

Social Media

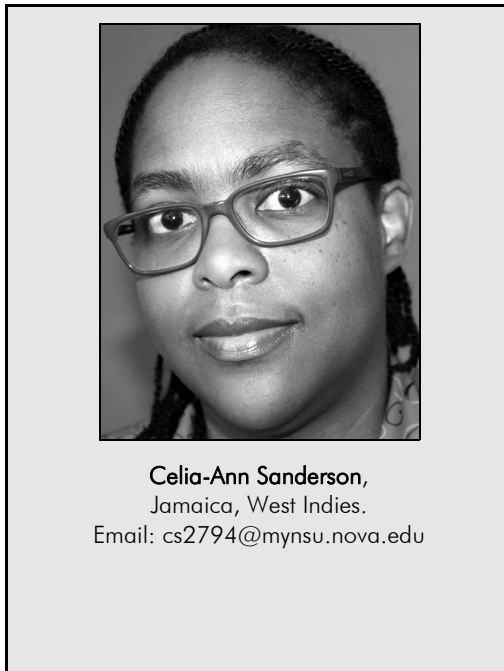
Fostering a Social Presence in Distance Education

Celia-Ann Sanderson

INTRODUCTION

One of the main characteristics of distance education is the absence of face-to-face interaction with instructor and learner as well as learner and learner. Instructor to learner dialogue is usually in the form of written instructions to the learners, podcasts, multimedia presentations that simulate lectures, emails, and assessment grades. There may be limited live discussions via synchronous video conferencing, or telephone calls. Learner and learner dialogue may vary. Responding to a discussion forum ques-

tion within the learning management system is the main method of promoting this type of dialogue. Learners are asked to respond to a question and then comment on their peers' responses. This type of discussion is usually assessed, which acts as a form of motivation for the student. Virtual spaces are provided for informal dialogue between learners. However, participation is relatively low. Given the need for a social presence in a distance education course, how is this achieved? The purpose of this article to explore the issue of social presence and the various innovations used to foster a social presence with distance education programs.



DISTANCE EDUCATION AND SOCIAL PRESENCE

Distance education is defined as “an institution-based, formal education where the learning group is separated and where interactive telecommunications systems are used to connect learners, resources and instructors” (Simonson, Smaldino, & Zvacek, 2015, p. 6). Research in this field is influenced by the theoretical framework which defines distance education as a teaching and learning event that occurs in an environment where the teacher and the learner are not in the same physical space at the same time (M. G. Moore, 2005). The three critical components of the theory of transactional distance are: dialogue—between learner and instructor as well as learner and classmates; structure—of the

program; and learner autonomy—which is the freedom that the learner has in the learning environment in terms of what to learn, how to learn and how much to learn (M. G. Moore, 2013). The essential feature is that the teacher and the learners are not in the same physical space. As a consequence, dialogue is very critical to distance education since it establishes the relationship between student and teacher as well as student and student. It fosters communication that is “purposeful, constructive and valued by each party” (M. G. Moore, 2005, p. 52). It is influenced by the personalities of the teacher, learner, course, and environmental factors (M. G. Moore, 2005).

Technology is the medium by which distance education is facilitated. This is done by allowing dialogue between the learner, instructor, and classmates. In this case the communication may be one to many—for example teacher to students; or one to one—for example teacher to student or student to student (M. G. Moore, 2005). Asynchronous dialogues include video lectures, assessments, announcements, emails, text files containing tutorial notes, handouts, extract of a textbook or articles and Web 2.0 technology by allowing discussion posts, social networking sites, blogs and wikis. The file transfer protocol allows submission of assignments and downloading of journal articles and handouts. HTML5, the latest version of hypertext markup language, permits the learner to read the text, view images, listen to audio and watch videos or multimedia presentation. Real time dialogue occurs via telephone or online meetings. A factor that influences the dialogue amongst participants in distance education is the frequency of opportunity for communication. This is usually determined by the administration, the physical environment, the attempts to initiate a conversation, the noise on the communication line and the emotional environment of the learners (M. G. Moore, 2005).

