

Deltak

WHERE ACADEMICS AND INNOVATION CONVERGE

THE EVOLUTION OF ONLINE LEARNING:

Incorporating Social Presence to Create Engaging Online Learning Experiences

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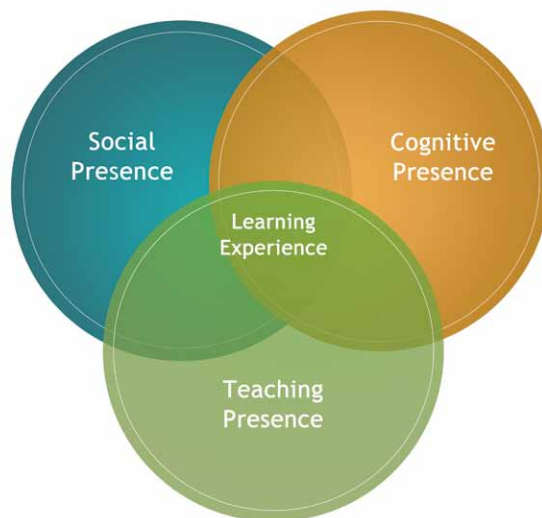
Online learning in higher education has reached an inflection point. There are now over 4.6 million students taking online classes and 1 in 4 higher education students now take at least one course onlineⁱ. As we will explore in a subsequent paper, schools are increasingly moving to blended learning experiences. The walls between online learning and the traditional residential experience are coming down. In some ways, even the findings of the somewhat contentious 2009 DOE meta-analysis are outmodedⁱⁱ. The question should no longer be whether online education is credible or comparable to traditional instruction; the real question is - how can we best employ online learning, and what features of the online experience contribute to outstanding learning outcomes?

If we scan the landscape of online learning in higher education, we'll see that the experience looks more similar than different, and frankly, it hasn't changed all that much since 1996. Many courses are still largely text-based resources, discussion forums, quizzes, and the occasional media object. Yet we know that people learn best when they have an opportunity to interact with content, instructors, and fellow learners, when there's an authentic problem that activates and situates the new knowledge, and when they have a chance to apply new skills and reflect upon their learning. New models and innovations are emerging that will result in more powerful and engaging instruction that should translate into improved learning outcomes and retention.

A RESEARCH-BASED MODEL FOR DESIGNING ENGAGING ONLINE LEARNING EXPERIENCES

A recent paperⁱⁱⁱ by Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, and Swan presented some compelling evidence for the link between particular design features in the online learning experience and student engagement and retention. In their paper, they examine the Community of Inquiry framework developed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer^{iv} which describes three related components of the online learning experience: Teaching Presence, Social Presence, and Cognitive Presence. (see Figure No. 1)

Figure No. 1
Community of Inquiry Framework



Social presence is “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study)^v, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Categories for this component include affective responses, cohesive responses, and interactive responses^{vi}.

Teaching Presence is the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001). Categories for this component include instructional (course) design and organization, facilitating discourse, and direct instruction (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Arbaugh, 2008).

Cognitive Presence is the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2001). Cognitive presence is defined by the Practical Inquiry model, which examines critical thinking, and integrates discourse and reflection (Swan, Richardson, Ice, Garrison, Cleveland-Innes, & Arbaugh, 2008).

Each of these three ‘presences’ has design implications for the online learning experience.

- Simply put, social presence necessitates that students have a way to establish their personal identities and to interact with other students (e.g., profiles, forums, collaborative projects)
- Teaching presence relates not only to the instructional design, but to the instructor’s strategies for facilitating discussion and interaction, providing feedback, etc.
- Cognitive presence is the ‘extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through reflection and discourse.’

HOW CAN THE COI FRAMEWORK INFORM ONLINE LEARNING DESIGN?

Boston and his colleagues analyzed over 28,000 student records and survey data to examine the relationship between COI indicators and re-enrollment (i.e., retention). The survey items covered all three presences (social, teaching, and cognitive). Interestingly, two social presence items had the strongest correlation to retention. In particular:

- Responses to COI item #16 (Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction) accounted for over 18% of the variance associated with whether a student returned to studies in the semester subsequent to completing the survey.
- Two of the lowest responses (on a 5 point Likert scale) to survey items were on questions relating to social presence:
 - Question 14: Getting to know other course participants gave me a sense of belonging in the course (Mean response = 3.94)
 - Question 15: I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants (Mean response = 4.01)

BUILDING SOCIAL PRESENCE INTO ONLINE LEARNING

The implications of the research above combined with the explosion of Facebook and other forms of social media provide a ripe opportunity for exploring how we might harness social learning tools productively in our courses and programs. Discussion forums and instructor videos/podcasts are a good starting point, but they stop short of facilitating the formation and expression of rich instructor and student digital identities and providing an open set of supports for collaboration. The research suggests that to truly establish and project social presence, learners need the capacity for affective expression, open communication and group cohesion (Boston, Diaz, Gibson, Ice, Richardson, & Swan, 2009).

