

# The Role of Presence in the Online Environment

*Scenario 1.* At thirty-five, Amanda is a newly enrolled learner in an online master's program in adult education. She works full-time for a training and development company, is married, and has a small child. Time is a premium in her life—that's why she chose to enroll in an online program. This is her first experience with online learning, and her technology skills are limited. She is worried about the differences between the face-to-face courses she's so familiar with and the courses she will now be taking. She wonders how she will interact with the instructor and other learners, how she will be able to feel that she belongs to a community of learners and feel that this experience is "real." She is so used to working with trainees on an interactive basis that she cannot imagine how the feeling of "being there" and "being together" with others in this program will be possible. All she can envision is the computer and the books. She is beginning to feel lonely, anxious, and isolated.

*Scenario 2.* Carlos is a twenty-seven-year veteran instructor at a community college who was recently asked to offer his communications courses online. He is reluctant to do so because his classes are very interactive—they require small-group work, team project presentations, experiential field work, and active discussion. He worries that his years of teaching will be irrelevant. He does not understand how to adapt his course from the face-to-face to the online environment.

He asks himself: *How am I going to develop this course? What will my course feel and look like? How do I connect with my learners and get to know them? How will I adapt and implement the small-group work, team projects, and discussion activities to my online course?* All he can see is the computer and his class materials.

As instructors and designers in the field of online education, we cannot overestimate the importance of creating a sense of presence in online teaching and learning. Close your eyes and envision for just a minute the basic difference between learning face-to-face and learning exclusively online. Even before the minute is up, it will likely be obvious to you that the basic difference is the separation between the instructor and the learner and between the learners and each other. This separation naturally leads to feelings of isolation on the part of instructors and learners alike and has been a major reason for learner dissatisfaction and lack of retention in the online learning environment (Palloff & Pratt, 1999), as suggested by Amanda's scenario at the beginning of this chapter. The feeling of isolation is due to a lack of awareness and understanding of the concept of presence. In scenario 2, Carlos, the inexperienced online instructor, needs to be aware of and understand the concept of presence in order to effectively adapt his course to this new environment and feel a connection with his learners.

## **WHY IS IT IMPORTANT TO UNDERSTAND PRESENCE?**

The Internet is a social space. Today, Internet technology is ever-present, completely woven into our lives. We accomplish many of our communications and transactions via the Web without even noticing. As a result of this omnipresent feeling, we tend to want to be together with others even though we can't see them. These feelings of wanting to be together with others are often expressed through Internet-based social networking tools.

As Internet-based technology evolves in this social direction, it points to the importance of the sense of presence. To create presence in the online environment, we need to think, feel, and behave differently than we do in the face-to-face environment because we have to make an effort to be aware of the intentions of others and their thoughts, emotions, and behaviors when they are connected to us via technology (Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001). When we become aware of and understand the differences between in-person and online interac-

tions, we are better able to select appropriate technology and design learning environments that help create a sense of presence.

In this chapter, we will discuss why creating the sense of *being there* and *being together* is so important for online presence, define the concept of presence and the difference between presence and engagement, and explain the social, psychological, and emotional aspects of presence in the online environment.

## **CREATING A SENSE OF PRESENCE**

Current research shows that when there is a sense of presence in online learning, it can greatly enhance the instructor-learner relationship (Munro, 1998). We agree with this research and believe that this goal can be accomplished. But this belief opens up an array of questions: What is a sense of presence? What does it look and feel like? How is it created? How is presence different from engagement?

### **What Is a Sense of Presence?**

Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, and Stoner (2001) discuss the concept of presence as two interrelated phenomena: *telepresence* (the sense of “being there”) and *social presence* (the sense of “being together with others,” including people, animals, avatars, and so on). Telepresence in the online environment happens when learners have the impression or feeling that they are present at a location remote from their own immediate environment. Social presence means interactions with others in the online environment. We use the terms *being there* and *being together* in this book as the bases for our definition of a sense of presence.

### **What Does Presence Look and Feel Like?**

From our perspective, a sense of presence is “being there” and “being together” with online learners throughout the learning experience. It looks and feels as if the instructor has placed the learner at the center of the course development and created the course for that learner. It also looks and feels as if the instructor is accessible to the learners and that the learners are accessible to the instructor and each other, and that the technology is transparent to the learning process. Each learner is “there” and “together” with the instructor and with other learners as well. Learners are also involved in the design process by giving feedback and

helping shape the online environment. In the process, all the T's have been crossed and the I's dotted for this experience. In other words, the instructor has taken into consideration the entire learning experience prior to the course, during the course, and at the end of the course, along with all of the elements that help make presence happen. These elements will be introduced later in this chapter.

