Developing an Online Course and Examining Learner Satisfaction

Serkan IZMIRLI

Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Educaton, Computer Education and Instructional Technology, 17010, Canakkale, Turkey, sizmirli@gmail.com

Ozden SAHIN IZMIRLI

Canakkale Onsekiz Mart University, Faculty of Educaton, Computer Education and Instructional Technology, 17010, Canakkale, Turkey, osahinizmirli@gmail.com

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine learner satisfaction towards techniques and strategies used to establish social presence in an online course. Qualitative research methodology was used. Study had two phases. In the first phase, an online course including techniques for establishing social presence was designed and developed. In the second phase, online course was offered to students. After the course, an open-ended question form was administered to students. Participants of the study were 22 senior undergraduate students at a public university in Turkey. Students took a course in a blended format. The online course was designed with techniques for establishing social presence. These techniques were course orientation videos, audio-visual meetings, providing frequent and detailed feedback, limiting class size, using sense of humor, using emoticons, addressing students by name, sharing personal stories and experiences, expressing agreement or disagreement, asking questions and inviting response and greetings. According to the findings, students were highly satisfied with the course which was designed and facilitated with social presence features.

Keywords: Social presence, learner satisfaction, online course design

Introduction

Social presence is defined by Short, Williams and Christie (1976) as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships". Social presence occurs if a person perceived as a "real person" in an online community (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).

Learner satisfaction in online learning environments is important since it positively affects student achievement (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018). Social presence positively affects learner satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Hostetter & Busch, 2006; Johnson, Hornik & Salas, 2008; Swan & Shih, 2005) and learner achievement (Richardson & Swan, 2003). In addition, Oyarzun, Barreto and Conklin (2018) found that instructor social presence positively affects learner achievement. Thus, it can be said that student and instructor presence have positive effects on learner satisfaction and achievement. There is limited study in that topic and this should be tested. In this context, the purpose of this study is to determine learner satisfaction towards techniques and strategies used to establish social presence in an online course.

There are some techniques and strategies for creating online presence in online courses. Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) offered some techniques to establish social presence:
- Introductions: Online courses should begin with introductions. For instance, course instructor and students can introduce themselves.
- Orientations: Short orientation videos can be used at the beginning of the course.
- Personalized detailed feedback: Instructor can provide feedback individually in different environments.
- Reconnecting: Instructors reconnect students with some activities to know their personality. With this activity, students can know each other's personality, too.
- Free-flowing, organic interactions: Twitter (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009) or Facebook groups (Izmirli, 2017) can help for interaction.

Aargon (2003) stated some strategies to establish social presence:
- Developing welcome message like a video introducing instructor and course.
- Including student profiles in the course web page
- Using audio
- Limiting class size (Maximum 30 students)
- Using collaborative activities
- Contributing discussion boards by instructors
- Answering e-mails
- Providing frequent feedback
- Opening a conversation
- Sharing personal stories and experiences
- Using humor
- Using emoticons
- Addressing students by name
- Allowing students option for addressing the instructor

Method

Design and Participants

Qualitative research methodology was used to determine learner satisfaction. Study had two phases. In the first phase, an online course including techniques for establishing social presence was designed and developed. In the second phase, online course was offered to students. After the course, an open-ended question form was administered to students.

Participants of the study were 22 senior undergraduate students at a public university in Turkey. 13 of them were male and nine of them were female. Their ages ranged from 20 to 28. Students took a course in a blended format. The online course was designed with techniques for establishing social presence.

Online Course Design and Development

An online course was designed and developed. Online course had two main environments. First one was learning management system (LMS) which is Moodle in here. Second one was web conferencing environment which is Adobe Connect in here. In the course, course design and facilitation strategies were considered to establish social presence. These are as follows:
- Course orientation video (Aargon, 2003; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018)
- Audio-visual meetings (Aargon, 2003; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997).
- Providing frequent and detailed feedback (Aargon, 2003; Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2018).
- Limiting class size (Aargon, 2003)
- Using sense of humor (Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison & Archer, 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)
- Using emoticons (Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2007; Rourke et al., 1999; Swan, 2003)
- Addressing students by name (Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)
- Sharing personal stories and experiences (Aargon, 2003)
- Expressing agreement or disagreement (Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)
- Asking questions and inviting response (Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)
- Greetings (Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)

While some techniques and strategies helped to design the course, the others helped to facilitate the course in terms of creating social presence.