The level of interaction between classmates and instructor may be evaluated by using the community of inquiry theoretical framework. This framework is “a process of creating a deep and meaningful (collaborative-constructivist) learning experience through the development of three interdependent elements—social presence, cognitive presence and teaching presence” (Garrison & Akyol, 2013, p. 106). It defined social presence as the distance learner’s ability to identify with classmates or course of study, communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal as well as affective relationships progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities (Garrison, 2009). The learning community should support critical inquiry by allowing affective communication, open communication and group cohesion (Garrison & Akyol, 2013).

In determining the vibrancy of the social presence, the following questions should be answered: does the learning community allow for the use of emoticons, humor, self-disclosure and appropriate use to punctuation? (affective expression); Is there an opportunity for critical reflection, courtesy, recognition, compliments, responding to others comments and posting of own comments? (open communication); and do the students identify with the group by addressing members by name, display team spirit, and collaborate with each other? (group cohesion). If the answers are in the affirmative, then there is a social presence which encourages sustainable collaboration and critical conversations (Garrison & Akyol, 2013).

Establishing a learning community prevents the student from feeling isolated from classmates and course content, as well as becoming frustrated (R. L. Moore, 2014). Having a social presence allows the learner to benefit from shared experiences of peers, alleviate the fear of not being able to learn in the distance learning environment and positively contributes to the success of distance education (R. L. Moore, 2014). As a conse-

quence, one of the role of the instructor is to promote a culture of social presence. This can be done by incorporating the use of Web 2.0 technologies into the curriculum and learners' participation is required.

DISCUSSION BOARDS IN LEARNING MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

Discussion boards within a learning management system is predominantly used to create social presence in the learning community. A typical online course will contain a segment for discussion forum. A formal discussion forum is usually incorporated into the course's curriculum. This means that a question is usually posed by the instructor, requiring the learners to make an initial response to the question and respond to at least one classmate's original post. This type of discussion is accompanied by a grade as it ensures learners' participation (Ko & Rossen, 2017). The aim is to achieve a few of the course's learning outcomes and improve research skills while fostering a social presence. On the other hand, an informal discussion forum may be available for learners only. This forum is not moderated as the intention is for classmates to freely share information or socialize.

When the community of inquiry framework guides the evaluation the discussions board's ability to create a social presence, it reveals that learners are able to use emoji, pictures, and format their texts in order to display affective expressions. Open communication begins with the greeting of "hello," while there is group cohesion when the forum topic is one that fosters peer review of assignments. Nevertheless, learners are more motivated to participate in the formal discussions because it contributes to their grades, but the informal ones do not.

Although discussion boards within the learning management system remain staples in distance education, researchers observed that learners were using their external social media accounts very frequently (Lester & Perini, 2010; Woodley &

Meredith, 2012). In order to engage the learner, instructors are seizing the opportunity to engage the learners by incorporating the use of social media into the curriculum (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014).

SOCIAL MEDIA INNOVATION

Social media have been defined as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content" (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). This comprised of wikis, social networking sites, blogs and web applications that facilitate collaborative projects. The innovation of social media started with Bruce and Susan Abelson's "Open Diary" which was for online diary writers and emerged with the term weblog or blog (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). With increased access to the Internet, other social networking sites such as My Space and Facebook were established, which led to the term social media (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

According to Rogers (2003), an innovation is an idea, practice, or object that is perceived as new by an individual or other unit of adoption. An individual's perception of the innovation influences his or her reaction to it. The innovation may be deemed to be "new" based on "knowledge, persuasion, or a decision to adopt" (Rogers, 2003). The technology is a design for instrumental action that reduces the uncertainty in the cause-effect relationships involved in achieving a desired outcome. It comprises of both hardware and software components (Rogers, 2003). With regard to social media, the hardware comprises of computer, mobile device (laptop, tablet, or smartphone), and Internet connection that is supplied by a telecommunication provider. The software is a web browser or application that has Web 2.0 technology that allows the user to generate content (e.g., video, blog entry, graphics, audio, podcasting, or text) on a website. In order to qualify as user-generated content,

the medium must be publicly available via the internet, exhibit creative effort, and was created outside of professional routines and practices (OECD, 2007).

