indicators of teaching presence developed by Anderson et al., (2001), giving directions is basically a form of instructional design and organization (i.e., Teaching Presence). The fact that faculty spent most of their time giving directions, giving positive feedback, questioning students, and answering questions is important. This suggests that faculty in this sample were focusing on direct instruction, instructional design, and facilitating discourse. This analysis also suggests that the faculty in this sample were spending very little time welcoming, negotiating, or accommodating students' needs online. In other words, they were spending more time on teaching presence than they were on social presence.

The final type of analysis conducted was Constant Comparative Analysis. Constant Comparative Analysis is useful when trying to explore and understand the big picture of a phenomenon like teaching online (Lowenthal & Leech, 2009). In constant comparative analysis, the researcher reads the data and partitions it into small chunks, as can be seen in Table 5. For example, the following post was chunked into six small chunks:

Hello everyone!

I love the educational environments you have created this week. Educators and students should always be the ones who create our schools. It is inspirational to see so many of you create from the schools you have been in or are currently in.

Thanks for your creativity!

Dr. Bob.

Table 5. Results from constant comparative analysis

Codes	Grouping of Codes
Closing remark	**Course logistics**
Directions	Directions
	Writing style
Positive feedback	Number of students
	Teacher request
Greeting	Colorado law
Questioning	**Greetings and Salutations**
	Welcoming
Answering question	Greeting
	Closing remark
Elaboration / clarification	**Teaching / Facilitation**
Writing style	Questioning
Resource	Answering questions
	Elaboration / clarification
Number of students	Positive feedback
Inclusive language	Resource
Teacher request	**Caring teacher**
Colorado law	Inclusive language
Faculty seeking feedback	Empathy
Empathy	Faculty seeking feedback
	Negotiation
Welcoming	Accommodation
Negotiation	Contact information
Accommodation	
Contact information	

Each chunk is then labeled with a code while constantly comparing new codes with previous ones. For instance, the previous example yielded the following six codes: (a) Greeting, (b) Positive feedback, (c) Elaboration / Clarification, (d) Positive feedback, (e) Positive feedback, and (f) Closing remark. The codes are then grouped together. Once the codes are grouped together, the researcher identifies a theme that has emerged from the data.

The most prevalent theme that emerged from the constant comparative analysis is the following:

While faculty at P.U. have to deal with day to day course logistics, such as directions on how to complete assignments and course expectations, they play more of a role as a facilitator through the use of questioning, elaborating/clarifying, and giving positive feedback than as a instructor or giver of knowledge.

All three types of analysis—the word count, the classical content analysis, and the constant comparative analysis—offered insight into how these instructors communicated online and the degree to which they strived to establish their own instructor social presence in the online course discussions. While all three types of analysis offered a different perspective or glimpse of the truth space, classical content analysis and constant comparative analysis did a better job of highlighting how these faculty communicated online. These two types of analysis illustrate that faculty in this sample spent some time establishing their own social presence. For example, greetings, positive feedback, questioning are all examples of social presence (Rourke et al., 1999). So even though these instructors are teaching accelerated 8-week courses designed by others, they show some evidence that even in an accelerated term faculty can begin to establish their own social presence. However, at the same time, they appear to be focused more on teaching presence and the goal of teaching students the content in a timely manner. I caution the reader from generalizing too much from these findings.

To date researchers have not identified what the appropriate amount of social presence is in an online course—let alone accelerated online courses. Further, research on accelerated learning (which predominantly focuses on face-to-face courses) suggests that a different type of student takes accelerated online courses as well that a different type of instructor might enjoy teaching this intense format. Therefore, more research is needed to support these findings.

Traditionally instructors' establish instructor social presence in online course discussion forums. Thus, it is important, significant, and commonplace to explore faculty behavior in online discussion forums. But instructors also establish their social presence in other ways (e.g., one-on-one emails and feedback on assignments) (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014). Therefore, one limitation of this study is the fact that it focused only on course discussions in three courses. Additional weeks as well as additional course sections need to be analyzed to support the findings of this study. Also more research needs to be done to triangulate the results in this study with other things such as student perceptions of online faculty as well as instructors' perceptions of their own social presence.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Past research on presence in the online classroom has predominantly focused on social presence. The majority of this research has specifically focused on students' perceptions of social presence within a community of inquiry (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014; Lowenthal, 2009, 2012). To date, very little research has focused on instructor social presence or how social presence is established in accelerated online courses.

Researchers have questioned for years whether or not there is a right amount of social presence; in other words, they have questioned whether there might be a tipping point in which there might

be too much social presence (Lowenthal, 2012). The instructors in this study spent very little of their time intentionally establishing and maintain social presence in the online discussions. Instead, they focused more of their efforts, at least in the online discussion forums, on teaching presence and specifically on helping students successfully complete the course. It is impossible to discern from the data collected in this study whether or not this was an intentional move on the instructors or not. Previous research on accelerated programs suggests that students taking accelerated online courses tend to be non-traditional students, with lots of life experience, focused on learning skills that they can immediately apply in their day-to-day life. It is possible that these students care less about social presence than traditional students. However, at the same time, research on students in face-to-face accelerated programs does suggest that student's in these programs still want to build a relationship with their instructors and for their instructors to know who they are as students (Rico, Beal, & Davies, 2010); it is reasonable to suspect that students in accelerated online programs feel the same way. However, additional research needs to be conducted to confirm or deny this.

Additional research also needs to be conducted on whether or not students need for social presence is changing as they become more comfortable communicating online and taking online courses. It could be that as students get further along in their program of study online, they feel less of a need to spend time establishing a connection with their peers—especially in non-cohort-based programs where students might not see the relationships with other classmates persisting over time.

CONCLUSION

Three courses were randomly selected to explore the degree to which instructors establish their own instructor social presence in threaded discussions in accelerated fully online courses. Results suggest that while instructors did make attempts at

establishing instructor social presence, most of their efforts focused on aspects of teaching presence such as instructional design and facilitating discourse. While the main purpose of this study was to investigate instructor social presence in accelerated online courses, a secondary purpose was to test a mixed methods approach of studying online discussions. Thus, the scholarly significance of this study lies not only in its investigation of an often overlooked area of study (i.e., instructor's social presence in accelerated online courses) but also and arguably more importantly in outlying a way in which other faculty can use word count, content analysis (whether with predefined codes or having the codes emerge from the discussions), and constant comparative analysis to study online discussions. Through using mixed method approaches of study, researchers can begin to get a better idea of what happens in online courses of all shapes and sizes.

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KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

Accelerated Online Courses: Formal for-credit online courses offered in a compressed format (e.g., a 16-week semester course is offered in an abbreviated 8-week format).

Asynchronous Threaded Discussions: Online discussions that take place within a learning management system over time (e.g., over a given week).

Community of Inquiry: A framework that posits that a meaningful educational experience consists of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence.

Instructor Social Presence: The way an instructor establishes oneself as a "real" person and "there" using communication media while teaching.

Mixed Methods Research: Research that employs quantitative and qualitative approaches to study a problem or phenomena.

Social Presence: Establishing oneself as "real" and "there" using a communication medium.

Teaching Presence: The design and facilitation of social and cognitive processes toward an educational goal.