Therefore, while discussion boards have their place in the learning ecosystem, they tend not to facilitate the relationship building and true collaboration that satisfies the definition of social presence.

This article will profile three efforts to enhance social presence in courses, including:

1. A social learning community - Creighton University
2. Mixable - a tool developed by ITaP (Information Technology at Purdue) Studio
3. Course and program video-based communities - Kaltura MediaSpace™

A SOCIAL LEARNING/COMMUNITY TOOL FOR A PROGRAM

Deltak recently collaborated with Creighton University to develop a social learning/community site to support the Master’s in Healthcare Ethics and Doctor of Education and Leadership programs. We constructed the community using an open-source social networking tool.

All students and faculty in the program are members of the community and have access to global and group blogs, resources, files, videos, photo albums, and conversations (a feature similar to Twitter feeds). The community can be used for course-specific and program-

wide purposes and provides a rich complement to the interactions in the Learning Management System (LMS). In particular it provides a venue for interaction and collaboration that can be structured by the community members rather than pre-constructed in the course. This has led to students taking more ownership over the content and forging new relationships with fellow learners and faculty. (see Figure No.2)

Figure No.2



For anyone who's used Facebook or similar social network tools, there's something fundamentally different between these approaches and the traditional discussion thread. You get a sense of who people are. Or, as Boston and his colleaguesⁱⁱⁱ put it:

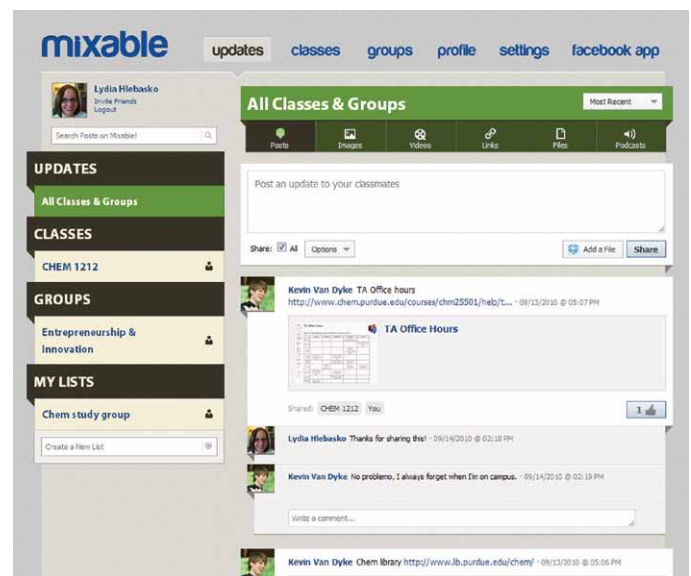
“Social presence is described as the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as well as their ability to perceive other learners as ‘real people’^{vii}. The three main factors that allow for the effective projection and establishment of social presence are affective expression, open communication and group cohesion. Affective expression is the ability of online learners to project themselves through... humor, and other expressions of emotion and values. Open communication refers to the provision of a risk-free learning climate in which participants trust one another enough to reveal themselves. Group cohesion refers to the development of a group identity and the ability of participants in the learning community to collaborate meaningfully.”

MIXABLE – HARNESSING FACEBOOK™, TWITTER™ AND DROPBOX™ TO FOSTER LEARNING COMMUNITIES

Purdue University, another Deltak partner, is taking a different approach to fostering a social learning environment. The ITaP (Information Technology at Purdue) Studio has created a suite of projects designed to leverage technology for online and face-to-face learning modalities. Mixable, one such tool, harnesses popular tools like Facebook, Twitter, and Dropbox and allows students to connect with fellow learners and share resources using their existing Facebook, Twitter, and Dropbox accounts. Mixable builds connections by blending the student's course enrollment information with their network of friends that already exist on Facebook.

One benefit of using tools like Mixable is that learning relationships are developed at the program level (i.e., beyond the course) and can persist after the term or even after graduation. (see Figure No.3)

Figure No.3



KALTURA MEDIASPACE™ – A PRIVATE VIDEO COMMUNITY

Deltak has also partnered with Kaltura, a video streaming solution, to create course and program sites that allow (depending upon how the site is configured) students

and faculty to upload and view videos directly from their desktop, laptop, or mobile device. (see Figure No.4) Unlike sites like YouTube™ or Vimeo™, Kaltura MediaSpace™ makes it possible to restrict the ability to upload content to a set of users (e.g., students and faculty). A course or program, with Kaltura MediaSpace™ integrated into the learning management system, provides yet another way to heighten social presence. Students can upload video reflections; instructors might upload topic introductions.