Data Collection

An open-ended question form was prepared and used to collect data. In this form, students were asked for their satisfactions for each technique and strategy to establish social presence. Students stated their satisfactions for the design of LMS and web conferencing environment. In addition, students were asked for the overall course satisfaction with an open-ended and a 5 point likert-type question.

Data Analysis

In the analysis of qualitative data, descriptive analysis was used since there were predetermined codes which were techniques to establish social presence. In the analysis of quantitative data, mean was used.

Findings and Discussion

Learner satisfaction for online course design techniques and participant (course instructor and students) strategies to establish social presence are listed in predetermined themes. Themes are given in Table 1.

Table 1.
Themes for online course design techniques and participant strategies

Themes	Satisfied / Positive Opinions (f)	Not satisfied / Negative opinions (f)
Course orientation videos	21	-
Audio-visual meetings	19	3
Providing frequent and detailed feedback	20	1
Limiting class size in live course	9	4
Using sense of humor	18	5
Using emoticons	17	1
Addressing students by name	22	-
Sharing personal stories and experiences	18	4
Expressing agreement or disagreement	22	-
Asking questions and inviting response	20	-
Greetings	22	-

Course Orientation Videos

Instructor added a course orientation video in the beginning of the course in LMS. 21 students were satisfied with the course. Student 3 said that "It (adding course orientation video) created a sincere environment. Thanks to this, it was not hard to participate in the class". Student 7 expressed that "It was positive because instructors' introducing himself and course helped me to prepare for the course and to get used to the course". Another student stated that "Since there was a sincere speech, I was not shy in the course". Adding a course orientation video is very helpful for creating social presence and improving student satisfaction. This finding is parallel to Aargon's (2003) and Lowenthal and Dunlap's (2018) suggestion which is "introduction and orientation should be included in an online course to establish social presence."

Audio-Visual Meetings (Live Courses)

In this study, audio-visual meetings were conducted via Adobe Connect. Most students had positive opinions for online live meetings. Student 2 said that "There was a sincere environment. I think every course should be given online". Student 21 stated that "Live class provides everything equivalent to face-to-face class. It is like a real class. The only difference is that in the live class you are in front of the computer screen…". This finding was parallel to the literature. Aargon (2003) stated that using audio is a strategy to establish social presence. But audio-visual communication triggers more intimacy than audio-only communication since it contains eye-contact (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997). In addition to positive opinions, students stated technical problems like connecting to the live class. Student 5 expressed that "It (Live meeting) is perfect except technical problems".

Providing frequent and Detailed Feedback

Frequent and detailed feedback was provided to students in both LMS and live meeting. 20 students were satisfied with feedback provided. Student 9 said that "I felt that I was there (live class) and it is intimate like face-to-face class". Similarly, Aargon (2003) and Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) stated that providing frequent and detailed feedback enhance social presence. On the other hand, one student had negative opinion about feedback. He said that "Feedbacks are more effective in face-to-face classes. I think since live class was crowded, instructor cannot give feedback to everyone…." (Student 7).

Limiting Class Size in Live Course

Live class size was 22. While nine students were satisfied with class size in live course, four students were not satisfied. Student 13 expressed that "Class size in live class is good. But if the number of students increases, some students cannot engage in class actively. In that case, some students may drop out". Student 10 who had negative opinion said that "Class size is high. Some students cannot engage in lesson". According to this finding, it can be said that class size should be smaller than 22. In the literature there is no consensus on class size in an online course. Tomei (2006) found that ideal online class size is 12. Orellana (2006) found that optimal online class size is 18.9 to have interaction. More studies are needed to determine ideal online class size.

Using Sense of Humor

Both instructor and student used sense of humor in both LMS and live meeting. Instructor used it intentionally to establish social presence. Most of the students were satisfied with the sense of humor in online course. One student said that "When sense of humor was used, I felt that I was in face-to-face class. I was at my home but it is like I am in the class…" (Student 16). This finding is parallel to the literature (e.g. Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2007; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003). Some students stated their negative opinions about that topic. Student 1 said that "When it (sense of humor) was overused, we could not have effective lesson".

