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Section III: Social Presence as Learners' Perceptions

Cultural Perspectives on Social Presence: Research and Practical Guidelines for Online Design

Charlotte N. Gunawardena

Social presence or the degree to which an individual is perceived as a “real person” in mediated communication has been established by distance education research as a key ingredient of the social environment of online learning (Rourke, Anderson, & Garrison, 2001; Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems, & Buuren, 2011; Richardson & Swan, 2003). I became intrigued by the concept of social presence developed by Short, Williams and Christie (1976) when I conducted an inter-university collaboration called “GlobalEd” among graduate students in several universities using a listserv. In my initial exploration of this inter-university collaboration, I found that even though computer-mediated communication is a text-based medium low in non-verbal and social context cues, it was perceived as interactive, active, interesting, and stimulating by conference participants. However, it was the kind of interactions that took place between online participants and their sense of community that impacted their perceptions of the medium as a “social medium.” (Gunawardena, 1995). Examining the two concepts of social presence and interaction, Rafaeli (1988, 1990) had observed that social presence is a subjective measure of the presence of others as Short et al. (1976) defined it, while “interactivity” is

the actual quality of a communication sequence or context. Interactivity is a quality (potential) that may be realized by some, or remain and unfulfilled option. When it is realized, and when participants notice it, there is "social presence". Therefore, I realized that it is important to examine how social presence is generated in interactive sequences and how participants communicate their "immediacy" or psychological distance in interactive sequences.

This realization began my deeper exploration into social presence and its role in online communication. In a second study researching a revised implementation of GlobalEd, we found that among eight independent variables social presence was a strong predictor of learner satisfaction (the dependent variable) in a computer conference (Gunawardena and Zittle 1997). This finding established the key role of social presence in online communication. The social presence and satisfaction scales we developed for this study, were considered valid and reliable by Cobb (2009) who encouraged further use of these scales in educational research. Additional findings in the Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) study showed that participants who felt a higher sense of social presence within the conference, enhanced their socio-emotional experience by using emoticons to express missing nonverbal cues in written form. Conversely, participants who judged social presence low seemed to not want to enhance their socio-emotional expression through this text-based medium. Did this group just throw up their hands in social frustration and try to muddle through a tedious CMC experience? Or was the social component ever important to them? This raises the question of individual differences along personality or social-psychological lines, and begs the need for future research to investigate individual differences as mediating factors in developing the social environment for online learning.

The first awareness that the degree of social presence desired may be different for learners from diverse cultural backgrounds came when we conducted a study of online group process and group development with Mexican and United States (U.S.) participants (Gunawardena et al. (2001). We found that social presence emerged as a theme addressed by both U.S. and Mexican focus group participants. U.S. participants felt that social presence is important to the smooth functioning of the group, to provide a sense that the members of the group are real people. Social presence can build trust and lead to self-disclosure, and building relationships certainly enhances civility online. The Mexican focus group participants on the other hand, felt that having personal information about the participants was not important. For these participants, the way interaction happens online and how participants contribute to the conference is far more important than knowing personal information about participants. There were differences in the way that U.S. participants and Mexican participants perceived social presence and some of these differences could be attributed to cultural differences. Given the power distance that exists in Mexican society (Hofstede, 1980), Mexican participants looked to the online medium as an equalizing medium that equalizes status differences present in society, and therefore did not want their peers to interject social context cues that would take away the equalizing power of the online environment.

Given that the degree of social presence desired can be different for diverse learners, we need to broaden our understanding of this concept as online learning expands globally to ask questions such as: How do learners from diverse cultural backgrounds perceive social presence? How does culture influence the perception of online social presence? In this chapter I begin to explore these questions, first, with a definition of culture for the online learning context, and then an exploration of how culture can

influence the perception of social presence online. I review literature that has examined cultural differences in the perception of social presence and present one of my previously published studies that explored cultural perspectives on “social presence,” and properties related to the construct “social presence” in informal online communication in the Moroccan and Sri Lankan sociocultural contexts (Gunawardena, et al. 2006, Gunawardena et al. 2009). Based on these discussions, I conclude the chapter with practical guidelines for designing online social presence with culture in mind.

