

SOCIAL PRESENCE IN AN ONLINE TEACHER EDUCATION PROGRAM: PRE-SERVICE TEACHER PERCEPTIONS

Tracey K. Hoffman

Assistant Professor, Prekindergarten Coordinator

Department of Education and Society, Miami University | Regional Campuses, 205T Thesken Hall -
Middletown

hoffmath@miamioh.edu

Thomas Mays

ABSTRACT

The Prekindergarten Associate degree program, offered on the regional campuses at a public Midwestern university, is a teacher preparation program designed for students planning to teach children birth through age five in a childcare or preschool setting. Many students in the program are nontraditional, often working full time and caring for family members. The program was changed from face-to-face to a fully online format to improve access for these nontraditional students. As the program launched, the researchers were concerned about the impact of moving to a fully online format on the online social learning environment. Students from two online Prekindergarten courses were invited to complete a survey to learn more about their perceptions of social presence in the online courses. Additionally, a small group of randomly selected students was invited to participate in an interview. Study participants reported that the new online format created an accessible way to earn their associate degree that they would not have been able to do if the program was in a face-to-face format. However, some students also stated that social presence was not a high priority since their primary goal was to earn a degree.

Keywords: online instruction, pre-service teachers, social presence, teacher education

INTRODUCTION

While college enrollment has been in decline for the past several years, enrollment in online college courses continues to increase (Seaman, Allen, & Seaman, 2018). As of fall 2016, 31.6% of higher education students have enrolled in at least one online course. Distance education is not a recent phenomenon. However, the growth of online education in traditional college institutions has made it challenging to meet the demand for online courses and programs (Santilli & Beck, 2005; Lloyd, Byrne & McCoy, 2012; Lee, 2017). Along with the increasing demand, there is a growing body of literature focused on the quality of online instruction, including the opportunities for engagement and social interaction in online learning spaces (Fung, 2004; Tezer & Bicen, 2008; Zhang, Allon, & Van Mieghem, 2017; Amemado & Manca, 2017). Since teaching and learning are inherently social endeavors, it is critical to consider the effects of geographical and psychological distance between instructors and their students (Bibeau, 2001).

The demand for online teacher education programs has grown dramatically (Faulk & King, 2014). Given the flexibility of online learning programs, they are an attractive option for nontraditional students who are employed full-time and have significant commitments outside the classroom (Li & Irby, 2008) which may in turn positively impact student persistence and graduation rates (Wlodkowski, 2003; Pontes, Hasit, Pontes, Lewis, & Siefing, 2010). Additionally, with a variety of online learning options now being offered, students can work at their own pace, providing greater flexibility (DuPlessis, Walker, & Naughton, 2008). Students who participate and stay engaged in online courses also have lower dropout rates (Lee & Choi, 2010) and potentially higher grades (Zhang et al., 2017). With the separation by distance in online learning, there is a lack of a shared physical space for students and instructors to collaborate and share ideas. The development of virtual synchronous options may provide students additional opportunities to interact and develop social connections (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen & Humistan, 2009). However, it can take time for students to feel comfortable learning in an autonomous format (Kop, 2011).

While the literature on online learning and social presence is expansive, research is scarce on the topic of online teacher education programs. This study aims to provide detail on the development of social presence in two required teacher education courses that were moved from face-to-face to a fully online format. The purpose of this study is to explore the development of social presence as well as student perceptions of social presence in two online teacher preparation courses. The research questions for this study are the following: (a) How do students (pre-service teachers) perceive the importance of social presence in online courses? (b) Did the two online teacher preparation courses promote the development of social presence? Adapting a part of an instrument developed by Arbaugh et al. (2008), the researchers gathered data on student perspectives of social presence. Additional data were collected through open-ended survey questions and in-person interviews.

LITERATURE

Establishing a strong sense of community in online courses can benefit students and can be especially helpful for those students in teacher education programs (West, Jones & Semon, 2012). A sense of community refers to the interdependence with others and the belief that someone is a member of a defined group (Sarason, Davidson & Blatt, 1986). Furthermore, Rovai (2002) found that a sense of community could also contribute to the successful completion of an online course. There are several characteristics, which can result in a successful and positive online learning experience for students. One important characteristic is the development of relationships that help to connect students through engaging online activities and assignments. Specifically, the simple exercise of an introduction forum can add to a student's sense of community (Blasi & Broad, 2002; Zhang et al., 2017). Zhang et al. (2017) observed that when students increase their engagement in their online courses, they experience an increase in quiz completion rates and course grades. Environments that integrate opportunities for engagement and building relationships are critical factors in successful online courses (Paloff & Pratt, 2007).

