



An analysis of instructor social presence in online text and asynchronous video feedback comments



Rebecca A. Thomas^{a,*}, Richard E. West^a, Jered Borup^b

^a Brigham Young University, 155 East 1230 North Provo, UT 84602, USA

^b George Mason University, 4400 University Dr. Fairfax, VA 22030, USA

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ABSTRACT

Online and blended instructors are increasingly providing student feedback via asynchronous video, and students have reported in previous research that they are better able to perceive their instructors' social presence in video as compared to text. However, research is lacking that examines actual feedback comments for indicators of social presence. We addressed this gap by coding for indicators of social presence in 422 text and asynchronous video feedback comments provided to preservice teachers in three blended and online courses. Minimal differences were found in the frequency of social presence indicators between text and video feedback. However, we warn against interpreting this finding too simplistically. While text and video feedback had similar numbers of indicators, the indicators in video feedback may have had a larger impact on social presence due to the richness of the medium. Further research is needed in order to understand how text and video feedback promote social presence in online courses.

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1. Importance of feedback in online and blended education

Online course enrollments have grown dramatically in higher education (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Taylor, 2016; Parsad & Lewis, 2008) despite attrition rates believed to be higher than those in face-to-face environments (Carpenter, Brown, & Hickman, 2004; Patterson & McFadden, 2009). Although the causes of the higher attrition rates are complex (Picciano, 2006), Gaytan (2015) explained that a major contributor is the quality of interactions and feedback that students receive from their instructors. Boling, Hough, Krinsky, Saleem, and Stevens (2012) added that instructor feedback can influence affective course outcomes and build strong student-instructor relationships. Establishing student-instructor relationships can be especially challenging in courses where face-to-face exposure is limited and the majority of communication and feedback is done through asynchronous text. This lack of face-to-face communication can make it difficult for students to perceive their instructors' social presence (National Union of Students, 2008).

Some have argued that blending face-to-face and online communication can help to retain students who would otherwise fail to persist in fully-online courses (Picciano, 2006). However, by adding face-to-face class sessions, instructors remove some of the flexibility that online

students require as well as other advantages of asynchronous learning (e.g. time to reflect between exchanges, more personalized communication, and a high level of student participation) (Graham, 2006). By improving the quality of online feedback that they provide their students, blended course instructors may be able to minimize their face-to-face contact with students and maintain a high degree of flexibility. As a result some blended instructors are providing feedback via asynchronous, one-to-one, video as a way to more easily establish their social presence while simultaneously providing detailed feedback to students (Borup, West, & Graham, 2012; Borup, West, Thomas, & Graham, 2014; Griffiths & Graham, 2009; Thompson & Lee, 2012). Research examining video feedback's impact on instructor social presence has largely relied on self-reported data; additional research is needed that analyzes actual feedback content. In our study, we attempted to meet this need by reviewing 422 pieces of text and asynchronous video feedback given by six instructors in a preservice instructional technology course. In this article, we first review the literature on social presence and audio/video feedback, and present the findings from our study.

2. Literature review

2.1. Social presence

Short, Williams, and Christie (1976) originally defined social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person" (p. 65) in mediated

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: beccathomas4777@gmail.com (R.A. Thomas), rickwest@byu.edu (R.E. West), jborup@gmu.edu (J. Borup).

communication. Short et al. (1976) emphasized that social presence was an objective attribute of the communication tool based on the amount of communication cues it was able to convey. Gunawardena (1995) later shifted the focus from the communication tool to participants' communication behavior by claiming that participants could "cultivate" their social presence (p. 162). In their Community of Inquiry (Col) framework, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) continued this shift of focus by defining social presence as "the ability of participants in the Community of Inquiry to project their personal characteristics into the community, thereby presenting themselves to the other participants as 'real people'" (p. 89).

Garrison et al. (2000) would later explain that one of the driving forces behind creating the Col framework was to connect social presence to teaching and learning elements in a community of inquiry. More specifically, the researchers viewed social presence as primarily a support to cognitive presence because participants in a community of inquiry were more likely to engage content-focused dialogue following the establishment of social presence. The Col also explained that students were more likely to establish their social presence when instructors established teaching presence by designing, facilitating, and directing cognitive and social processes (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001).

The Col framework "resulted in a flurry of new research" (Swan & Ice, 2010, p. 1). However, there are two primary limitations that should be acknowledged when using the framework to examine the impact of video feedback on instructor social presence. First, although Garrison and his colleagues explained that many of the online instructor responsibilities overlapped with the construct of social presence (Anderson et al., 2001), social presence was largely viewed as a student attribute. Lowenthal and Lowenthal (2010) recognized this limitation and made the distinction between Col's teaching presence and instructor social presence. Other research indicates instructor social presence has a larger impact on course outcomes than student social presence (Swan & Shih, 2005).

