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Online Community and Connectedness

• A Pilot Study •

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Objectives/Purposes

Do online students feel isolated and alone or does a sense of community and connectedness develop in online class environments? The poster presents the results of a survey that was conducted to determine if online “facelessness” blocks online students’ abilities to connect to their fellow online students and if being disconnected from their fellow students lessens their satisfaction with online courses.

Social presence and connectedness in online classes is a factor in student success and satisfaction. The sense of connectedness is also very elusive and a main complaint by many online students. This study, *Online Community and Connectedness* addresses a variety of social factors in both online and face-to-face classes in an effort to determine whether students are as satisfied with online classes as they are with face-to-face classes and what aspects of community and connectedness are important to students. Many researchers, such as those included in the following review, have addressed aspects of these issues.

Theoretical Framework

According to Tu (2000), social presence has been anemically defined as “the degree of person-to-person awareness.” (p. 1662) In a mixed-methods research study with 50 Arizona State University students Tu concluded that social presence is one of the most influential components of effective online instruction and therefore is “one of the most significant factors in Distance Education.”

In his 2002 study, Picciano explored the relationship between online students’ academic performance with their interactions and sense of presence. Picciano found that students who felt they had interacted at a high level had a high positive correlation with sense of presence and belonging in the class, and feeling that they had had a positive learning experience. The correlation between the sense of social presence and academic performance was also positive, but at a lesser level than the perceived success. Picciano’s work leads one to believe that students who feel comfortable and included will likely enjoy online classes more and perform better in them. Students who have this sense of social presence within an online class are likely to feel connected to their online classes and thus experience a sense of community that is important to online class success.

Rovai (2002) indicates that sense of community emerges in an online class when students feel a social presence and sense a connectedness with other students, thus not feeling isolated, a state that is significantly related to the high drop out rate in online classes. Rovai (2002) studied the importance of sense of community in his study “Sense of community, perceived cognitive learning, and persistence in asynchronous learning networks.” He concluded that online graduate students within his study did develop a sense of community and that those students who felt more of a sense of community were more likely to also feel that they had learned a lot in the course and less likely to drop out without finishing.

Researchers indicate that drop out rates in online classes are much higher than in face-to-face classes, sometimes as high as 30% or more (Hill, Raven, & Han, 2002). Hill et al. also suggest that a lack of a sense of community due to a lack of sense of presence of others in the course is one contributor to this high drop out rate.

Some students can be quite successful working in a “faceless” classroom, but others feel the need for a more personal touch. Wegerif (1998) conducted a 3-month study with 21 students in an online course to look at the impact of social presence on learning. The students were in the United Kingdom, Italy, and Canada. He discovered that some students felt the class was great while others felt it was cold and isolating. Wegerif noted that some students failed to cross a social threshold that allowed them to feel like part of a community rather than outsiders looking in. Perhaps adding visuals in the form of student photos or personal interest icons would help more students to find their way across this social threshold.