Using Emoticon

Emoticons were used in LMS and live meeting by instructor and student. 17 students were satisfied with emoticons. Student 3 expressed that "Using emoticon was good because I felt that I was in the face-to-face class". Another student said that "Using emoticon showed that people were sincere. There was not a serious environment thanks to emoticons. I felt happy" (Student 16). Just one student had negative opinion. She said that "I don't think that it (using emoticon) is necessary" (Student 8). Like in the literature (e.g. Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2007; Rourke et al., 1999; Swan, 2003), using emoticon should be used to establish social presence.

Addressing Students by Name

Instructor addressed students by name in LMS and live meetings. All students were satisfied with being addressed by their names. Student 6 said that "I was satisfied that my instructor addressed me by my name. My interest towards course increased". Student 17 expressed that "It (Being addressed by name) affected me positively because I understood that instructor knew me. One of the most important things for a student is being addressed by name. Because it is motivating". This finding is parallel to the literature (e.g. Aargon, 2003; Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003).

Sharing Personal Stories and Experiences

Both instructor and students shared their personal stories and experiences in LMS and live meetings. While 18 students have positive opinions, four students have negative opinions. Student 3 expressed her positive opinion with saying "I felt that it (sharing personal stories and experiences) created an environment as if I was in the classroom". Student 9 said that "… it was good since it helped to create a sincere environment". According to this result, Aragon's (2003) suggestion was confirmed. On the contrary, Student 8 said that "When it takes too much time, it affects the lesson negatively".

Expressing Agreement or Disagreement

In live courses, instructor and students expressed their agreements or disagreements by verbal expression or written text. All students were satisfied with expressing agreements and disagreements. Student 10 said that "Expressing agreement/disagreement positively affected the interaction between student and course". Student 21 expressed that "It provides that we participate in the lesson actively". This finding is parallel to the literature (Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003)

Asking Questions and Inviting Response

Instructor asked questions and invited response in live meetings. 20 students stated that they were satisfied with being asked questions and being invited response. Student 7 said that "Being asked questions and being invited response affected me positively". Besides student 16 expressed that "Instructor increased my motivation by asking me questions". This finding is parallel to the literature (e.g. Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003).

Greetings

Instructor greeted students with a friendly "hello" in each live meeting. All students had positive opinions about greetings. Student 8 said that "Greetings provides a more sincere environment". Another student expressed that "I think it (greetings) creates a friendly class environment" (Student 13). This finding is parallel to the literature (e.g. Izmirli, 2017; Rourke et al., 1999; Richardson et al., 2015; Swan, 2003).

Students' Overall Satisfaction

20 students were satisfied with the online course in general. Student 16 stated that "I was so satisfied in general. I want to do it (participation to online course) again. Many thanks for everything". Student 18 said that "I was satisfied. Course was more comfortable, sincere and understandable". Students were asked to answer a quantitative question (5 point likert-type) to measure their overall satisfaction. Students' mean score was 4,59 which meant that students were highly satisfied with the course.

Conclusion and Suggestions

The purpose of this study was to determine student satisfaction towards techniques and strategies used to establish social presence in an online course. In the online course, some techniques and strategies were used to create social presence. These were course orientation videos, audio-visual meetings, providing frequent and detailed feedback, limiting class size, using sense of humor, using emoticons, addressing students by name, sharing personal stories and experiences, expressing agreement or disagreement, asking questions and inviting response and greetings. Students were highly satisfied with the course which was designed and facilitated with social presence features. Students had mostly positive opinions for the online course. Instructional designers and course instructors should consider social presence while designing an online course.

This study has some limitations. Firstly, the study was conducted on online part of a blended course. Research studies should be conducted on fully online courses to find out learner satisfaction regarding social presence features. Secondly, participants of the study were senior undergraduate students. Studies with different participants can be conducted. Thirdly, the study examined student satisfaction. The effects of social presence features in online courses on achievement can be examined with experimental studies.

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