While there are a number of unique challenges with creating social presence in online learning environments, scholars have noted several methods that attempt to address the issue through increasing engagement among students as well as with the instructor. Low student and instructor participation, isolation, and procrastination are some of the most commonly cited issues raised by students in online courses (Rabe-Hemp, Woollen & Humistan, 2009). However, some online students do possess a desire to make connections and interacting with others (Mays, 2016; Wickersham & Dooley, 2006). These social connections are not limited to peers and often include teaching faculty. For some students, the social connections built with faculty benefitted them during their time in college, and many have expressed a desire to continue these connections after graduation (Mays, 2016).

Scholars suggest several processes and practices to encourage engagement and the development of social presence in online courses. For instance, Lehman & Conceição (2010) recommend incorporating a welcome email, scavenger hunt, regular announcements, assessment feedback, and discussion forums to help build social presence. Dunlap and Lowenthal (2014) suggest sharing teacher and student biographies, conducting peer reviews, and including "no jeopardy" group work where students are not penalized if group members do not complete their part of the assignment. Richardson et al. (2012) also suggest group projects, but also suggest chat and web conferencing, blogs, and student-generated content.

One of the most commonly used teaching techniques to develop social presence are discussion forums. However, poor design and facilitation can impede the development of social presence (DeNoyelles et al., 2014). When employing discussion forums, instructors should consider how students are asked to engage in the forum. Often, following the prompt, response, and reply approach leads to less than substantive results (Darabi et al. 2011). Group assignments can be especially challenging to develop and complete in an online course, but cooperative group assignments can encourage students to work together interactively (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008). Collaborative tools, such as forums and chat rooms, are critical for reflecting and discussing course content in an online course. Students are more apt to comment on their peer's work and participate in discussions when collaborative tools are provided. Haythornthwaite and Bregman (2004) describe three aspects of persistent conversation that should be present in online collaborative or group activities. Visibility is how the participants will be "seen" by others. Visibility can be accomplished through any of the available means of communication provided within the course (e.g., email). The timing of students' communication can also influence how group members interact and can be an opportunity for conversations between students. Finally, the method of how students express themselves can affect group communication.

The human element can sometimes be lost or masked with online instruction. Intimacy and immediacy are two components that are instrumental in constructing a conceptual framework used to understand the relationship between online interaction and social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Intimacy is often conveyed through speech and verbal and nonverbal cues (Walther & Burgoon, 1992). Body language and the topic of conversation are two factors that can affect the level of intimacy in online course discussions (Ozenc & Farnham, 2011). For example, a controversial topic in an online discussion can influence the level of intimacy among a group of students. Immediacy pertains to the psychological distance between individuals (Mehrabian & Wiener, 1968; Dixson, Greenwell, Rogers-Stacy, Weister, & Lauer, 2017). Additionally, online courses should focus intently on embedding interaction and engagement opportunities rather than solely content and knowledge acquisition (Jonassen, 2007). Ensuring that students and faculty make connections and engage with one another should be a crucial aspect of all courses, whether they are offered face-to-face or online.

The researchers adopted the concept of social presence as described in the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework presented by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000). Within the CoI framework, social presence is defined as, "...the ability of participants in the community of inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people' (Garrison et al., 2000, p.89). The perception of connectedness, awareness of others, and a sense of community are all characteristics used to describe social presence. The context of communication is another aspect of social presence that is shaped through a variety of factors such as familiarity, motivation, and commitment to learning. The literature on learning includes many examples of where a focus on student-student and student-instructor interaction can benefit student outcomes. Online teacher education programs, specifically those focused on developing pre-service teachers, pose another dimension to online learning and need for social presence discussion.

METHOD

Setting

This study involves two online courses in the Prekindergarten Associate of Applied Science degree program at the regional campuses of a public Midwestern university. The University's Institutional Review Board exempted the study. The first course, EDT 273: Prekindergarten Integrated Curriculum I prepares students for work in a variety of professional childcare environments with children ages birth to five years old. The course also includes a 24-hour practicum in a preschool or childcare setting. The second course, FSW 283: Introduction to Child Care Administration focuses on the administration and management of childcare programs. The course also focuses on leadership and management skills in the field of early childhood education.