### **How Is Presence Created?**

The teaching-learning process for creating presence online may feel overwhelming to those like Carlos who are new to the online environment. But it does not need to be. This book will suggest strategies to decrease these feelings. Still, it is important to know that a sense of presence doesn't just naturally happen. Creating presence is a result of awareness, understanding, involvement through experience, and intentional planning and design on the part of the instructor, the entire support team (that is, instructional designer, technical support, and so on), and the learners who participate in and help negotiate that design. When this process is thoughtfully implemented, the impact on the learners—like Amanda—can be significant. It can create an awareness of what online presence means for them, help them break feelings of isolation, get them involved in the learning process, and bring them together in a virtual community.

### **How Is Presence Different from Engagement?**

Engagement is only one aspect of presence: it is the participation of the instructor with learners or learners with other learners as they interact in the online environment. In contrast, presence includes the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior in the online environment. This dynamic interplay takes place both consciously and unconsciously as instructors and learners experience both the real world and the online environment. We believe that presence will not be felt completely until this dynamic interplay has been realized. This book looks at social presence and engagement as aspects of presence rather than presence in its entirety.

## **WHAT WE KNOW ABOUT PRESENCE**

In the current research discussion of presence in the world of online learning, the focus is on creating engagement, a rich environment for learner interaction,

and a sense of community, which together result in an enhanced social presence. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2001, 2003) describe this enhancement through engagement when they talk about producing a richer social atmosphere and generating a climate for high-level dialogue and critical thinking. Ijsselsteijn, de Ridder, Freeman, and Avons (2000) also address this idea when they speak of creating a sense of the learners and the instructors being together in an online classroom.

The concept of social presence has been extensively addressed in the literature. In Kehrwald's (2008) study, it is defined as "an individual's ability to demonstrate his/her state of being in a virtual environment and so signal his/her availability for interpersonal transactions" (p. 94). The ability to be social in a virtual space is affected by immediacy, degree of awareness, and willingness to engage in communication exchanges. Immediacy is fundamental to effective interpersonal transactions; the higher the interaction among learners and the instructor, the greater the level of social presence (Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Without participant awareness of being perceived as a "real" person ("being there" and "being together") in mediated communications, there is a lack of social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). Social presence also means there is a willingness on the part of participants to engage in communication exchanges. This willingness is motivated by purposeful interactions that benefit all. According to Kehrwald (2008), "Motivation is provided by either *need*, as in the case of learning tasks that require interaction, or *interest*, as in the case of relations that motivate ongoing interaction" (p. 97, italics in original).

Tu and McIsaac's (2002) research found that the social context, online communication, and interactivity affect social presence. The social context is created based on participants' characteristics and their perception of the online environment. Online communication can positively influence social presence when it is stimulating, expressive, carries feelings and emotions, is significant, and is implicit. When interactions among participants are enjoyable, immediate, and reactive, and when participants are comfortable and recognize discussion themes, social presence is positively affected.

According to the research, social presence is central to the creation of effective online learning. Caspi and Blau (2008) have investigated the self-projection of participants onto the group and their identification with the group and found that they positively correlate with each other. They noted that social presence can

effectively influence learning by creating a comfortable environment. They also found a positive correlation with aspects of perceived learning.

Moreover, Swan and Shih's (2005) investigation indicates that learners who perceive high social presence during online exchanges also think that they learn more from their interactions with others because they benefit from their ideas. They further suggest that learners may need to be socially engaged with online communities. In order for that to occur, learners need to be introduced to the notion of community building, knowledge construction as a group, and ways of being present during online discussions.

Supplementing the research on social presence and community, Gunawardena (1995) has added the importance of the online learner context. She says that the context in which participants learn and their relationships within that context have an effect on the online learning experience. Lehman (2006) expands on the concepts of social presence, community, and learner context by suggesting the creation of an environment that considers the perceptual nature of the learner. She describes this environment by using what we call a *perceptual systems approach*. This approach considers learners as perceivers who bring their individual knowledge, skills, attitudes, preferences, and diverse backgrounds to the online learning experience. From this perspective, learners are active perceivers, rather than passive receivers, during the entire online learning experience. The perceptual systems approach considers the learner to be central to the online learning experience before, during, and at the end of the course.

## **PRESENCE AS THE RESULT OF OUR PERCEPTUAL PROCESS**

Why is creating presence so important? We are basically social creatures. When the social aspect is absent, we tend to crave it and look for ways to accommodate its absence. Our social nature is integral to our perceptual process when interacting with others not only in the real world but also in the online environment. Through the process of perceiving, we interact with information and others in the online environment, which requires others to relate to us and work with us—this happens at the behavioral level. Individually we make sense of information for our use, for sharing, and for further interacting with others to refine and expand our knowledge. We search for appropriate resources to challenge, support,

and enhance our experiences. We then reexamine the entire process by refining what we have integrated, resulting in circling back to repeat the process; this happens at both the cognitive and emotional levels. We continuously go through this process in the online environment from an individual point of view—in other words, perceptually (Lehman, 1996, 2006). Because this process occurs at the subconscious level (Noe, 2005), it is difficult to notice when it is happening.

