



The Influence of Virtual Education on Classroom Culture

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INTRODUCTION

Social distancing has caused educators to rely on all types of media to connect and extend social interactions, in turn, transforming cultural norms and social behaviors (Matei and Ball-Rokeach, 2001). During the Fall 2020 Semester, the author taught two undergraduate courses in communication, fully online and synchronous. The classes met 3 days a week for 14 weeks, and each meeting lasted 50 min. While the course included substantive course content, the author quickly realized during the first week of classes that encouraging and developing a virtual classroom culture was as important since students had significantly fewer opportunities to create and build relationships with each other before, during, and after class meetings. According to Nesson and Nesson (2008), “Simple interactions such as conversations in the minutes before class begins and after it wraps up, walks from one class to the next, and chance meetings in the library and student center are frequently the basis for forming new relationships and sustaining existing ones” (p. 278). Moreover, changes in norms and behaviors were evident the first week when a student asked about a dress code for class meetings, a requirement in other classes. Fewer cliques existed among students perhaps due to an absence of desks, seating arrangements, and chatter that naturally occurs in a physical space.

Whereas a traditional class environment relies on verbal and nonverbal communication to create and foster cultural norms, behaviors, practices, and beliefs, virtual learning disrupts the process since technology changes an individual’s communication behaviors. It is important to develop social presence in virtual education courses through: 1) synchronous teaching and learning, and 2) self-disclosure for fostering student engagement, creating relationships, and building supportive class communities. This article presents literature about virtual education prior to Covid-19, as well as the author’s reflections based on observations and personal experiences teaching 35 undergraduate students in two communication courses at the University of Indianapolis during the Fall 2020 Semester.

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BODY

Social Presence

Virtual education or computer-mediated communication (CMC) changes the way professors and students interact and develop relationships, are influenced by others, and manage reduced social cues (Sherblom, 2010). According to Song et al. (2019), the classroom setting is a social environment in which individuals communicate with each other; however, “. . .relationship building could be somewhat difficult in online classes because social cues and nonverbal information are limited (p. 452).” Building relationships requires social presence or, “. . .the sense of “being together with another,” (Biocca et al., 2003, p. 459). Short et al. (1976) introduced the concept of social presence in 1976, rooted in social psychology of interpersonal communication, and described social presence as, “. . .the degree to which the communication medium facilitates social-emotional communication and

allows one to experience and understand the other person and interpersonal relationship” (as seen in Sherblom, 2010, p. 500). Since its conception, scholars have broadened the definition of social presence to include mediated environments and interactions between people and things. Researchers have debated about the degree of influence media have played on social presence, as well as how best to explain and distinguish between social presence theories and methods and degrees of measurements (e.g., state of mind vs. behavior).

Garrison et al. (2000), defined social presence as, socio-emotional support and interaction and “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as “real” people (i.e., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used,” (p. 94). The scholars stated that a successful and productive educational experience is rooted in a Community of Inquiry Model that consists of: cognitive presence (exploration), social presence (group cohesion, open communication), and teaching presence (instruction, building understanding). Specifically, social presence can positively impact learning satisfaction and enable a sense of community (Rovai, 2002; Sung and Mayer, 2012). Thus, a supportive CMC culture demonstrates social usefulness in which students can learn from professors and peers (Flanagin, 2005 as seen in; Sherblom, 2010).

Social presence is an integral part of developing a positive online culture, which is influenced by conversations, activities, collaboration, familiarity and motivation among participants. Moreover, social presence can increase student participation and interaction, which would likely enhance student motivation (Edwards et al., 2007). Still, data suggest that CMC may lessen opportunities for social exchanges and student connection with peers and faculty and increases alienation and isolation, thus, impacting social presence. (Bejerano, 2008; Ho and McLeod, 2008). During synchronous meetings in the author’s courses, students experienced fewer social exchanges and increased anonymity that hindered the development of relationships and building a dynamic class community. As a cohort, they confronted challenges such as exchanging information to form social norms, behaviors, common beliefs, ideas, and values. Creating a cohesive class community was more difficult due to increased distractions that drew student attention away from class discussions. For example, during a class meeting on Zoom, one student shared his screen to show the class a first draft of an upcoming assignment. Instead of displaying the paper, however, the class observed him playing a video game in which several characters were battling armed enemies with weapons and speed. After several seconds, and seemingly embarrassed, the student realized his faux pas and apologized repeatedly. It is unlikely the student would have played the video game in earnest in a traditional classroom setting. This example illustrates how developing social presence and, thereby, building a unified class culture may be more difficult and affect interactions between people and relational development.

