Social Presence in Online Education: The Instructor’s Point-of View

Kristi Preisman
Peru State College
United States
kpreisman@peru.edu

As our means of education has shifted from face-to-face learning to various online and flexible learning opportunities, so has our understanding of social presence. According to Oztok & Brett’s (2011) review of research, social presence is historically viewed through the eyes of the student learner and/or community of learners with a specific focus on strategies to create/improve social presence in the online setting. This research study takes a unique look at social presence in online education from the eyes of the instructor. This self-study allows the researcher/instructor to critically question the assertions of social presence research from the vantage point of the instructor. There is a dissonance that exists regarding online education. Research demonstrates that many people take online courses because it allows them the freedom and flexibility to work on their own, yet instructors are pushed to create a sense of community through social presence. Instructors (at the researcher/instructor’s institution, in particular) are directed to create a greater sense of online presence in their courses, yet there is little professional or financial support given to adhere to these expectations.

For three semesters, the researcher/instructor has taught two sections of a graduate assessment course. Each semester, the researcher randomly selected one of the two courses to create a greater sense of online presence through the addition of instructor videos, a personalized grading tool (Screenr), and consistent responses to student comments on the discussion board. These actions were in addition to weekly voice-over PowerPoints, the use of SKYPE, and less than 24-hour response time to student emails and phone calls. Data was/is collected through emails, discussion board postings, student grades, instructor evaluations and a personal journal. Data analysis is currently being completed in order to discover how the efforts to create a greater sense of social presence impact the course in general (student attitude, grades, dependence upon instructor, evaluations, etc.). This research strives to critically analyze the data and the researcher/instructor’s involvement in creating social presence to determine if efforts and tools used are a worthwhile investment of time and energy.