Methodology

Participants

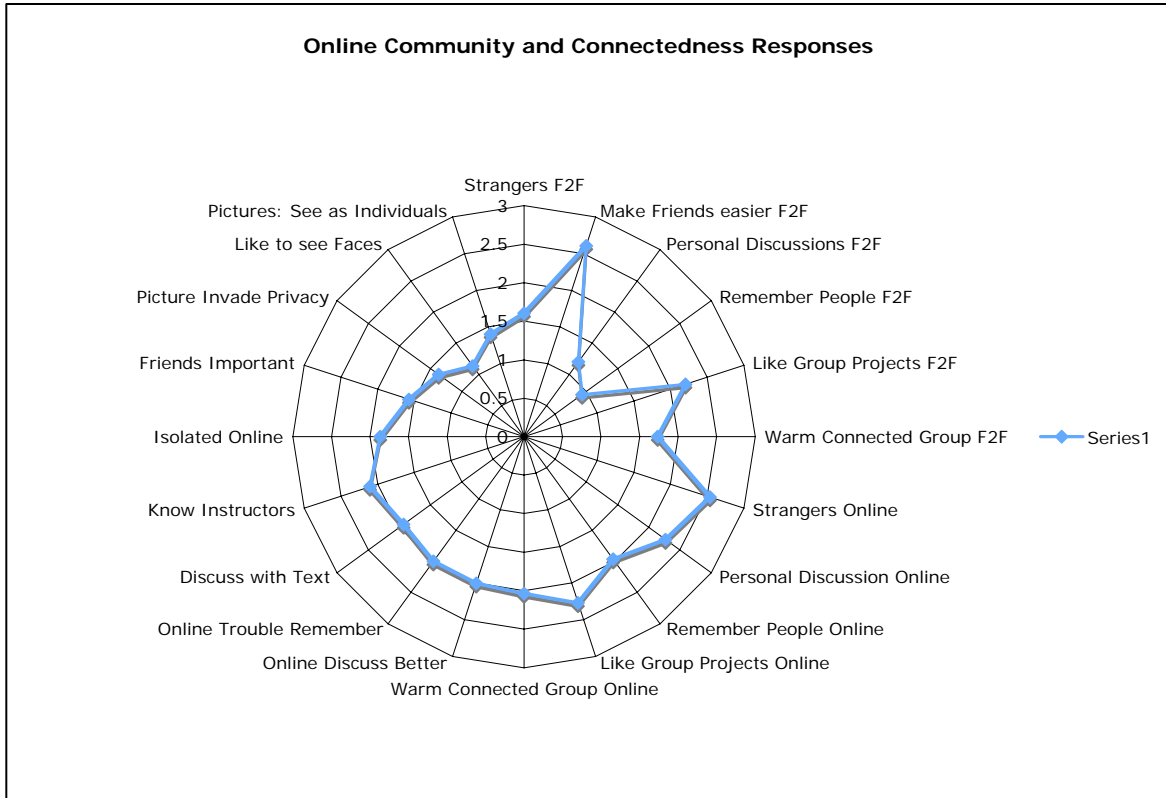
- 30 University of Nebraska graduate students completed the survey.
- 6 out of 17 students who were invited to participate in the online class TEAC 811B (Contemporary Research in Reading) completed the survey, making a response rate of 35%.
- 24 out of 120 current and former classmates who were invited to participate responded for a response rate of 20%.
- The overall response rate was 22%.
- Other details regarding the participants:
 - Of the 30 subjects, 23 are also taking face-to-face classes at UNL.
 - One student is also taking a face-to-face class elsewhere.
 - Seven of the subjects are taking only online classes
 - The subjects ranged in age from 22 to 51. The mean age was 33.5.
 - The subjects included 21 females and 9 males.

Survey Specifications

- 20-question online survey
- Likert-scale questions ranging from (1) Strongly Agree to (5) Strongly Disagree
- 9 additional demographic questions

Survey Items

1. I feel like my face-to-face classmates are strangers.
2. I feel like my online classmates are strangers.
3. I find it easier to make friends in face-to-face classes than in online classes.
4. In face-to-face classes, I often have personal discussions with fellow students.
5. In online classes, I often have personal discussions with fellow students.
6. I remember people from my different face-to-face classes.
7. I remember people from my different online classes.
8. I like to do group projects in face-to-face classes.
9. I like to do group projects in online classes.
10. I think most of my face-to-face classes are warm, connected groups.
11. I think most of my online classes are warm, connected groups.
12. Making friends in classes is important to me.
13. Discussions in online classes are better than in face-to-face classes.
14. In online classes, I have trouble remembering what I have discussed with whom.
15. In online classes, I feel like I am discussing with text rather than with people.
16. I know my online instructors as well as I know my face-to-face instructors.
17. I feel isolated when I take online classes.
18. It would invade my privacy to ask me to post a picture in an online class.
19. I would like to see faces (photos) when I talk to my online classmates.
20. Seeing pictures of classmates would help me to see them as individuals.