Definition of Culture

Culture is a complex concept to define. For the online context, a good beginning is the early definition put forward by Edward T. Hall “Culture is communication and communication is culture” (Hall, 1959, p. 186), as it focuses on both culture and communication where social presence is generated. This definition also accommodates the notion that culture can be negotiated online through a communication process mediated by technology interfaces that themselves are culturally produced. Also, Hall’s distinction between high context (indirect) communication where many things are left unsaid letting the context explain, and low context (direct) explicit communication plays a role in online communication. While researchers have used Hofstede’s (1980) cultural dimensions (power distance, individualism-collectivism, masculinity-femininity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation) to describe online cultures, we have found that these bi-polar dimensional constructs can be limiting when applied to the online context. For instance in our study of group process and group development in Mexico and the U.S. discussed above (Gunawardena, et al. 2001), we found that although Mexico is considered a high power distance country by Hofstede, the Mexican

participants approach the online medium as a liberating one that equalizes status differences. Therefore, their interactions online would not necessarily reflect high power distance communication.

A definition of culture that is flexible, dynamic, and negotiable is more appropriate to understand the online learning context. To conceptualize cultures that emerge online and accommodate the notion of culture as negotiated by online participants whose ethnic, gender, and religious identities are enacted, or concealed, or merged into hybrid identities, we (Gunawardena, Idrissi Alami, Jayatilleke, & Bouacharine, 2009) adopted the definition of “idioculture,” a concept developed by Gary Alan Fine and cited by Cole and Engestrom (2007), in their work.

“Idioculture consists of a system of knowledge, beliefs, behaviors, and customs shared by members of an interacting group to which members can refer and employ as the basis of further interaction. Members recognize that they share experiences in common, and these experiences can be referred to with the expectation that they will be understood by other members, and further can be employed to construct a social reality (Fine, 1979, p. 734).

This definition focuses on the interacting unit, that culture is experienced as part of a communication system of a small group. It accommodates the idea of culture as emerging from a local activity system such as Internet communication (Cole & Engestrom, 2007), where multiple cultural selves and hybrid identities interact with each other to form unique cultures of their own. Cole and Engestrom noted that by focusing on the interacting unit, Fine showed that each group has to some extent a culture of its own, which he refers to as the idioculture. This definition allows for the development of culture through communication, by dialoguing, sharing experiences, and interacting with each

other. It supports the concept of a “discourse community,” groups that have goals or purposes and use communication to achieve these goals (Swales, 1990). The definition of idioculture fits well with the ephemeral, fluid nature of the Internet that fuels the development of cybercultures, cultures that emerge among those who use the Internet to communicate, developing their own etiquette, norms, customs, ethics, and mythology, just as an idioculture does (Gunawardena & Jung, 2014). I use this definition to conceptualize culture and focus on the interacting unit as I explore the role of culture in social presence.

Review of Literature on Culture and Perceptions of Social Presence

Only a few studies have examined cultural perceptions of social presence. Tu (2001) found that Chinese students perceived online communication as a more comfortable medium to express their thoughts because of the lack of confrontation and face-saving concerns and thus increased their social presence in an interactive online collaborative learning environment. But, on the other hand, they were concerned that their messages might appear in public areas and cause them to lose face and privacy. In a subsequent study, Yen and Tu (2011) confirmed that the results of their study suggested that cultural groups perceived online social presence in a slightly different manner.

Al-Harhi (2005) conducted in-depth telephone interviews with Arab students in order to understand how they perceived the values related to study in an American distance learning program and found that for Arab students the lack of physical presence in the online environment was seen as a positive feature because, in addition to accessibility advantages, it provided a reduced risk of social embarrassment. Female Arab students in particular felt more comfortable studying online, as it allowed for an

easy conformity with the separation of genders that is traditional in Muslim culture. The notion of “shame” was also a factor in Al-Harhi’s (2005) study of Arab distance learners for whom guarding family reputation is key. One of the Arab female participants reported that she would log off an online discussion when joined by a fellow student who was acquainted with her family to avoid the risk saying anything that would reflect negatively on her family. This is an example of how social conventions that exist in the real world get translated into online interaction.