When thought, emotion, and behavior work together in our real-world experiences, we believe that we have created a successful perceptual experience and a sense of presence. Often we do not realize what happens when we are, for example, assigned to a small group in a face-to-face class (the environment), interacting with group members (with emotion), and focusing, following, and completing the group assignment (with thought, based on group behavior). This perceptual experience parallels the online learning experience, but in the online learning experience the instructor and learners are not in the same physical space. It is therefore necessary to intentionally rethink and redesign the course to incorporate the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior so that the perceptual process is influenced and a sense of presence is created in the online environment.

For both Amanda and Carlos, perceptual presence is their sensory experience of “being there” and “being together” with others. It involves their recognition of the online environment and their actions in response to this environment. Through the perceptual process, which involves thought, emotion, and behavior, they interact with information and others and feel as though they are together in this learning experience.

## **UNDERSTANDING PRESENCE**

The concept of presence is complex and not easy to understand. Presence is the result of the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior in the online environment, between the private world (that is, the inner world) and the shared world (that is, the outer world) (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007) and is rooted in the interactive (that is, enactive) perceptual process (Noe, 2005). Therefore, presence should be viewed from different perspectives: social, psychological, and emotional.

## **The Social Aspect**

The first perspective involved in the concept of presence is social presence, a concept that surfaced in the 1970s when Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) wrote about individuals being seen as “real” when communicating using media. They found that the amount of presence was based on the type of media used. For example, distance learners received video cassettes recorded by instructors as a resource to supplement correspondence study. Learners felt a sense of instructor presence when they listened to the instructor’s voice and could hear the nuance and tone. Today it is believed that while the type of media used has some influence on social presence in online environments, social presence has more to do with how well individuals participating in online learning are successful in acknowledging or disregarding the presence of the medium (Lombard & Ditton, 1997) and feel that they are together with others (Biocca, Burgoon, Harms, & Stoner, 2001), as previously mentioned.

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) have incorporated social and teaching presence in their Community of Learning and Inquiry model, viewing these two types of presence as elements of cognitive presence. From their perspective, social presence and teaching presence have to do with how instructor and learners, via online technology, individually and socially see each other as “real people.”

Palloff and Pratt (2007) consider social presence to be a critical element in online community building. They say that in online environments there is a greater chance for learners to feel isolated because of a sense of loss of contact and connection with others. Social presence gives learners a feeling of connecting and belonging to a community.

For learners like our hypothetical Amanda, considering the social aspect of presence when designing a course can help reduce feelings of isolation. And if Carlos addresses the social aspect of presence, he can adapt and incorporate group activities that mirror the strategies he uses in his face-to-face course.

## **The Psychological Aspect**

In the second perspective, according to Lombard and Ditton (1997), presence is a psychological state in which the technology becomes transparent to users, who no longer recognize it in the learning experience. In other words, an illusion is created in which the technology seems to disappear and people and locations that are actually separated feel that they are together in the same room.



Simulations are an example of online environments in which technology becomes transparent. Simulations involve the imitation of the real world in the virtual world. The technology creates an illusion of the real world so that the participants no longer perceive the existence of the medium (Lombard & Ditton, 1997).

However, it can be challenging for novice learners and instructors to achieve the feeling of transparency. They may feel anxious and reluctant about the online environment and focus on the technology rather than on the learning experience. After they become psychologically comfortable with the online environment, the technology is no longer a distraction and they have the potential to better experience presence.

We should clarify the term *virtual* as we use it in this book. We use the term in two ways: *virtual space* and *virtual world*. When we refer to the online environment, we are referring to the virtual space in which learners participate in the learning experience. When we use the term virtual world we are referring to a computer-based simulated environment that involves immersive experiences.

### **The Emotional Aspect**

The third perspective, emotional presence, is the ability to genuinely show feelings through words, symbols, and interactions with others in the online environment. In this process, learners and instructors are emotionally present when they connect with others in an authentic way during the online learning experience.