One of the researchers in this study was also the instructor for the two courses used in this study. Opportunities for instructor-student engagement were provided through weekly announcements, informational emails, and feedback provided on assignments and papers. There were multiple opportunities for student-student engagement using a wide variety of discussion forums, including twelve forums for EDT 273 and nine for FSW 283. The courses included a variety of assignments and activities to promote community building and social presence, especially in the introduction Modules. One example of a community-building activity was a scavenger hunt, in which the students had a document with a list of qualities, values or characteristics. The students had to find someone in their course who possessed each of the characteristics. For example, a characteristic might be, "Find someone that has provided childcare in his/her own home." The students would then chat or email with each other to find a classmate who fits the description. By the time the assignment was completed, the students had interacted with each other multiple times. The introduction module in each of the EDT and FSW courses also include icebreaker activities, which were created for having students share information about themselves (unrelated to course content). For example, in one of the courses students were asked to find something in their purse, wallet, or backpack that has significant meaning to them. The goal was to learn something about their peers based on an item that they possess. Providing self-disclosure about life outside the class is an effective way for instructors to incorporate a human social presence (Wise et al., 2004).

Participants

The participants include students in the fully online Prekindergarten Associate of Applied Science degree program. A total of nine students from EDT 273 and 43 students from FSW 283 successfully completed the survey. Three responses from FSW 283 were incomplete and removed from the dataset leading to a total of 52 participants (n=52) and a response rate of 43%. In addition, four students were randomly chosen to conduct follow-up interviews. The four students interviewed were females ranging in age from 23 to 46 years old and were all sophomores. Table 1 lists the interview participants' demographic information.

Table 1: Interview participants

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Rank
Deanna	24	Female	Sophomore
Elaine	23	Female	Sophomore
Saniya	46	Female	Sophomore
Joanna	29	Female	Sophomore

Data Collection and Analysis

This study employed both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis to gain a fuller understanding of the student social experiences in the two courses. The researchers adapted the Community of Inquiry instrument, which was initially developed and tested by Arbaugh et al. (2008). Specifically, items related to social presence were incorporated in a new survey that also included open-ended questions. The CoI framework describes a student's learning experience in online courses, and it involves teaching, social, and cognitive presence. Teaching presence "...includes the selection, organization, and primary presentation of course

content, as well as the design and development of learning activities and assessment” (Garrison et al., 2000, p.90). Cognitive presence is “...the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry can construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison et al., 2000, p.89). Lastly, social presence is “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people (e.g., their full personality), through the medium of communication being used (Garrison et al., p. 94).” Within social presence, three factors are found including affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Arbaugh et al., 2008). The instrument included ten Likert Scaled items grouped into three categories: affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion. The five-point scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). Students in the EDT and FSW courses were invited to complete the survey at the end of the semester (see Table 2). Descriptive statistics were calculated based on the responses.

Table 2: Survey Items – Social Presence

Affective expression

1. Getting to know other course participants in the beginning module gave me a sense of belonging in the course.
2. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants after completing the discussion board activity, three truths and a lie or identification exercise, in Module 0).
3. I was able to form distinct impressions of some course participants after completing the discussion board activity, learning from experience or the best team, in Module 0).
4. Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction

Open communication

5. I felt comfortable conversing through the online medium.
6. I felt comfortable participating in the course discussion boards in Module 0.
7. I felt comfortable interacting with other course participants.

Group cohesion

8. I felt comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust when completing the discussion board questions in Module 0.
9. I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other course participants.
10. Online discussions help me to develop a sense of collaboration.

Note. Instrument items adapted from Arbaugh et al. (2008).

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with four randomly selected students enrolled in either the EDT or FSW course (n=4). Each interview was conducted by phone and ranged from 30-40 minutes. Participants were asked five interview questions (see Table 3). The interview questions were developed based on a literature review and the interviewer’s professional experiences working in the field of teacher education. The method reflected that of Merriam and Tisdell’s (2016) Basic Qualitative approach, which seeks to discover “how people make sense of their lives and their worlds” (p. 25). In this study, the researchers focused on the participant’s online learning experiences in either of the included two courses. The interviewer made detailed written notes during the interviews, and the data were coded and analyzed for emergent themes.

Table 3: Student Interview Questions

1. Did you develop relationships or friendships with one or more of the students in your online EDT 273/FSW 283 course this semester?
2. Can you describe the connections or relationships you developed with fellow students in your online EDT 273/FSW 283 course this semester?
3. What are some ways that would have helped you to get to know the other students in the online course better?
4. What types of activities or assignments might foster relationships in online Prekindergarten courses?
5. What are the advantages or disadvantages of taking online Prekindergarten courses in regard to social interactions with fellow students?

