Social Presence And Cultural Competence In The Online Learning Environment (OLE): A Review Of Literature

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ABSTRACT

In recent years growth in new technology has altered the way in which students interact with both teachers and classmates. Despite the high flexibility in online learning, Allen & Seaman (2011) explained that there is a higher dropout rate for online students as compared to a traditional classroom setting. It was found that there is lack of teacher-immediacy, teacher presence, and student interaction with teachers that may cause the high attrition rates (Martin et al., 2012). One university college of nursing has been able to combat this problem by introducing a follow-up process into the curriculum, supporting how faculty interact with each other and with their students.

Keywords: Social Presence; Online Learning; Education

PURPOSE

The objective of this article is to examine the relationship and importance of cultural competence and social presence in the Online Learning Environment (OLE), and to explore methods used by scholar-practitioners to promote educational opportunities. While much research has been conducted on these variables, the relationship between cultural competence and social presence in the OLE is under-represented in literature and research.

METHOD

An exhaustive search for peer reviewed articles published between 2011 and 2015 was conducted using the following databases: CINAHL, Science Direct, MEDLINE, and EBSCO. A base research was conducted using keywords "social presence" and "online learning," which retrieved 5,070 peer-reviewed articles. Another base research using the keywords "cultural competence" and "online learning" returned 23 peer-reviewed articles. For this study eight peer-reviewed articles, including all of the key words directly related to the current study's purposes, were retrieved.

Social Presence and Cultural Competence

Social presence in online education refers to the level or degree of personal connectedness of students in the classes (Sung & Mayer, 2012). According to Sung & Mayer (2012), social presence can be affected by five factors: social respect, social sharing, open mindedness, social identity, and intimacy. The more students perceive that they have the ability to receive timely feedback, share information, share their own beliefs, express positive responses, have an identity, and share personal experiences, the stronger they perceive social presence (Sung & Mayer, 2012). This makes a student feel socially secure and paves the way for an environment where the student feels safe to express his/her ideas. According to Biocca, Harms, and Burgoon (2011), social presence also refers to the degree that people in an online community can feel the presence of others based on their personal interactions with them.

On the other hand, cultural competence is defined by the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN) as the attitudes, knowledge, and skills necessary for providing quality care to diverse populations (2008). The AACN

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(2008) has long advocated for the need to integrate cultural competence in baccalaureate nursing education. This is to ensure an elimination of health disparities and to improve patient-centered care, which "identifies, respects and addresses differences in patients' values, preferences and expressed needs" (AACN, 2008).

Importance and Applicability of Social Presence and Cultural Competency

Online learning has grown remarkably and significantly for the past few years and has already become an integral part of many colleges' and universities' overall strategy (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Capra, 2011). According to Allen and Seaman, a recent report prepared by the Sloan Consortium showed that at least 6.1 million students are learning from an online course. Among higher education students, 31% of them have experienced at least one course in an online environment. The explosive growth may have triggered many opportunities, but high dropout rates undermine the effectiveness of these online programs (Boston, Ice, & Gibson, 2011). Several studies assert that the lack of social presence as well as teacher presence in the online learning environments, compared to traditional learning environments, is the main reason for the high attrition rate among online students (Bolinger & Inan, 2012; Hart, 2012). Several studies assessed the importance of social presence for online learning (Hart, 2011; Zhan & Mei, 2013).

Literature Review

A quantitative and qualitative study conducted by Zhan and Mei (2013) assessed the effects of both academic self-concept and social presence on student achievement and satisfaction. The researchers assessed these constructs in both versions of the same course: online and traditional face-to-face versions. From a convenience sample of 257 undergraduate students, the researchers found that both academic self-concept and social presence can be influential in students' achievement and satisfaction, but one is more important that the other. Results indicated that online students tend to perceive lower social presence than face-to-face students, even though both types of students have an equal degree of academic self-concept. Moreover, it was found that the effect of social presence is more significant among online students than traditional students (Zhan & Mei, 2013).