In a study that examined the impact of national culture and social presence on interpersonal trust in both culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous groups of Chinese and U.S. participants, Lowry, Zhang, Zhou, & Fu (2007) found that the level of individualism of group members, social presence, and group composition are important factors in trust building in both culturally homogeneous and heterogeneous groups. They observed that interpersonal trust is higher in homogeneous, low individualism groups (represented by Chinese participants) than in homogeneous, high individualism groups (represented by U.S. participants); however, interpersonal trust in heterogeneous groups is lower for low-individualism than high-individualism group members. They note that the development of interpersonal trust is particularly crucial and challenging when a group consists of high individualism members and/or when the group is culturally heterogeneous. They also found that social presence has a positive impact on interpersonal trust.

Yildiz (2009) examined how linguistic and cultural differences influenced social presence among graduate students in English as a Second Language (ESL) online courses which comprised both native and non-native speakers. The absence of social context cues in the Web-based forum provided non-native speakers with a reduced anxiety-

provoking environment in which they could interact with native English speakers more often and reveal personal information and express their beliefs, values, and attitudes. The forum environment also gave them an opportunity to talk about their native culture, which they indicated was rarely available to them in the face-to-face classroom because they found the face-to-face communication more challenging and face threatening. However, non-native speakers expressed concern that their contributions might be judged less favorably because of their less fluent English writing skills, while others found some of the American students too direct, and interpreted this directness as being impolite. Postings that expressed support and encouragement; revealed personal information; were personalized with greetings, closures, and/or vocatives; and showed interest in participants' native cultures were identified as high in social presence.

Whiteside and Dikkers (2012) discuss how to maximize multicultural online learning experiences with the five key elements: affective association, community cohesion, interaction intensity, knowledge and experience, and instructor investment of the social presence model developed by Whiteside, (2007). In explaining both the affective association and community cohesion elements, they discuss the important role of initial introductions to the online community that involves, greetings, social sharing and self-disclosure. Providing activities such as ice breakers that help learners to get to know each other better is a key social foundation for the rest of the course. Drawing from the work of Tu (2001) and Yildiz (2009), Whiteside and Dikkers (2012) point out the importance of including "netiquette" to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts.

This need to examine individual differences in the perception of social presence has been highlighted by Kear, Chetwynd, Jefferis' (2014) research examining the role of personal profiles in generating social presence. They found that when using online

forums, some students saw value in adding information and a photo to their personal profile, and found it helpful to read the profiles of other students, while others felt no need for personal profiles, had privacy concerns, or expressed the view that reading others' contributions was a better way to get to know them.

Champion (2006) has made an attempt to define the distinction between social presence and "cultural presence" in virtual worlds. He observes: "Perhaps textual communities can build an idea of social presence, but it can only be sustained if the users have an idea of whom they are talking to and what they (over time) consistently believe in" (p.96). He further notes: "To gain a full sense of cultural presence we also need to experience culture itself as a process rather than as a product (p. 96)." While the idea of "cultural presence" has to be developed further, Champion makes two important points: interaction is necessary to negotiate culture across space and time, and we need to experience culture as a process rather than as a product in online text-based communication.

The above review has highlighted aspects of culture and language that have an impact on the perception of social presence. These previous studies however, have examined social presence in academic contexts, studying learners who are already enrolled in university online courses. In order to develop a more comprehensive understanding of perceptions of social presence, it would be useful to examine how social presence is generated in informal use of the online medium. In the following study conducted predominantly with Internet Café users in two very different social and cultural contexts; Morocco and Sri Lanka, we examined how social presence is generated in chat forums, the more informal online communication undertaken by Internet chatters

who use synchronous or real time communication to build relationships with strangers (Gunawardena et al., 2006; and Gunawardena et al., 2009).

