Is Anyone There? Using Interaction Behaviors to Enhance Online Discussion Forums

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IS ANYONE THERE? USING INTERACTION BEHAVIORS TO ENHANCE ONLINE DISCUSSION FORUMS.
WHY STUDY SOCIAL PRESENCE IN AN ONLINE GRADUATE CLASS?

• Discussion is often a key element in an online class where it is expected that participants not only demonstrate their own understanding of course material but also learn from one another.
• I wondered how the social presence of students would be demonstrated in online discussions.
• Does a social presence influence an online discussion?
Social presence is defined by Garrison as “the ability to project one’s self and establish personal and purposeful relationships” (2007).
“Learning occurs in a context of social interactions in which the learners socially negotiate meaning through reflection, collaboration, and articulation“ (Yildiz, 2009, p.46).
METHODS: MEASURING COMMUNICATION INTERACTIONS & PATTERNS

• Analysis of the course discussions and measuring through coding behaviors that seem to further the concept of social presence.
• Each discussion forum was treated as a single unit of analysis.
• Number of interactions between participants were counted which allowed researchers to see where the bulk of communication was happening and what patterns emerged.
RESULTS OF COMMUNICATION INTERACTIONS & PATTERNS

• There were definite relationships developed during the course that acknowledged social presence.

• The instructor was not often present in the discussion forum – only to answer questions and provide additional resources. - no modeling of expectations.

• Interactions tended to follow a time pattern in which the early responders communicated with each other. Those posting later, tended to respond to various posts but did not always receive affirmation of their thoughts from other participants.
METHODS: CONTENT CODING INTERACTIONS

- Use of Bales’ Interpersonal Analysis.
- Two coders read through the discussion and coded behavior based on unit of analysis.
- Data was analyzed between participants and over time.
RESULTS: CONTENT CODING INTERACTIONS

- Without the nonverbal signals, coding content is reliant on interpretations based on experience.
- Affirmation in previous interactions can influence the component of social presence in the next interaction.
- Knowledge base is a component of who interacts. Individuals asking questions of other participants were often provided with answers and positive advice. Interesting to note that the one participant who started out asking questions decreased in the level of participation but was still responded to in a positive manner.
POPULATION

• Graduate Class with a small number of students.
• The makeup was primarily female.
• Students were at different points in their academic pursuit.
• Almost all had some teaching experience. – 2 at the collegiate level and the rest at the K-12 level.
POSTING PATTERNS

• Degree of variety in posting.
• Level of expectation – the instructor required an initial post and then response to two other posts.
• There was measure of quality of post that asked students to extend the conversation.
• As students begin to recognize these expectations, posting tended to decrease to meet the minimum.
• This pattern does impact social presence as affirmation was often missing in order to meet the requirement.
CHANGES BASED ON SOCIAL PRESENCE FEEDBACK:

• Instructor increased her own number of postings (a work in progress).

• Some discussion prompts have been modified, to promote social presence by actively encouraging participants to include personal examples, etc. as applied to course content in responses.

• An online discussion rubric is in the process of being revised to encourage more substantial responses by participants.