We humans are perceptual by nature, dynamically interacting in the perceptual environment to create representations of our world that allow us to organize information into stories or self-narratives. Our perceptual environment is our awareness of all sensory information (Noe, 2005), which includes a recognition of our own body and inner self. This awareness provides us with information about the external world, the body, and the internal world. Our perceptual process manages and integrates this information, and represents it to us consciously and unconsciously. During this process, emotions affect our behavior and thought and our experience of presence. Emotions are key to perception; they guide us to focus on particular aspects of a situation, enable us to concentrate on that situation, connect the affective to the cognitive, and to arrive at thoughtful and appropriate decisions for our actions (Alcañiz, Bañoa, Botella, & Rey, 2003).

The emotional aspect of presence includes the active process of receiving, responding to, valuing, organizing, and characterizing what is important (Krathwohl, Bloom, & Masia, 1964). Emotions are a kind of gatekeeper for our perceptions and act both with and without the intervention of thought. We need to consider the role of emotion in online learning because it helps us recognize the environment where learning takes place: online interactions among participants and the creation of a learning community.

**Environment Where Learning Takes Place** The online environment is often defined based on how an individual observes and perceives something concrete, such as the type of technology used in the course, the type of the learning community formed, the interactive strategies implemented, the role played by the instructor, and the content. These aspects of the online environment are often recognized by instructors when they design face-to-face courses, where emotional cues are easily recognized because of their physical closeness to participants. But in the online environment, they need to be intentionally included in order to create presence.

The concept of presence is rarely considered in the design of an online environment because it is difficult to understand how it will play out in the learning experience. But when a course is designed with presence in mind, the experience comes alive and the learning process is driven by the dynamic interplay between thought, emotion, and behavior.

**Online Interactions Among Participants** Technological advances and the use of the Internet in online learning have changed the way we view online interactions among participants. Today these interactions are evolving: life is increasingly virtual as we carry out more and more of our communications and transactions via the Web; instructors increasingly serve as guides and mentors for learners; learners express the desire to be emotionally interconnected with other people even when they can't see them; and feelings of "being there" and behaving socially with other people are expressed through social networking tools. Thus Carlos needs not only to be familiar with the design of online courses but also to be aware of emerging technologies.

These kinds of changes are beginning to lead instructors and designers to rethink how to create online learning environments that are socially interactive,

create learning communities, and help learners feel a sense of presence during the online learning experience.

**Creation of an Online Learning Community** One way to consider emotion as a guide in the development of presence in online learning communities is to use collaborative and reflective communication among participants. Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) developed the Community of Inquiry Model through the occurrence of three elements that are essential for an online educational experience: cognitive, social, and teaching presence.

- *Cognitive presence* relates to thinking and involves the ability of learners to start, create, and validate meaning through reflection and dialogue in the online environment.
- *Social presence* involves personal and emotional connection to the group. In online environments, individuals are able to express themselves socially and emotionally in a genuine manner if the design of the course is successful. Social presence can facilitate cognitive presence because in order for learners to express their thoughts, ideas, and feelings in the online environment they need to feel comfortable relating to others.
- *Instructor presence* is the voice of the facilitator, who serves as a model for the critical discourse, provides constructive critique, and gives formative feedback. A successful educational experience involves the balance and interaction of cognitive, social, and instructor presence (Garrison, 2003).

There is no question that creating a sense of presence in the online environment is critical. As we already mentioned, people are social beings by nature, and today the Internet is one of our social spaces. Because of the differences between the physical space of the real world and the virtual space, our sense of presence is felt and experienced in different ways. In the physical space, presence is easier to recognize through observation and perception. In the virtual space, presence needs to be intentionally created. The feeling of presence in the virtual space is the result of the dynamic interplay of thought, emotion, and behavior between the private world and the shared world. It is rooted in the interactive perceptual process. While most research focuses on cognitive, social, and teaching presence, this book considers them, but sees a perceptual systems approach as central to the design process. Designing with a sense of

presence starts with an awareness of presence and places the learner at the center of the design process.

In the beginning of this chapter, we introduced you to Amanda and Carlos. Amanda did not know why she felt lonely, anxious, and isolated even before her online courses started. Carlos could not imagine how his interactive course could possibly be taught totally online. These two hypothetical cases present the typical concerns of novice learners and inexperienced instructors when working in the online environment. Their feelings of apprehension show how the concept of presence is elusive and hard to grasp when there is an unfamiliarity with this environment. We must take into consideration the social, psychological, and emotional aspects of presence and ways in which they influence participants' interactions in the online community.

## **SUMMARY**

In this chapter we discussed why fostering feelings of “being there” and “being together” are so important in creating online presence, and we provided an overview of the current research on presence. We also defined the concept of presence and explained the difference between presence and engagement, as well as the social, psychological, and emotional aspects of presence in the online environment. In Chapter 2, we will focus on how, according to perceptual research, presence can be experienced in the online environment, and we will introduce you to the Being There for the Online Learner model.