A Study of Culture and Perceptions Social Presence in Informal Chat

Employing qualitative ethnographic analysis (Merriam, 1998), and grounded theory building (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), my Moroccan and Sri Lankan colleagues and I explored cultural perspectives on “social presence,” in informal synchronous chat in the Moroccan and Sri Lankan sociocultural contexts and presented our findings in Gunawardena et al. (2006), and Gunawardena et al. (2009). I discuss excerpts from this study here to show how culture played a role in the generation of social presence in informal chat by Internet Café users in Morocco and Sri Lanka. Morocco is a predominantly Arab and Moslem country speaking Moroccan Arabic and French, and Sri Lanka is a predominantly Buddhist country, speaking Sinhala, Tamil, and English. Both countries are similar in that they have diverse minority groups with different languages and religions represented in the population. At the time the study was conducted (2004-2005), social media and social networking had not made its entry into the Internet communication scene in these two countries and chat was the more favored form of informal communication. Asynchronous text-based communication in forums was considered more formal and academic and hardly used by Internet chatters.

The study objectives were: a) to explore “social presence” in online communication from a cultural perspective, and b) to determine the properties or characteristics related to the construct “social presence” in the two sociocultural contexts. In addition, we wanted to examine questions such as: (a) What techniques do people use to reveal their persona online? (b) What cues prompt them to reveal their true self to a

person they do not know? (c) How do they negotiate their identity online? d) How do they build trust? e) How do they resolve conflict? and f) How do they use language? Interview questions were developed from these research questions and the study was conducted using a qualitative research paradigm to enable ethnically and culturally appropriate understanding of the factors that influence online communication. Interviews were conducted with fifty five adults in Morocco which included 36 males and 19 females, and with fifty adults in Sri Lanka which included 33 males and 17 females. In both these countries, fewer women frequented Internet Cafes, reflecting social taboos. In Morocco, the Café was the domain of men and this transferred to the concept of the Internet Café as well. In a mid size town in Sri Lanka, Galle, only one in ten users was a female.

Social Presence. Analysis of interviews conducted in Morocco and Sri Lanka indicate that social presence emerged as a central phenomenon in the communication patterns of Internet chatters. From the point of first contact, Chatters spend their time trying to figure out how “real” the other person is. As the communication sequences develop, Chatters use a variety of techniques to establish the “realness” of the other, and generate the “realness” of their own persona for the other. It is when this feeling of realness is established to some extent that relationship building occurs. Participants who engage in online communication describe their sense of presence in different idioms. Some talk about “feeling” from the language and ideas what the other users’ reality is, and “knowing” whether they lie or tell the truth. Group identity seems to play a determining influence in constructions of identity and formation of attitudes. Some Chatters admitted that they pose as Europeans or claim a different gender identity. In so doing they reveal the complex web of cultural codes and social patterns of behaviors that

enable them to construct a variety of scenarios based on group identity.

Self-disclosure. Many participants indicated that the realness of the other is expressed through disclosure of private life. They insist on the importance of personal experiences, intimate problems as well as ideas to get to know each other better. For Driss, a chatter who talks about his/her personal problems inspires confidence. When asked at what point they really trust the other person to ask for personal information such as photos, most said that they will use a webcam when available, but will only ask for photos after they have been in a chat communication over several weeks and if they trust the person. If the person is in the same town, they may even meet.

In establishing social presence, Youssef presents his personae depending on the person he talks with. If he feels that the other person is forthcoming with information about himself/herself, he would do the same. If not, he would discuss issues with some reservation. Hamid usually suggests a topic for discussion and if the person expresses himself/herself spontaneously, he feels that they are honest. He tests the person first and finds out about their intellectual level through questions and opinions. Hassan stressed the importance of initial contact in establishing social presence. He tries to make funny remarks starting with his/her pseudo name. He always insists on introducing himself on the positive side. Badr stressed the importance of conveying social presence through ideas, grasping how the other person thinks. Hamid insists on honesty in generating presence. He depends on the “feel” of the conversation in the nature of the personal details given. In creating social presence online, trust and honesty are important. Spending time in online chatting helps to determine if the person is genuine.