RESULTS

Affective Expression ($M=4.1$), Open Communication ($M=4.4$), and Group Cohesion ($M=4.2$) all scored above 4.0. Regarding individual survey items, the highest score was for *I felt comfortable participating in the course discussion boards in Module 0* ($M=4.5$). The lowest score was in *Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction* ($M=4.0$). Table 4 provides descriptive statistics as well as the totals for respondents somewhat and strongly agreeing, and somewhat and strongly disagreeing with each statement.

Table 4: Survey Descriptive Statistics and Selected Results

	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Somewhat and Strongly Agree	Agree	Somewhat and Strongly Disagree	Disagree
Item 1	4.1	1.1	76.9%		9.6%	
Item 2	4.2	0.9	84.6%		3.8%	
Item 3	4.1	0.9	80.8%		5.8%	
Item 4	4.0	1.0	78.8%		9.6%	
Item 5	4.3	0.9	84.6%		5.8%	
Item 6	4.5	0.6	92.3%		0.0%	
Item 7	4.4	0.8	88.5%		3.8%	
Item 8	4.2	1.0	84.6%		7.7%	
Item 9	4.3	0.8	80.8%		1.9%	
Item 10	4.1	1.0	78.8%		9.6%	

Affective Expression

Survey items one through four pertained to affective expression. Responses to item 1 indicated that 76.9% of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the beginning modules in the courses gave them a sense of belonging, while 9.6% somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed. Item two asked if students were able to form distinct impressions of some course participants. Responses showed 84.6% somewhat agreed or strongly, while 3.8% of the participants somewhat disagreed or strongly disagreed. Item 3 asked participants about their ability to form distinct impressions of some course participants after completing an activity and discussion board in the beginning module. Responses showed that 80.8% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed, and 5.8% somewhat or strongly disagreed. Item four asked if online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction. Responses showed that 78.8% of participants somewhat or strongly agreed, and 9.6% somewhat or strongly disagreed.

While the survey responses for Affective Expression were very positive, the interview responses less so. One participant commented, "I was not interested in knowing the other students or in them knowing me." The participant continued. "Again, not interested in course participants. In fact, the opinions that I did form, even if inadvertently, were mostly negative."

During an interview, Elaina, a self-described nontraditional student, stated, "I did not feel super connected since I am coming from a different background. I have much more experience since I already work in a childcare center." Joanna described similar difficulties but regarding communication challenges. "It can be harder to communicate [in an online course], but people that are more interested will put in the effort. However, once you get into the courses in your major, you get to know the group of people better."

Open Communication

Survey items five through eight were related to open communication. Item five asked participants about their comfort when conversing through an online medium. The responses showed 84.6% somewhat or strongly agreed, and 5.8% somewhat disagreed. Item six asked about feeling comfortable participating in the course discussion boards. The responses showed 92.3% somewhat or strongly agreed, while no participants responded somewhat or strongly disagree. Item seven asked if participants felt comfortable interacting with other course participants in the online courses. The responses showed that 88.5 % somewhat or strongly agreed, and only 3.8% somewhat disagreed.

There were several responses to the open-ended survey questions, all of which reflected a hesitancy to post online. "I felt a little like I didn't want to leave my conversations 'out there' without the option to delete them later," noted one participant. Another participant wrote,

I'm not really comfortable because there is too much offense taken to the written word these days. Gone are the days of constructive criticism. Now, it's straight to shaming dissenting opinions [generally speaking, not specific to this course]. There is too much room for misunderstanding when not face-to-face.

One participant wrote about not wanting to socialize with others in online courses. “I’m comfortable online, but I don’t want to ‘socialize’ – I just want my degree. I have experience making friends and teamwork, and I don’t need it here.”

The interviews revealed additional perspectives on Open Communication. Deanna said, “I emailed with them [classmates], but I did not develop relationships with anyone.” Deanna continued stating, “I like online courses for the flexibility, but you can’t communicate with others as much. If you have questions about an assignment, you have to wait before getting the information.” While Elaina expressed concern regarding posting ideas online, she also described an advantage.

