Introduction to Social Presence

"Recent literature has shown that social presence is one of the most significant factors in improving instructional effectiveness and building a sense of community." (Aragon)

What is Social Presence?

The definition of social presence varies by researcher and research study. Much of the information about social presence is found within the communications field. The underlying theory of social presence is based on the early work of Short, Williams, and Christie (1976), who define social presence as the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships." Two concepts closely related in social presence include intimacy and immediacy. Intimacy is dependent upon nonverbal cues, such as eye contact and smiling. Immediacy is the psychological distance that a person puts between himself or herself and the object of communication. A high level of social presence will create a safe environment that motivates and supports learners, ultimately engaging them in the learning process. For the purpose of this study social presence will be defined as "a sense of being and belonging in a course."

Why is it important?

Social presence research indicates that students' perceptions of social presence have an influence on satisfaction with online courses. Social presence is especially important for distance education settings because good student outcomes are consistently tied to feelings of "community" "immediacy" and "connection." Each of these feelings are significantly influenced by the degree of social presence a faculty member has in her/his course. Being "present" doesn't substitute for good syllabi, educated and articulate faculty, or well designed assignments – but it does supplement them to create a better learning environment.

About the Research

Research currently available states that social presence improves student satisfaction with online courses.   The goals of this project are to verify that these results are consistent with our DE population and identify specific strategies that create and develop social presence. After a review of literature we have determined that there are three primary components of social presence: self-presentation, interaction, and safe environment. For each of the three components we have developed training modules that include an introduction to the theory/concepts, group activity, and suggested strategies—which we are asking you to implement in the upcoming semester.

Based on published survey instruments, we developed a survey to determine which components affect student perception of social presence. In the Spring semester we conducted a pre-survey in order to establish a baseline for comparison with future survey results. With information gained from the initial survey results and literature reviews we developed a list of strategies to implement and study for effectiveness.

In order to determine which strategies are effective, we will survey the students in both of your online courses in late August and mid November. Once we collect the survey data, we will analyze the results and share our findings with you in early January.

How You Are Involved

 We have recruited faculty—you, to teach two online classes. In one class you will use the suggested social presence strategies and in your other class we are asking that you not use the suggested strategies. We understand that there will be some cross over with the social presence techniques, and that you may already be implementing some of the strategies. Throughout the semester we will check in with you and be available to answer questions. We have created a Blackboard course to supplement the Social Presence project. The Blackboard course will provide access to the recorded face-to-face training, handouts, group activity summaries, and Discussion Boards for collaboration.