Ideas or opinions that acknowledge the chatter’s culture such as feasts, national holidays...generate a feeling of seriousness and enhance social presence. For Habiba, a

chatter from the West who asks about her culture indicates seriousness and interest. She was happy after Ramadan to find a message saying “Blessed Eid” which meant the person was seriously interested in getting to know her. There is a difference between Moroccan women and Sri Lankan women in the amount of self disclosure they are comfortable with, the latter hardly divulging information on private life in a chat forum.

Trust Building. Social presence is closely linked to building trust. From the initial encounter chatters spend their time trying to determine the trustworthiness of the other, which in turn leads to an enhanced sense of presence. The most common trust building technique is to ask a series of questions in the initial online contact and ask the same questions again later to determine the consistency or inconsistency in the answers. Many mentioned time as an important factor for building trust. This is clear in the technique of using questions over time and repeating them to establish continuity and sameness. When asked about how he trusts the information the other person delivers, Youssef said that when people give their e-mail and their personal information, that means that he can somewhat trust them. Many will not reveal their true identity until they can trust the other person. Zakaria feels that a person can be trusted depending on the conversation and how it unfolds. From the questions and answers and their pattern, he is able to know whether that person is being serious or not. Participants talked about giving photographs or mobile phone numbers when they feel the chatter is trustworthy. Trust and honesty are important for the relationship to continue. When trust is established there is an enhanced sense of social presence.

Anonymity. Anonymity increases the ability to self-disclose, and generate a heightened sense of social presence. In a high-power distance society like Morocco, online communication equalizes participants. Respondents felt that talking online can

break barriers to communication between the sexes that exists in more traditional areas of Moroccan society. This view was expressed by Sri Lankans as well, but to a lesser extent. Anonymity also encourages relationships that are superficial. A Sri Lankan male noted that it is not necessary to reveal the truth because he does not have the intention of continuing the friendship.

Conflict Resolution. The nature of the relationship determines reactions to insults and the resolution of conflict. Chatters will close the window if the relationship is weak and employ a variety of techniques to resolve conflict if the relationship is stronger. Generally, they would first seek an explanation and then decide on other courses of action, such as shutting down the communication, ignoring the person, insulting back, or asking for an apology. An apology is requested if the person or the relationship is valued. E-mail is resorted to in order to clarify the situation, settle misunderstandings and present apologies. Email is preferable if the relationship has been going on for a long time and if the insulted person thinks that it is not intentional but a result of a misunderstanding. Therefore, attempts to resolve conflict depend on the strength of the relationship that has been built and the reality of the other. Face saving strategies are adopted when there is a bond and when there is an interest in maintaining the relationship. If not, in the real-time world of chat, the general tendency is to close the window and forget the person.

Use of Additional Media. Chatters enhance their social presence by using other media such as mobile phones and webcams. It was fairly common to see chatters talking to the same person on the mobile phone while chatting online. Some Moroccans spoke Arabic on the mobile phone and French online indicating their versatility in moving between different languages. The use of the two types of media enhanced their presence and connection with each other. If in the same country, chatters give out their mobile

phone numbers in order to verify the trustworthiness of the person. The phone call thus established credibility and the reality of the other. Most respondents prefer e-mail when the online relationship gets longer and stronger. They feel that email communication is more “serious” and “honest” than chat. Another advantage of email is that there is less time pressure to answer immediately. Some cannot write fast and this can affect the flow of communication and even the chatter’s interest. Therefore, the speed of writing can be a factor in generating social presence.

Emoticons. Some chatters used emoticons (icons that express emotion) or smileys to enhance their presence and express their emotions. Others stated that they use text to express their emotions. Hamid expresses his personae through icons. He is very interested in showing that he is a man and that he is Moroccan, and that in Morocco the man is the one that decides for the woman. When asked if women continue to keep talking to him after this admission, he said that they keep on the discussion to know more about his perspectives and that it is a good way to exchange cultural aspects about the topic.

