



From pixel on a screen to real person in your students' lives: Establishing social presence using digital storytelling

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ABSTRACT

The Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework is a comprehensive guide to the research *and* practice of online learning. One of the most challenging aspects of establishing a CoI in online courses is finding the best way to attend to each element of the CoI framework in a primarily text-based environment. In our online courses, we have examined the use of digital storytelling as a way to break down the barriers that can get in the way of achieving a healthy and productive CoI. In this paper, we describe how we use digital storytelling to establish our social presence as instructors.

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1. Introduction

One of the most challenging aspects of establishing a Community of Inquiry (CoI) in online courses—and the three different presences that make up a CoI—is breaking through the social barriers that exist because of the transactional distance between students and instructors (Moore, 1993), and the reliance on text-based technologies for social interaction and communication to do so. These barriers can dull or even nullify online instructors' humanness — their emotion, humor, sympathy, and empathy. These human qualities, established through personal sharing, help students develop a sense of trust in and connection with an instructor, which is foundational for cultivating the social presence needed for a healthy and productive CoI. One strategy that humans rely on for personal sharing is storytelling; simply stated humans are storytellers (Schank, 1990). (Try to get through the day without relating a story to someone.) In our online courses, we use digital storytelling as a way to break down the barriers that can get in the way of illuminating our humanness and, consequently, achieving a healthy and productive CoI. In this paper, we describe how we use digital storytelling in our online courses to establish social presence.

2. Social presence and online learning

Of the three elements of the CoI, social presence has received the most attention (Bartruff & Headley, 2009; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007)—largely because of educators' skepticism of the effectiveness of computer-mediated communication (CMC) to support the social and interpersonal communication required for engaging teaching and

learning (Lowenthal, 2009b). Early researchers, referencing Short, Williams, and Christie's (1976) original theory of social presence, focused on why CMC, although perceived to be inherently antisocial and impersonal, really is not (Walther, 1996; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994). Later, researchers of online learning (Danchak, Walther, & Swan, 2001; Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Tu, 2000) also turned to the theory of social presence but reconceptualized it—focusing on how people use communication media rather than any supposed inherent qualities of them (Lowenthal, 2009b). Social presence is now commonly understood as the ability of people "... to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to other participants as 'real people'" (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000, p. 89).

Social presence is now a central concept in online learning. Researchers have shown—to varying degrees—a relationship between social presence and student satisfaction (Gunawardena, 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003), social presence and the development of a community of learners (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999; Rovai, 2002), and social presence and perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Because of results like these, faculty continue to explore different ways to establish social presence. However, in comparison to the overall research on the CoI, there is surprisingly little guidance on specific ways to establish social presence. Rourke et al. (1999) identified a list of indicators of social presence that can be seen as guidance. For instance, they point out that the expression of emotions, the use of humor, and self-disclosure are ways people establish social presence. Aragon (2003) later identified over a dozen different ways to establish social presence (e.g., incorporating audio and video, posting introductions, frequent feedback). Ice, Curtis, Phillips, and Wells (2007) illustrated the utility of using audio feedback. And finally others have looked at establishing and maintaining social presence by looking outside

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of the LMS and using things such as text messaging (DuVall, Powell, Hodge, & Ellis, 2007), Internet-based voice mail (Keill & Johnson, 2002), Twitter (Dunlap & Lowenthal, 2009), and digital music (Dunlap & Lowenthal, submitted for publication).

When we design and teach online courses, we continually strive to build in authentic and relevant opportunities to establish social presence (Dunlap, Dobrovolny, & Young, 2008; Dunlap, Furtak, & Tucker, 2009; Dunlap, Sobel & Sands, 2007), with an eye to Rourke et al.'s (1999) original list of social-presence indicators. Interestingly, one of humankind's original teaching strategies – storytelling – is an excellent way to express emotions, use humor, and self-disclose. Therefore, we have explored the use of storytelling in general, and digital storytelling, in particular as a way to establish our social presence as faculty in our online courses.

3. Digital storytelling

Stories and storytelling are powerful strategies for teaching and learning. Stories help make meaning out of experience (Bruner 1996; Schank 1990). Experiences, and the stories created to make sense of that experience, are key to learning (Schank 1990; Zull 2002). Stories also help build connections with prior knowledge and improve memory (Schank 1990). As a result, good stories are remembered by students (Rex, Murnen, Hobbs, & McEache, 2002). In terms of social presence, storytelling helps people connect to others (Lowenthal, 2008) by disclosing personal information and relating to each other's common experiences.