One advantage is that you aren’t sitting in a classroom with all eyes on you. You can be more open on social media, and you can express yourself more. However, there is also the risk that someone can take something you say wrong or misinterpret what you are saying (in discussion boards). I sometimes wonder if I need to filter what I say

Group Cohesion

Items eight through ten pertained to group cohesion. Item eight asked about feeling comfortable disagreeing with other course participants while still maintaining a sense of trust when completing the discussion board questions. The responses showed that 84.6 % somewhat or strongly agreed, and 7.7% somewhat or strongly disagreed. Item nine asked about how participants felt about other course participants acknowledging their point of view. The responses showed that 80.8% somewhat or strongly agreed, and 1.9% somewhat disagreed. Item 10 asked whether online discussions helped students to develop a sense of collaboration. The responses showed that 78.8 % somewhat or strongly agreed and only 9.6% somewhat or strongly disagreed

One participant commented, “I’m too busy to care if other people acknowledge me.” The same participant continued:

I absolutely loathe this push for “socialization.” Just give me the assignment and the reading and let me go about my day already. I will collaborate when it is real instead of this “being nice because it’s recorded in digital archives.” It is all hot air. I mean, I do it because it is required, but I think it is a waste of time. Nothing personal. It’s just not my style.

From the interviews, both Joanna and Deanna described problems with group projects in online courses. Joanna said, “You are always going to have issues with group projects – that is just the reality.” More specifically, regarding EDT 273, Deanna stated, “Discussions went well, but group projects were hard due to everyone having different schedules. People don’t always respond to emails when working on a project together.”

Elaina described not having made any friends in the course. “There were a couple people I emailed with, but I did not develop any relationships or friendships through my online courses.” However, Sonya described having a friend in FSW 283, and Joanna discussed having previously known students in her class, EDT 273. “I had already met people in my other face-to-face classes, so it was easier to connect with them online. I didn’t build new friendships, but I just got to know people better.”

DISCUSSION

The first research question asked if and how social presence was a high priority or an important factor for students (pre-service teachers) taking online courses. According to the survey responses, most student participants believed that social presence was, indeed, an important aspect of online learning. For example, question four asked participants to rate the following question, “Online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction.” The mean was 4.0, which indicates that most students agreed that social communication could be successfully achieved through online communication. However, a small number of students felt that social presence was not necessary and that they had no interest in socializing or getting to know their classmates in their online course(s). For example, one student stated, “I was not interested in knowing the other students or in them knowing me.”

The second research question inquired if online teacher education courses in the current study promoted social presence. Even though the lowest score on the survey was well above the neutral response selection, the interview data suggest that the online course environment did not always foster the development of relationships. Interestingly, while 78.8% of students somewhat or strongly agreed that “online or web-based communication is an excellent medium for social interaction,” one participant commented during the interview that she was “not interested in course participants. In fact, the opinions that I did form, even if inadvertently, were mostly negative.” Another participant who was a self-described nontraditional student, stated, “I did not

feel super connected since I am coming from a different background. I have much more experience since I already work in a childcare center.”

One of the ideas to emerge from this study is the recognition of a student’s perspective as well as their goals and intentions when completing online courses. For example, a set of students enter an online course not knowing the other participants. Within this set are subsets of students, including those who may want to develop relationships with fellow students and those students who do not wish to interact. Another set of students enter the course with previously established relationships, and these relationships are strengthened throughout the term. Of the interview participants, one made a new friend in the online course during the term, one already had a friend in the online course and reported that the relationship was enhanced, and the other two participants reported making no friends during the term.

Several of the participants stated that some of their favorite online course activities were related to assignments involving social media (i.e., Twitter, Pinterest, etc.). During the student interviews, several participants mentioned the assignments that used Twitter and Pinterest were uniquely engaging since they were already using these two types of social media outside of class. Research has shown that students who report using media tools such as Twitter have a more positive learning experience and stay more engaged with class assignments (Lin, Hoffman, & Borengasser, 2013). However, research on this topic is limited concerning its application in education (Veletsianos, 2012). Using media tools for learning, which are already familiar to students, can make a difference in promoting engagement.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

It is crucial to ensure the quality and rigor of online courses continue to be evaluated, especially with the constant changes in the field of early childhood education. Research has consistently shown that better educated early childhood professionals working with young children provide a higher level and quality of education and care (Burchinal, Cryer, Clifford, & Howes, 2002; Sachs, 2000). Therefore, the positive outcomes of having better educated early childhood teachers is a strong argument to provide courses which provide social engagement with peers and instructors.

The researchers recommend that more work be conducted with larger populations of pre-service teachers since this topic has not been thoroughly explored in the literature. Perhaps researching the differences between fully online and hybrid (or blended face-to-face and online) teacher preparation courses may be helpful to discern student preferences. Another critical area for research is with student intentions in online courses concerning interaction and developing relationships. If engagement is deemed vital in education, specifically with education students, then how do we address those students who resist efforts to promote engagement?

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