Innovation of Language Forms. Communicating in the native language, or short forms of the native language using a Latin keyboard increases the level of social presence. Many Moroccans chat in French. Some use Moroccan Arabic expressions in Latin script to connect more closely and enhance their presence. Moroccan Arabic is an oral language and its transliteration in Latin script enhances presence and the connection between communicators. Hassan thinks that he can convey his true feelings by using Moroccan Arabic expressions when the other party knows it. Mounia chats in English and French and switches to French when she gets angry. She felt that insulting in Moroccan Arabic is “low” and despicable, but insulting in French is acceptable. Many who were fluent in

French and Arabic indicated that French would be the language to use for insults as insulting in Arabic would lower their status. For Mustapha, changing languages would mean that he is weak and that he is not courageous, so, he would continue in the same language. Khalid sometimes uses Moroccan Arabic because the expression is shorter than French. For example, “how are you?” in Arabic is “ki dayer?” They may mix both French and Arabic if chatters understand Moroccan Arabic.

The level of language as well as the quality of opinions help chatters build each other’s profiles. Kenza relies on language (idiomatic expressions such as the ones associated with native French speakers) to generate social presence. Abdelali examines the English used by chatters and the amount of mistakes made especially if the person claims to be from an English speaking country such as the U.K. or U.S.A. to determine if the person is trustworthy. In this case, the level of language use can be a factor in creating social presence and establishing credibility.

Similar innovations in the use of language was observed in Sri Lanka. In Sri Lanka, the predominant chat language is English for both ethnic groups, the Sinhalese and the Tamils. However, chatters often write their native language Sinhala or Tamil using the English alphabet. Sinhala is a phonetic language and can be written using the English alphabet. Ramani, explained that writing in Sinhala generates more feeling than writing in English. Sri Lankans also felt that phrases such as “machan” or “buddy” when written in English generate closeness and social presence. Very often they code switch moving from one language to the other. Innovations in the use of language to adapt to communication via chat was one of the most interesting findings of this study.

Summary of Results. Results of this study indicate that social presence is key to building online relationships. Several dimensions emerged from the analysis which can

be related to the construct “social presence.” They include self disclosure, trust building, anonymity, conflict resolution, emoticon use, and the innovation of language forms to generate immediacy. The following propositions emerged from the data analysis: (1) There is a relationship between social presence and disclosure of private life. Participants tend to expect chatters to tell them about their problems, because that makes them “real”; (2) social presence is closely linked to building trust. When trust is established there is an increased sense of social presence; (3) anonymity increases the ability to self-disclose, and generate a heightened sense of social presence; and (4) communicating in the native language, or short forms of the native language using a Latin keyboard increases the sense of social presence. These findings provide guidance for designing social presence in online learning environments.

Practical Guidelines for Designing Online Social Presence with Culture in Mind

Drawing from the discussion of previous research, and my own experience designing online learning environments for the past twenty-five years, I present practical guidelines for designing social presence considering the diversity presented by national and ethnic cultures, as well as the emergence of culture through interaction in group spaces on the Internet. As you read through the following guidelines it is important to keep in mind that the level of social presence desired will be different for each interacting participant. Knowing one’s learners and the context will help to design appropriate social presence strategies.

Introductions and Self Disclosure. Online courses usually begin by asking participants to introduce themselves to the online community. This activity is very important as it can generate social presence, build relationships and trust to help

participants connect with each other and develop the social environment that supports online learning. However, the expression of identity and the amount of self-disclosure that participants are comfortable with will vary depending on cultural background and gender. For some, self-disclosure is not easy. Others would prefer a degree of anonymity. Posting photographs with introductions can lead to stereotyping and reduce anonymity. Therefore, it is important to carefully develop self-presentation activities. One technique is to ask students to post an image that represents them and to explain why they chose that image. There will be a certain level of self-disclosure in the description of the image, but it would also maintain a level of anonymity. Since many students would not know how to introduce themselves online, it is a good strategy to provide guidelines on how to do so, being mindful of issues related to identity expression, self-disclosure, and power-distance. Where self-presentation is difficult, introducing each other online may be more comfortable. In a cross-cultural graduate student collaboration with a university in China, I paired one of my students in the U.S. with a Chinese student, and they learned about each other via e-mail and introduced each other online. In another context, a faculty development program in Sri Lanka where participants were new to online learning, I provided the following guidelines for online introductions that worked well to generate a sense of presence.