The Center for Digital Storytelling (CDS) has been a leading force in popularizing digital storytelling (Lambert, 2002). Using technical advances in multimedia, the CDS began over ten years ago reinterpreting storytelling by delivering the same engaging and emotional impact of in-person storytelling using digital images, audio, and video. At its most basic level, a digital story is a story told in a digital format that shares a point of view, often the storyteller's point of view (Lowenthal, 2009a). Digital stories are essentially personal expressions with a purpose. Using personally meaningful visual and aural elements (e.g., personal photos and the storyteller's own narration), the digital storyteller delivers a relevant “lesson learned” that extends beyond her or his specific experience to human experience in general. While early digital stories were created using video editing tools like Adobe Premiere, slide show applications like PhotoStory and even newer Web 2.0 applications like Animoto and VoiceThread are making it easier than ever before to quickly create, publish, and distribute a digital story.

4. Digital storytelling and social presence

Although CMC can be used for personal and social interaction and enable people to present themselves as “real” online, many students new to online learning report feeling alone and isolated (Bennett, Priest and Macpherson, 1999; Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff, 1995; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Further, the literature on establishing a Col suggests that it's important to establish social presence early on in a course (Akyol & Garrison, 2008; Rourke et al., 1999). This has led faculty, when possible, to set up a face-to-face meeting before the online course begins. While we acknowledge the benefits of strategies like these, as online programs continue to grow and attract students from throughout the world, meeting face-to-face ceases to be a viable option. Instead, faculty must find ways to establish their social presence early on in online courses without meeting face-to-face. We believe that digital storytelling can be one way to do just this—that is, it can be used to increase personal connections and social presence at the beginning of online courses (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2007).

4.1. Faculty stories

Following Aragon's advice (2003), we begin our online courses with an introductory getting-to-know-you activity. We put a lot of emphasis on these biography-like activities because we want to help students develop the trust and feelings of connection needed to establish a Col. We have found that text-based introductions often fail to achieve this objective. While adding things like a photo or even disclosing personal information is a step in the right direction and supported by the literature (Aragon, 2003; Rourke et al., 1999), we have still found ourselves dissatisfied with how our students perceive us online. This led us to create digital stories about our most memorable learning experiences to share with our students (see Figs. 1 and 2). Through self-disclosure, emotional expression, and even subtle humor, these stories achieve several things related to establishing our social presence as instructors:

- Provide insight into our educational and personal values;
- Highlight our teaching approaches and strategies;
- Expose our personalities, voices, and families;
- Remind students that we were once students too and, therefore, are able empathize with their circumstances;



Fig. 1. Patrick Lowenthal's most memorable learning experience. <http://www.patricklowenthal.com/digitalstory>.



Fig. 2. Joanna Dunlap's “... and tenure makes three” digital story. <http://www.augustcouncil.com/~jdunlap/JoniDunlapSOR.mov>.

- Model relevant personal sharing, self-disclosure, and storytelling;
- Illustrate our enthusiasm for the teaching-learning enterprise; and
- Begin the process of building trust, connection, and community.

4.2. Student stories

While we began using digital stories to introduce ourselves to students when teaching online (Lowenthal & Dunlap, 2007), over the years we have experimented with using digital stories in a variety of other ways. We recognize, like Swan and Shih (2005), that social presence is established and often perceived differently by faculty and students. And while faculty play an indispensable role in the design, facilitation, instruction, and ultimate success for establishing a CoI, it is equally important to design purposeful, relevant, and authentic opportunities for students to establish their own social presence online.

When we teach online, we strive to find multiple ways for students to create and share digital stories. Besides having students share digital stories as introductions, we have them develop digital stories to demonstrate conceptual understanding, and as formative and summative assessment of learning. For example, we ask students to create digital stories:

- Instead of delivering presentations or writing essays;
- That teach others about a particular concept or topic;
- To summarize a lesson or unit, or set of readings;
- To illustrate their understanding of how theory applies to their professional work;
- To explore their conceptions (and misconceptions) of a complex topic prior to working on a unit/module or project; and
- To empower them to creatively express their ideas and perspective in an engaging, evocative way.

These types of digital storytelling activities help students establish their social presence in online courses while meeting learning and assessment objectives. It is important to note that when digital storytelling is used with students in the ways described above, it can also be an effective strategy for establishing cognitive presence, which is the ultimate goal of establishing social presence within the CoI framework.

5. Conclusion

Formal and systematic research is needed to truly assess the effectiveness of digital storytelling as a strategy for establishing social presence in online courses. As a starting place, we encourage online faculty to begin experimenting with the use of digital storytelling in their online courses. We believe faculty will find, as we have, that digital storytelling has a unique way of establishing social presence in online courses when it is authentically and meaningfully integrated into the course. Then, once digital storytelling activities are designed and implemented, we encourage online faculty to engage in the scholarship of teaching and learning, studying their unique use of digital storytelling as a strategy for establishing social presence, and formally reporting the results. In this way, those in the online-education trenches can help grow this fledgling area of inquiry, providing valuable insight to new and experienced online instructors who wish to establish communities of inquiry in their online courses.

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