Second, research using the Col framework has focused largely on how students express social presence in text discussion board activities despite technological advances that have made it possible for instructors to more easily communicate via video (Archer, 2010). Rourke and the original authors of the Col framework (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999) analyzed students' discussion board comments and identified three categories of messages that helped students establish their social presence:

- Affective—the expression of emotions, use of humor, and self-disclosure.
- Interactive—continuing a thread, quoting from others' messages, referring explicitly to others' messages, asking questions, complementing, expressing appreciation, and expressing agreement.
- Cohesive—using vocatives, phatics, or salutations and addressing or referring to the group using inclusive pronouns.

However, Rourke et al. (1999) could not easily identify all social presence indicators. While aggregate interrater reliability coefficients amongst authors were high with a range of 0.91 to 0.95, reliability coefficients varied widely depending on which indicators were being measured. For example, the authors reported reliability coefficients of 1.0 (total agreement) on objective indicators such as *continuing a thread* and *addressing participants by name* and much lower coefficients when the indicators required more subjective interpretation. For instance, *humor* had a reliability coefficient of 0.25. If trained coders had difficulty recognizing the more subjective indicators of social presence, it is likely that the actual discussion board participants also varied in their perceptions and interpretations of others' messages.

Rourke et al.'s analysis of actual text discussion board comments confirmed that social presence could be established in text-only environments, but the low reliability coefficients on some social

presence indicators also supported Garrison et al.'s (2000) previous acknowledgement that "the lack of visual cues [in text] may present particular challenges to establishing social presence" (p. 95). Indeed, Walter, Ortbach, and Niehaves (2015) studied perceptions of social presence and feedback quality when given by either humans or computers via text, audio, or video and concluded that media richness played a significant role in perceived social presence. As a result, more research is needed that examines instructors' attempts to use asynchronous video feedback to provide quality feedback as well as more effectively establish their social presence.

Although the Col framework's definition of social presence can provide insights into how video feedback impacts instructor social presence, the framework focused largely on text-based environments and viewed social presence as a student attribute. Archer (2010), one of the original authors of the Col Framework, explained that attempts to "broaden the scope of the Col framework entails a new look at the overall rationale for the framework" (p. 69). Unfortunately little research has attempted to broaden the scope of the Col framework and examine video feedback's impact on instructor social presence, or even that of other multimedia communication types such as audio feedback, even though the tools for audio feedback have been robust for many years.

Analyzing video feedback comments can add to the literature on social presence because feedback has a social dimension even when its primary focus is on course content (Evans, 2013), and feedback given with high social presence is perceived to be more useful (Walter et al., 2015). Boling et al. (2012) added that instructor feedback plays an important role in building instructor–student relationships. Before we consider the literature on video feedback as it may relate to social presence, we will first discuss what is known about audio feedback as a foundational precursor to the research that has been conducted on the more media-rich video feedback.

2.2. Asynchronous audio feedback

Most of the research we have reviewed below has relied on students' self-reported data on surveys and interviews, possibly because social presence can be somewhat subjective (Garrison et al., 2000). The research examining student and instructor perceptions of online feedback modes has proved helpful in identifying several advantages and disadvantages of various feedback modes and has explained what students and instructors value. Understanding what students' value in their course interactions can affect the way in which these communications are utilized.

Although student perceptions of audio feedback have been mixed, the majority of students in the following studies we reviewed found several advantages of audio feedback in establishing instructor social presence. For example, analysis of student surveys and interviews found that students generally enjoyed hearing their instructor's voice through audio feedback (Cuthrell, Fogarty, & Anderson, 2009; Wallace & Moore, 2012), and others indicated that audio feedback felt more supportive (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Gould & Day, 2013; Ice, Swan, Diaz, Kupczynski and Swan-Dagen, 2010), interactive (Thompson & Lee, 2012; Wood, Moskovitz, & Valiga, 2011), and personal (Cuthrell et al., 2009; Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Gould & Day, 2013; Ice et al., 2010; Rodway-Dyer, Knight, & Dunne, 2011; Wallace & Moore, 2012; Wood et al., 2011). While most students agreed that audio feedback enhanced their relationships with their instructors (Gallien & Oomen-Early, 2008; Wallace & Moore, 2012), some felt that audio feedback came across more critical and harsh than text feedback (Gould & Day, 2013; Rodway-Dyer et al., 2011). Despite potential drawbacks to audio feedback, most students felt that audio feedback was delivered positively, and that receiving audio feedback was motivating (Wood et al., 2011).

Studies on teacher perceptions of audio feedback were more limited than those examining student perceptions, but instructors perceived

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