1. Tell us about your professional interests (and not your job title.)
2. Tell us about any personal interests such as your hobbies that you feel comfortable sharing.
3. Upload a picture/image that reflects you and say why it reflects your character. Do not upload your photograph. If you would like to use an image from a website such as Google Images ©, check the copyright and ask permission first, before

you use it.

Developing an Inclusive Learning Community. Depending on the role, the facilitator or instructor or teacher plays a critical role in facilitating social presence and building an inclusive environment for online learning. It is critical to maintain the online environment as an equal playing field where all participants have the opportunity to participate and feel comfortable communicating their opinions. As in the study discussed earlier on group process and development, Mexican participants looked to the online medium as an equalizing medium, and therefore, it is critical to prevent the interjection of social context cues present in society that might make the online environment less equal. The facilitator must make the concepts of community and interaction central to the online learning experience, so participants see the value of interacting with each other and learning from each other, not worrying about status differences. The facilitator should engage students in community-building activities. One of the activities I have used as a facilitator at the beginning of the course is a “Mutual Interests” forum/discussion where students connect with each other and share their common interests and get to know each other better. Once students have introduced themselves to each other and posted in the Mutual Interests forum, I develop a gallery of student profiles, noting their accomplishments, skills, interests, and the images they posted, and share it with the class. This indicates the facilitator’s interest in each online student and is well received by adult learners. Another technique that has worked well is the “Help Wanted, Help Given” forum that stays open throughout the semester where students post their requests for help. I encourage students to help each other in this forum and very often peers, and sometimes the facilitator provides the help they need. Students who use this forum gradually begin an informal peer mentoring process helping and supporting each other. Once the learning

community is established in the beginning of the course and participants feel comfortable with each other, they take charge of their learning. Therefore, facilitators need to spend a great deal of time and effort at the beginning on an online course to develop the social environment that will support learning.

Informal Social Spaces. Very often at the beginning of online courses, students are nervous about formal asynchronous discussion spaces as they feel their contributions to class topics may be inadequate, sometimes because of lack of fluency in English, and at other times if they are worried about their writing skills or are new to the discipline or topic. Others, such as participants in Morocco in the research study discussed earlier, make a clear distinction between formal and informal online spaces and will contribute differently in the two types of spaces. Therefore, an informal virtual space assigned for social interaction where participants can demonstrate a sense of their own social presence and feel fully represented may make many comfortable to enter online discussions.

Therefore a “Virtual Pub,” or a “Virtual Café,” or a “Virtual Canteen,” depending on the cultural context within which the course is developed can ease communication anxiety and provide a space to practice online discussions. An activity that has worked well in this separate social space in two different cultural contexts, the U.S.A. and Sri Lanka is when I ask students to discuss the biggest risk they have taken in their lives, where students are asked to complete the sentence: “The biggest risk I have taken in my life is...” This activity generates camaraderie and social presence in addition to making students feel comfortable to talk online. Another fun activity is to run a virtual Costume party – an activity where social presence and interaction can be generated by asking participants to assume identities allowing for identity play and then describe their costumes so class members can guess their identity.

Designing Formats for Interaction. Designing for inclusion means creating opportunities for learners to choose among learning activities that reflect different ways to communicate, interact, and process information. In predominantly asynchronous courses, real time (synchronous) interaction with other learners and the instructor through chat or desktop conferencing builds a sense of social presence. Those who are unable to attend will benefit from listening to the recording. Carefully developing formats for interaction such as story telling, and sharing experiences, can ease many learners to feel comfortable in online spaces.