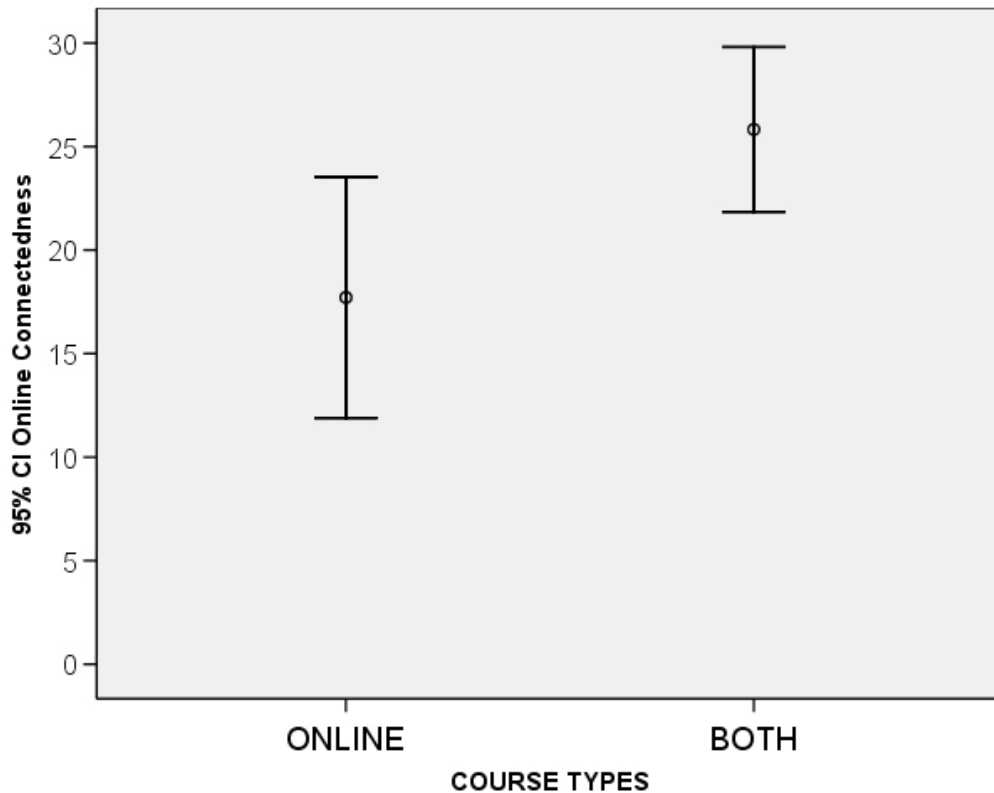


Results

The Online Community and Connectedness Survey Responses graph at the bottom center shows an overview of the responses per question. For the purposes of clearly showing relationships, the questions on the graph are arranged in three groups: F2F questions, online questions and photo-related questions. The coefficient alpha for the face-to-face scale (six questions) was .77. For the online scale (11 questions), it was .88. Since the questions about pictures were not really part of either the online nor the face-to-face experiences, those scores were kept separate.

No differences were found in feelings of connectedness and community, between men and women. The number of male subjects was only 10 thus the results might change with a higher number of subjects.

The responses from students who were taking only online classes (no face-to-face classes, thus no in-person connections) were significantly different from those taking both online and face to face classes. Online only students had a significantly lower sense of community and connectedness $F(1,28)=4.7, p<.05$.



Conclusion (Notable Trends)

- Online students are more likely to view their classmates as strangers.
- Students find it easier to make friends in face-to-face classes.
- Students are more likely to have personal discussions in face-to-face classes and are more likely to remember their face-to-face classmates.
- Students prefer face-to-face classes
- Making friends in class is important to students.
- Students do not feel like they know their online instructors as well as they know their face-to-face instructors.
- Students would like to see online pictures of their classmates.
- Grades in online and face-to-face classes are about the same.
- Students taking only online classes (no face-to-face classes) have a lower sense of community in their online classes than do students who are taking both online and face-to-face classes.

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