TYPES OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social networking sites as defined by Boyd and Ellison (2007) are “web-based services that allow individuals to construct a public or semipublic profile within a bounded system, articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and view and traverse their list of connections those made by other within the system” (p. 211). Examples of social networking sites are Facebook and Twitter. Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) provide the definitions for the other main types of social media:

- Content communities consist of media content that are shared between users within these communities for example, YouTube and SlideShare. Even though YouTube may be classified as a social networking site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), for the purpose of this article, it qualifies as content communities because users are not required to create a personal profile page, and the individuals who post feedback comments are not required to be on the channel owner’s personal social network.
- Blogs contain mainly text-based content, images, and video. It is managed by one person or an entity where interaction with others is permitted by posting comments.
- Collaborative projects “enable the joint and simultaneous creation of content by many end-users” (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 62). This includes wikis, and any website that allows the users to add, remove, and change the content.

DIFFUSION OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

According to Rogers (2003) “diffusion is the process in which an innovation is commu-

nicated through certain channels over time among the member of a social system” (p. 5). This theory is usually applied when the integration of a new technology into a situation will result in changing the way a procedure is executed. In other words, diffusion of innovation is the communication method used to inform the affected stakeholders of the change that will arise because of a new technology and as a consequence it results in a social change (Rogers, 2003). Rogers stressed that “person to person communication is critical ... among all kinds of adopters” (McGrath & Zell, 2001, p. 388). This is because it is the persons who have used the new innovation that share their experience with others who have not yet tried it.

The concept of sharing is not new in distance education as the learners participate in discussion forums that give the learners the ability to post videos, images, text, and audio recordings. However, the distinction between discussion forums and social media is the location. Discussions forums are confined within the institution’s controlled environment of a learning management system, while social media are external to this environment and are accessible by the world’s population.

When adopting social media innovations, the instructor has to take an intentional action that will integrate social and cognitive presence in order for learning outcomes to be achieved (Garrison & Akyol, 2013). Thus, it is best to inform the learners about the use of social media by infusing it into the learning experience via the curriculum. This may also require a change in the approach to distance education course design by the instructional designer and instructor (Baird & Fisher, 2005). For example the instructional designer should consider how encoded hyperlinks are utilized by the social networking website as the learner may use navigation clues associated with the title attribute to determine whether or not to follow a hyperlink (Baird & Fisher, 2005).

Instructional strategies may include using digital storytelling to introduce the learners and instructor, following classmates on Twitter, preparing a group article using Google Docs, and critiquing a picture created by the learner using the picassohead website (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2014). Regardless of the instructional strategies used, the instructor must ensure that the use of social media is aligned with learning objectives. In addition, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) recommend five best practices for the use of social media. They are:

1. carefully choose the right medium and social network site to communicate the content to the target group;
2. pick the application or make your own social network site;
3. ensure that all social media activities work with each other to harmonize the message;
4. plan to integrate social media and traditional media;
5. ensure access for all.

The opinion leader and change agents of the integration of social media into distance education are the institution, instructors, and the instructional designers, while the targeted social system is the distance education learners. Even though the main communication channel for the implementation of social media is the syllabus, it is important to note that the rate of adoption of any innovation is influenced by the stakeholder's perception of the capabilities of the new technology which is based on information gathered over time (Rogers, 2003). A review of the research literature revealed the various ways that social media were used in distance education. These included:

- Providing an informal means for learners to talk to other students by sending personal messages and assistance with coursework, as well as work collabora-

tively on group projects (Lester & Perini, 2010).

- Accessing a wide array of learning content in video format (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).
- Transitioning students into a new learning environments especially when learners struggle to express themselves more on social media. Facebook can be used to transition students to a university (Woodley & Meredith, 2012).
- Institutions' administration may use social media to share information with students (Lester & Perini, 2010). For example Facebook may be used for posting the registration date for the new semester. Twitter was mainly used for disseminating information about scholarships, fundraising, and soliciting employment opportunities for students (Kimmons, Veletsianos, & Woodward, 2016).
- Instructors may post information about events, projects, welcome announcements and other opportunities for students (Woodley & Meredith, 2012).

In general, social media allow learners to post their own questions, resources, video presentations; respond to other posts; and increase their peer to peer learning experience. This is similar to capabilities of the discussion forums within the learning management system. However, learners may receive and respond to comments made by others within the world's population and not only from classmates and instructors.