According to Hart (2011), online students who manage to thrive and persist in their online courses are the ones who perceive a strong social presence and a sense of connectedness. Students who feel that there is a lack of instructor and social presence are likely to feel demotivated to study, so they are more likely to withdraw from the course or fail (Capra, 2011). Zhan and Mei (2013) and Hart (2011) both found that social presence influenced the satisfaction levels of online students, while Leong (2011) found that social presence is not directly related to student satisfaction, but rather, the relationship is mediated by cognitive absorption. Moreover, Leong (2011) determined that the perceptions of social presence are largely shaped by individual students' interest in their online courses. Jokismovic, Gasevic, Kovanovic, Riecke, and Hatala (2015) in particular, found that social presence in online discussions has a significant and positive relationship with the academic performance of the students. The cited researchers specifically focused on the performance of students in a master's level of computer science online course and found that indicators of social presence can serve as effective early detection of students at risk of failing a course and as explanation into why certain students are lagging behind (Jokismovic et al, 2015). Zhao, Sullivan, and Mellenius (2013) evaluated the effects of social presence on the use of asynchronous computer conferencing in instruction and found that social presence can improve learning in such a setting. Specifically, they found that social presence can improve learning by realizing collaboration with the establishment of a warm and collegial learning community. Under such community, learners are encouraged to participate and interact with one another.

Kim, Kwon, and Cho (2011) asserted that several factors can influence online learning in higher education, especially when collaborative and communicative discourse are the key ingredients in attaining knowledge. Social presence should be nurtured and maintained in online higher education because it can facilitate discourse. In assessing the relationships of certain demographic variables and social presence, Kim, Kwon and Cho (2011) found that a student's gender, online learning experience, as well as work status do not affect their perceptions of social presence. The same demographic variables also do not influence the students' satisfaction with their online courses. On the other hand, they found that media integration and an individual instructor's quality of teaching shapes students' perceptions of social presence and their satisfaction with their online courses. Lastly, interactivity among students affects their perceptions of social presence, but not their satisfaction with the online course (Kim, Kwon & Cho, 2011).

Not all studies agree, however, that social presence is lacking in online classrooms when measured in terms of students' perceptions. Bowers and Kumar (2015) compared the perceptions of social presence among students from an online class with students from a traditional class. It is interesting to note that Bowers and Kumar (2015) found students perceived stronger teacher and social presences in the online classroom as compared to those enrolled in a traditional class. There is also a study that claimed social presence is not as important as the existing literature established it to be. Giesbers, Rienties, Tempelaar, and Gijselaers (2014) however, claimed that social presence does not always lead to better learning. The cited researchers found that social presence through web video-conferencing does not have an automatic positive effect on the students' academic performance. They compared the experiences of 147 students who used discussion forums and 256 students who used both forums and web-videoconferencing. The results showed that social presence only improved the clarity of goals and tasks of the students who used this but did not improved their learning experiences.

Enhancing Social Presence in the Online Learning Environment (OLE)

Some studies, recognizing the problem, presented solutions regarding how instructors or online courses can improve levels of social presence. Borup, West, and Graham (2012), in particular, shared that emerging video technologies may offer significant help in enhancing social presence. The researchers interviewed students from three difference courses using varying video-based instructional strategies. Most of the student participants reported that video-based communication helped them perceive that their teachers are real and accessible, improving their perceptions of social presence. Plante and Asselin (2014), in their article "Best Practices for Creating Social Presence and Caring Behaviors Online," found that what was more important than the use of communication-enhancing technologies was the need for online learning environments to encompass caring behaviors, because this would greatly improve social presence. Using a literature review analysis of 11 articles, the researchers found that instructors who can exhibit respectful and encouraging attitudes toward their students not only foster but improve social presence. Being caring online can also beget students' sense of caring.