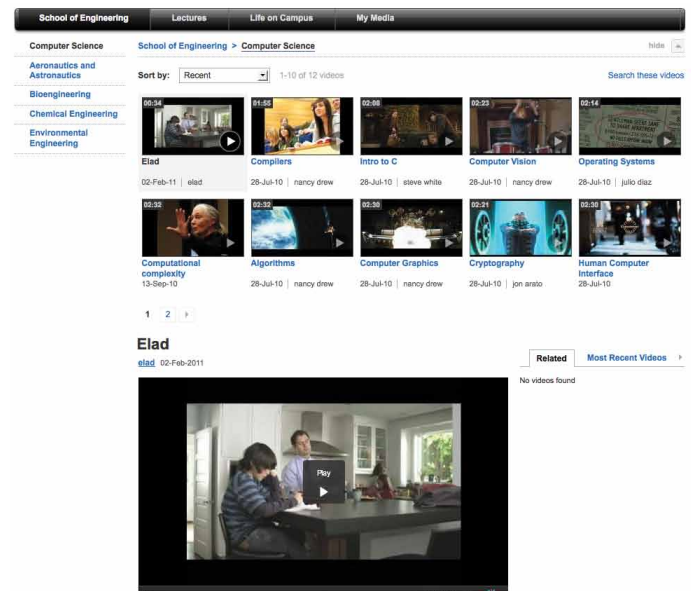
Deltak has also used another tool, Voicethread, to facilitate collaboration via video, voice and text. Voicethread allows users to asynchronously contribute their comments and feedback on an image, document, or video. Voicethread has a very manageable learning curve for students and faculty, and we've found it to be a very powerful solution for achieving the benefits of collaboration while maintaining the 'anytime/anywhere' preference of online learners.

In closing, today's learning environments need to facilitate connections and collaboration at the course, program and institutional level. Today's learners bring sophisticated skills in the creation and maintenance of digital identities and expect that they'll be able to collaborate in the learning environment much as they do in work and in life. The approach should be to create courses, activities and design affordances (e.g., personal profiles, shared blogs, collaboration capabilities) to encourage social learning and social presence. This is not about chasing a fad or just implementing new technologies. We need to work at facilitating productive social presence in our courses, and that requires the combined expertise of faculty and instructional designers to incorporate social presence around authentic learning tasks (e.g., inquiry, problem solving).

In other words, there are two components to the process:

1. Having the tools/affordances for social presence and
2. Creating learning experiences that positively leverage those tools to advance learning. Building the capacity for expanded social presence into the online learning environment should, based on a growing body of research, yield increased engagement and retention.

Figure No.4
Kaltura MediaSpace™



ⁱ Allen, I. E., & Seaman, J. (2010). Learning on Demand: Online Education in the United States, 2009. United States: The Sloan Consortium.

ⁱⁱ Means, B., Toyama, Y., Murphy, R., Bakia, M., & Jones, K., (2010). Evaluation of Evidence-Based Practices in Online Learning: A Meta-Analysis and Review of Online Learning Studies. Retrieved on February 22, 2011 <<http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>>

ⁱⁱⁱ Boston, Wally, Díaz, Sebastián R., Gibson, Angela M., Ice, Phil, Richardson, Jennifer, Swan, Karen. (October 2009) An Exploration of the Relationship Between Indicators of the Community of Inquiry Framework and Retention in Online Programs. Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 13(3), 67-83.

^{iv} Garrison, D.R., T. Anderson and W. Archer. (2001) Critical thinking cognitive presence, and computer conferencing in distance education. American Journal of Distance Education 15(1), 7-23.

^v Garrison, D. R., Anderson, T., & Archer, W. (2000). Critical inquiry in a text-based environment: Computer conferencing in higher education. The Internet and Higher Education, 2(2-3), 87-105.

^{vi} Swan, K., Richardson, J.C., Ice, P., Garrison, D.R., Cleveland-Innes, M. & Arbaugh, J.B. (2008). Validating a Measurement Tool of Presence in Online Communities of Inquiry. E-mentor, 2(24).

^{vii} Sawn, K and L. F. Shih. (2001). On the nature and development of social presence in online course discussions. Journal of Asynchronous Learning Networks, 6(1).

ABOUT DELTAK

Through collaborative partnerships, Deltak works with colleges and universities to expand the reach of their master's, doctoral, and bachelor's degree programs, bringing the unique mission of each partner institution to new audiences and increasing both enrollments and revenue. Deltak's partners benefit from their expertise and capabilities in market strategy, operational management, marketing, student recruitment, student retention services, faculty support, and online course development. Together, Deltak and its partners innovate to succeed in an increasingly competitive and dynamic higher education market.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rob Schnieders is the Chief Learning Officer at Deltak, leading the Academic Services group and working with partners and Deltak Partnership Operations to create innovative, high quality online learning experiences for partner schools. Prior to joining Deltak, Rob was the Director of National Engagement at the University of Chicago Urban Education Institute. Rob was also the founder and CEO of AHA! interactive and was a manager in Accenture's performance and learning practice. Rob received his Master's in Learning Sciences from Northwestern University where he is also now a member of the adjunct faculty for the MS in Learning and Organizational Change program.