REACTION TO SOCIAL MEDIA IN DISTANCE EDUCATION

The reactions of the target group impact acceptance or rejection of a new innovation (Rogers, 2003). In the distance learning environment, learners are required to research various topics which may involve locating information, synthesizing it, and sharing the output (video, text, podcast, or

image) with their peers via their social media network. However, learners may not be keen on using social network sites to support their coursework due to concerns about the quality of their work posted in a public space, and such assignments should be viewed only by the instructor (Dennen & Burner, 2017). Such sites do not provide a controlled environment to analyze the students' postings, especially comments. There may be difficulty in identifying the student as opposed to an independent use of a social media networking site. Similarly, the social networking sites do not adequately monitor the student teacher interaction. This is because the sites do not provide the entire dialogue for identification and analysis of patterns of interaction between learners and instructor, as might be found within a learning management system (Friesen & Kuskis, 2013).

Social media allow the learners to gain knowledge from everyone within the social media network, whether or not there is a direct association with the educational institution. However, all social media may not be accessible by all students. For example, Facebook may exclude those students who do not have a Facebook account. Learners who were not required to use Twitter, did not perceive it to be an effective way of fostering a social presence (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Thus, the distance education learning management system's discussion boards will have to ensure that a sense of community and social presences are felt by all learners.

SOCIAL MEDIA AND SOCIAL PRESENCE

In assessing the level of social presence within social media, the community of inquiry framework was applied. Social media facilitate the use of emoticons during dialogue between learners and instructors. It also encourages affective

expression via video, audio and image posting. Learners are also able to demonstrate their skills of producing these types of media with the instructor assessing them accordingly. Blogs, Twitter, Facebook and YouTube (for a video log) posts are available for the learner to critically reflect on events, ideas and experiences. When posted, they are quickly shared with persons in the learners' social network or tweeted to followers or subscribers of the blog or YouTube channel. Readers or watchers may leave a comment.

As it relates to student identifying with their peers on social media, the potential is there for some learners to be excluded, unless the course requires the cohort to own a social media account and to include them in the social media network. One disadvantage of Facebook is that it may exclude those students who do not have a Facebook account. Likewise, a learner may opt not to have a YouTube channel or blog. Also the potential is exist for learns.

Social media was inherently designed to foster a social presence by allowing the user to share a myriad of digital content with the use of Web 2.0 technologies amongst one's social network or to the world's population. However, in distance education, there is the potential to include learners and nonlearners as well as excluding learners of the course. In essences the possibility of tracking the learners will be difficult, especially when an alias is used in the social media. Thus increasing the likelihood of unsuccessfully maintaining group cohesion.

In order to create a positive and inclusive distance learning environment, it is for the instructor to determine the terms and conditions under which social media is used in the distance education curriculum. The institution should also assess the risk and evaluation the security protocols before engaging learner in social media (Lester & Perini, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Social media will engage the learners and has the potential foster social presence. However, not all learners want to be visible on social media. Web 2.0 technologies provide social media and discussion forums with the same capabilities for creating of a social presence. The major difference between the discussion forums and social media is that social media is not limited to the course's classmates and instructor. In addition, the probability for the loss of identity within the class is higher in social media then socializing within the confines of the learning environment. Thus the instructor has to weight the importance of sustaining a social presence in the learning community when selecting the Web 2.0 technologies to be infused into the curriculum.