A study by Kaufmann et al. (2016) suggests the onus is on educators to create a supportive online environment by being available, positive, and sympathetic. And a compassionate CMC

culture—one that values kindness and respect—is vital to attain an inclusive class community (Vess, 2005; Waldvogel, 2007). There are a number of ways teachers can develop and build social presence that include holding face-to-face class meetings and understanding the communication medium that is used (Garrison et al., 2000). First, virtual education that is synchronous is vital to improve social presence and develop an inclusive class culture. Although relationship development in asynchronous CMC is valuable, it is more challenging to attain compared to face-to-face experiences because asynchronous learning is primarily text-based (Akcaoglu and Lee, 2018). A traditional classroom setting provides a structured space that encourages socialization and communication; social cues and nonverbal information are open. Culture is expressed in the meanings co-constructed by its participants (Dutta, 2009). Next, it is important to understand CMC—synchronous and asynchronous. Scholars have described a positive virtual classroom environment as “...perceived connection to, rapport for, or affinity with teacher and students...” (Kaufmann et al., 2016, p. 318). Research suggests that virtual education presents a time–place shift that decreases communication and socialization (Caplan 2003; Caplan and High, 2006; Sherblom, 2010). Students have more control over their communication styles through strategically-constructed CMC messages. “...people are likely to select positive information about themselves to reveal to other people benefiting the limited cues available online...” (Song et al., 2019, p. 449). Moreover, asynchronous CMC greatly reduces opportunities for students to communicate and socialize with peers, whereas synchronous CMC offers space to develop social presence. Hence, developing a virtual class culture is less effortful when teaching synchronously.

Self-Disclosure

Social presence influences self-disclosure, which effects relational development. Self-disclosure may reduce uncertainty and ambiguity in communication and increase the likelihood of building positive relationships. As illustrated by the Social Penetration Theory, self-disclosure and intimacy are primary factors in relationship development. Song et al. (2019) stated, “Research has consistently supported the strong link, demonstrating that disclosure of personally relevant information promotes intimacy” (p. 453). For example, the author designated one class meeting to engage students in a political and social discussion about racial justice and the black lives matter (BLM) movement. The professor acknowledged the sensitivity of topics and explained to students that participating included active listening as much as sharing thoughts, experiences, and opinions with others. A student moderator led peers in a conversation that consisted of an equal number of black and white students. While many individuals spoke before the group, others felt more comfortable sending messages and questions to the moderator via a private chat box. Students shared personal anecdotes about their lives. For example, a black student shared advice from his mother that included never wearing a hoodie when driving or walking into a store, and always raising both hands if pulled over by a police officer to protect himself.

Other students shared personal experiences about colorism, racial profiling, and stereotypes on campus. White students disclosed sympathies and acknowledged biases of peers' experiences. Facilitating a discussion about the BLM movement opened the door to larger conversations about racial issues in America, the Tokenistic Fallacy (Desmond and Emirbayer, 2009), and similarities among all students. Additionally, students had space to disclose personally relevant information to promote intimacy and relationship development.

Next, there is a positive correlation between self-disclosure and increased relationship satisfaction, which may lead students to feel more connected to teachers (Song et al., 2019). Research suggests that educators who disclose information about themselves are more likely to enhance students' feeling of social presence, thereby, cultivating supportive relationships with students:

“. . . students in online classes have limited information about their teacher. . . even basic information about their teacher such as sex, ethnicity, and physical appearance is rarely shared with students. . . students have a desire to want to know about their teacher. . . Given that learning about people's basic information is one of the first steps in relationship building, lack of knowledge about their teacher in online classes will be likely to negatively affect teacher-student relationship... findings demonstrate that teacher self-disclosure affects social presence of a teacher, which in turn influences teacher-student relationship satisfaction. . . self-disclosure is an important factor that enhances social presence in an online learning environment. . .”—(Song, et al., 2019, p. 453).

In the absence of basic information, students may use mediated forms of communication such as Google, LinkedIn, Facebook, and/or Twitter to gain knowledge about teachers. “In an online learning environment, where limited information about a teacher is available, teacher self-disclosure becomes an important immediacy behavior” (Song et al., 2019, p. 449). Immediacy behavior, or closeness, builds supportive relationships through verbal and nonverbal communication behaviors. Behaviors may include teachers calling students by

name, giving and receiving feedback, and eye contact. Due to the physical distance in CMC, immediacy behavior can reduce the mental distance between individuals and, in turn, increase student motivation and attendance, promote interpersonal communication, and increase trust between teachers and students (Roca, 2007).

CONCLUSION

Key Takeaways

College is a place where culture is created, both intentionally and unintentionally. A campus makes students aware they are part of a larger community and working with peers toward similar goals (Nesson and Nesson, 2008). Traditional face-to-face classrooms can foster positive and inclusive learning cultures, observe open communication, and provide opportunities for students to connect with peers before, during, and after class meetings. In-class activities, projects, and discussions require students to actively engage, and participation is a great predictor of academic and social success. Over the course of a semester, conversations make up a great deal of one's personal knowledge base, and students build relationships that outlive the duration of the course. Similar to traditional face-to-face education, virtual education can create and build classroom culture—one in which a more relaxed dress code becomes normal and lack of physical space reduces cliquish behaviors. More importantly, virtual education that is synchronous can provide space to develop social presence and promote self-disclosure to enhance positive, supportive classroom cultures.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

KG wrote and conducted all research for the article, as well as interviewed participants. She is the sole author.

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