The university college of nursing in this study has a program which provides a service to assist every student in achieving their goals and reaching their dreams. This program demonstrates concern, interest and love for the student and the investment of attention, small online class sizes, and the belief and passion for creating extraordinary nurses for the future. Faculty are concerned with the state of mind and the overall well-being of their students and others. The program further promotes empathy to truly be concerned with students' achieving their goals and objectives. All faculty and leadership are provided with training prior to assisting the students with this program. The goals of this program are to assist the student in being successful in in their studies, to achieve their goals, and to pass their licensing examination. It was found that this approach also increases retention and graduation rates by helping the students exceed national exam pass rates while maintaining and exceeding the student and program outcomes (Chamberlain College of Nursing, 2015).   Alumni and employer expectations are also exceeded creating what are deemed by the college as "extraordinary nurses."

Smith and Flaherty (2013) specifically assessed the factors that can increase the perception of social presence in an online MBA program. Gathering data from 26 of the MBA program's students as well as recent graduates, the cited researchers found that there are three main factors that can improve social presence factors: opportunities for students to interact with their faculty, whether formally and informally is one. Another is having occasional face-to-face meetings throughout the online segment of the program. These meetings can lead to stronger group cohesion and improve academic performance of the students. Lastly, non-course related, synchronous online interactions can also improve perceptions of social presence (Smith & Flaherty, 2013). On the other hand, Medeiros, Gomes, Amorim, and Medeiros (2013) suggested redesigning collaboration tools so that social presence can be improved. They specially claimed that by extending social interactions to external collaboration tools, social presence can be promoted and learning experiences can be improved (Medeiros et al, 2013).

CONCLUSION

Faculty in the online learning environment (OLE) are faced with a challenge, not only to increase social presence, but to ensure that students in their classes will become culturally competent practitioners. To meet this demand, nursing faculty are using various online tools, including communication, emails, video / audio recordings, to

enhance individual students' learning experiences. This review of the literature examined the various ways in which online faculty can enhance social presence and cultural competence in the OLE. The results from this study could also help educational institutions develop programs to address culturally-based issues that may be affecting students' overall success in learning.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Dr. Tracey "T." Soper: I am honored and delighted to make your acquaintance. I am the Subject Matter Expert (SME) for NR222, health and wellness nursing course. Teaching online is my professional passion. I have a blessed life and desire to share my nursing knowledge and wordily wisdom with others to help them reach their dreams. I earned a Doctorate of Education (EdD) degree specializing in curriculum design and special instruction, along with a supporting master's degree in nursing education. I am currently pursuing a Doctorate of Nursing Practice (DNP) degree as I have an insatiable thirst for knowledge. My 30-year nursing career encompasses critical care, emergency, informatics and education in nursing. My roles have varied from hospital implementation of electronic medical record systems to being a clinical nurse specialist in Washington State to opening the first Bachelor of Science in Nursing (BSN) program in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia. Being a computer consultant opened my world to the on line nursing arena. I have experience as a college simulation coordinator with a 100 percent NCLEX pass rate.   In the administration capacity, I have been the director of education for both large and small hospitals and worked as an assistant dean in a nursing program. Online teaching and learning is by far my favorite role. I recently had the pleasure to be selected to experience a fully funded nursing mission to an island off the east coast of Africa in an effort to elevate nursing instruction in that underserved part of the world. This experience has made a lasting impression reminding me to pay it forward.

My spouse and I have two Goldendoodles, Gingy and Prancer. We take the dogs everywhere and have great fun. As a vegan and avid walker I practice what I teach in NR222 - Health and Wellness. Ask the dogs; we walk rain or shine. The dogs even have rain coats and boots.

Thank you for this opportunity to spend time with you. Again, I am so excited and if I can do anything to help you please do not hesitate to ask. Feel free to email me at tsoper@chamberlain.edu or call me at 904-463-5437. My cell is a Florida number though I am a Texan and live in the Mountain Time Zone.

Eme Ukot, DNP, MBA, MSN, RN is a lecturer who has taught at all levels on nursing both on campus and online. She has been in healthcare since 1994, and she is a published author who has presented at various international and national conferences. Dr. Ukot's research interests include simulations, reflective journaling, and the use of technology in nursing education. She is also a member of Sigma Theta Tau and several professional national and international organizations.

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