REFERENCES

- Baird, D. E., & Fisher, M. (2005). Neomillennial user experience design strategies: Utilizing social networking media to support "always on" learning styles. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems, 34*(1), 5–32. <https://doi.org/10.2190/6WMW-47L0-M81Q-12G1>
- Boyd, D. M., & Ellison, N. B. (2007). Social network sites: Definition, history and scholarship. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication, 13*(1), 210–230. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x>
- Dennen, V. P., & Burner, K. J. (2017). Identity, context collapse, and Facebook use in higher education: Putting presence and privacy at odds. *Distance Education, 38*(2), 173–192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2017.1322453>
- Dunlap, J. C., & Lowenthal, P. R. (2014). The power of presence: Our quest for the right mix of social presence in online courses. In A. A. Piña, & A. P. Mizell (Eds.), *Real life distance education: Case studies in practise* (pp. 41–66). [ebook] Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Friesen, N., & Kuskis, A. (2013). Modes of interaction. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 351–371). Oxfordshire, England: Routledge.
- Garrison, D. R. (2009). Communities of inquiry in online learning. In P. Rogers (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of distance learning* (pp. 352–355). Hershey, PA: IGI Global.
- Garrison, D. R., & Akyol, Z. A. (2013). The community of inquiry theoretical framework. In M. G. Moore (Ed.), *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 104–119). Oxfordshire, England: Routledge.
- Kaplan, A. M., & Haenlein, M. (2010). Users of the world, unite! The challenges and opportunities of social media. *Business Horizons, 53*, 59–68. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2009.09.003>
- Kimmons, R., Veletsianos, G., & Woodward, S. (2016). Institutional uses of Twitter in U.S. higher education. *Innovative Higher Education, 42*(2), 97–111. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10755-016-9375-6>
- Ko, S., & Rossen, S. (2017). *Teaching online: A practical guide*. [Kindle edition]. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Lester, J., & Perini, M. (2010). Potential of social networking sites for distance education student engagement. *New Directions for Community Colleges, 2010*(150), 67–77. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cc.406>
- Lowenthal, P. R., & Dunlap, J. C. (2018). Investigating students' perceptions of instructional strategies to establish social presence. *Distance Education, 39*(2), 281–298. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2018.1476844>
- McGrath, C., & Zell, D. (2001). The future of innovation diffusion research and its implications for management: A conversation with Everett Rogers. *Journal of Management Inquiry, 10*(4), 386–391. <https://doi.org/10.1.1.458.458>
- Moore, M. G. (2005). Transactional distance. In D. Keagan (Ed.), *Theoretical principles of distance education* (pp. 49–84). [ebook]: Oxfordshire, England: Routledge.
- Moore, M. G. (Ed.). (2013). Theory of transactional distance. In *Handbook of distance education* (pp. 66–85). New York, NY: Routledge.
- Moore, R. L. (2014). Importance of developing community in distance education courses. *TechTrends, 20–24*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-014-0733-x>
- OECD. (2007). *Participative web and user-created content: Web 2.0, wikis and social networking*. [ebook]: OECD Publications Centre. <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264037472-en>

- Rogers, E. (2003). *Elements of diffusion*. New York, NY: Free Press.
- Simonson, M., Smaldino, S., & Zvacek, S. (2015). *Teaching and learning at a distance: Foundations of distance education*. [Kindle]. Charlotte, NC: Information Age.
- Woodley, C., & Meredith, C. (2012). Supporting student transition through social media. *The American Journal of Distance Education*, 26(2), 86–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08923647.2012.655055>


When It's Your Life...

You TRAIN
You DELIVER
You DEVELOP




Well, we have something in common.

Our degree programs in Instructional Technology and Distance Education are designed for TRAINERS and educators who can DEVELOP and implement learning activities using technology to DELIVER instruction to learners not bound by time or place.




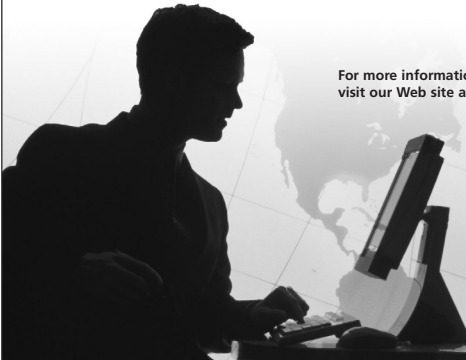
NSU's Fischler School of Education and Human Services is offering master's and doctoral degrees of education in Instructional Technology and Distance Education.



For more information, contact us at 800-986-3223 or visit our Web site at www.SchoolofEd.nova.edu/itde.

On-site. Online. Worldwide.





Nova Southeastern University admits students of any race, color, and national or ethnic origin. Nova Southeastern University is accredited by the Commission on Colleges of the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (1885 Southern Lane, Decatur, Georgia 30033-4097, telephone number: 404-679-4501) to award associate's, bachelor's, master's, educational specialist, and doctoral degrees. 10-01-14094 P99