Facilitator/Instructor/Teacher Presence. First, facilitators must reflect on their own cultural programming and own cultural biases and how these would influence communication before they engage in facilitating online learning for diverse learners. Continuous self-reflection is key to keeping oneself in check and to know if an incident or situation was handled appropriately. In a networked learning environment, the facilitator plays a critical role in connecting learners, generating interaction, and maintaining a healthy social environment. Building trust and caring about student responses will enable the facilitator to build a conducive environment among diverse learners. Using private e-mail to provide guidance and feedback is often appreciated. This is specially important if a conflict or a difficult situation has occurred in discussion spaces.

Social presence research reviewed in Gunawardena (1995) has shown that teacher immediacy behaviors include both verbal and nonverbal actions such as gesturing, smiling, using humor, vocal variety, personalizing examples, addressing students by name, making eye contact, questioning, praising, reinforcing, initiating discussion, sharing personal experiences, encouraging feedback and providing timely feedback.

Facilitators play an important role in community building activities, facilitating discussions, summarizing, and by being present online frequently. Timely feedback, encouraging participation, and rewarding contributions are other techniques to demonstrate facilitator presence. Since social presence can be cultured, facilitators who are new to online teaching should be guided on how to create the appropriate amount of social presence for their learners and context.

Web-based learning environments incorporate multimedia formats that enable communication via video, graphics, audio, and text, and designers can use the capabilities of media appropriately to develop social presence techniques. One of my colleagues uses screen-capture video developed using “screencast-o-matic” © to guide students through the navigation of the course in order to increase instructor presence and reduce the sense of isolation that many online students may experience. Another possibility is to use a podcast for announcements, or to provide an overview of a module’s objectives and activities. Adding audio to textual information enhances the sense of presence and also assists differently abled students who use audio readers.

Orienting Students to Online Social Presence and Communication Protocols.

Designing for inclusivity involves orienting students to communication online. Rules of common courtesy should be used when interacting with people at any time, and in an online environment this is doubly important where body language and tone of voice is not seen and heard but inferred. Posting the Netiquette or the communication protocols for the class makes it easier for students to know what is expected of them. The following is an example of the netiquette my colleagues and I have developed and used in online courses we have taught in Sri Lanka and the USA:

1. Try to keep your messages short. One screenful or two.
2. Talk online as you would in a face-to-face class. Use simple language.
3. Review your messages and think about how they will be interpreted before you post them.
4. Provide the context necessary to interpret your message. This is especially important if you use words that have specific meanings in a specific culture. For example, always spell out the acronym the first time you use it in a message.
5. Make sure your emotions are interpreted accurately by using the appropriate smileys if you would like to use them. When we communicate online, we do not have the usual nonverbal cues that help us to communicate our message. Therefore, we need to be extra careful in considering how our written messages will be interpreted. To some extent you can compensate for the absence of traditionally and culturally communicated body language and other physical cues by using words and symbols, for example, smileys or emoticons or emojis, icons that express emotion, such as :-), :-(, or parenthetical metalinguistic cues such as (hmmmm,) to indicate you are thinking.
6. Humor and jokes are difficult to interpret online, so be careful when you use them, and give cues/hints to help in their interpretation. In an online environment, sensitive topics can be misunderstood easily. If you think someone has misunderstood you, try to discuss this misunderstanding via private e-mail and try to resolve it. If not ask the facilitator to help.
7. Do not insult each other online on a personal level. It is important that we create an environment where individuals feel comfortable to disagree with each other's

ideas. But we must learn to be polite to each other as we do this and disagree only on the level of ideas.

8. Most important, “Be human.” Do not forget that the person reading your message is, a person, with feelings that can be hurt. We hope that you will share your expert knowledge and help this online community grow, and that your online dialogues will be a rich experience for you.

Understanding learners from a cultural perspective is critical if we are to design inclusive online learning environments. This chapter has discussed cultural perceptions of social presence from previous research as well as my own research and experiences, and provided guidance for instructors and designers on how to facilitate social presence with culture in mind. Further discussion on how to design for cultural inclusivity is found in Frechette, Layne, and Gunawardena (2014). I hope that understanding how to develop culturally-inclusive online courses will be of interest to future designers and researchers alike.

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