

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SOCIAL PRESENCE IN A BLENDED LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT:

The outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic was a driving force behind the implementation of online learning in numerous universities in Vietnam, and now when face-to-face learning is resumed, blended learning has been employed. Although there has been plenty of research into blended learning benefits, little is known about how to construct a successful blended learning model. A widely accepted framework of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), “community of inquiry”, suggests three interwoven components of effective blended learning, one of which is social presence. Noticing research into this area in Vietnam is insufficient, this work is aimed at exploring how students perceive social presence in a blended learning environment, and which among the 11 factors that might affect social presence were the most effective. Triangulation of data was used by questionnaires from 132 students attending a B1 English course and voluntary interviews with 15 students. Data analysis revealed that students highly appreciated the roles social presence played in their learning whilst they thought social presence remained unchanged in both blended and face-to-face modes. Among the 11 factors, students valued the closeness of teachers, their prompt feedback, and group work most. Meanwhile, some did not appraise the importance of group projects, forums, and peer feedback. Yet the interviews gave some insights into what they expected and suggested to enhance social presence through online and in-class activities. Finally, the research discusses some implications in designing and delivering blended courses that promote multidimensional interactions and hence, contribute to the effectiveness of blended learning.

Key words: blended learning; social presence; community of inquiry; students' perceptions

1. INTRODUCTION

“Blended learning”, the integration of face-to-face and online teaching and learning (Graham, 2013), has become a more popular term and been implemented among more universities. In the present circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic, many Vietnamese educational institutions have become ready to employ blended learning.

However, how to harness the full potentials of blended learning remains a big question. Among some few principles for successful blended learning such as those of Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), and Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013), this research looks into blended learning through the lens of Garrison, Anderson and Archer’s (2000) “Community of Inquiry” (COI) framework. Three interconnected elements of COI are social presence, teaching presence, and cognitive presence.

Due to its scope and scale, this research focuses on social presence because previous studies on this element have not made it comprehensible; moreover, no study in Vietnamese universities specifically analyses social presence in blended learning programs from students’ perspectives. Therefore, in the hope of contributing to the body of research into social presence, this project considers Hoa Sen University (HSU) as a case to answer the two questions:

1. How do the students at HSU perceive social presence in their blended learning course?
2. What elements do the students at HSU consider most and least important in constructing social presence in blended learning?

To discover the answers, both qualitative and quantitative research are applied. From analyzed data, it is expected to shed some light on how students evaluate the role of social presence in their blended learning course, and what they suggest to make social presence more of a key factor in improving the efficiency of blended learning.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. Blended learning

The definition of blended learning is varied, but it, by common consent, is when traditional face-to-face and online learning activities are combined. However, researchers emphasize that blended learning does not mean simply layering these two components (Garrison, 2011). Face-to-face and

online approaches must be complementary, thoughtfully selected and then fused in an organic way (Garrison & Vaughan, 2008).

In higher education (HE), blended learning with its synchronous and asynchronous communication offers a robust educational experience compared with a merely face-to-face or online mode (Colis & Moonen, 2001). It encourages teacher-student and student-student interaction, enables instant feedback, provides richer and authentic learning materials, promotes learner's autonomy and reflection (Gómez & Igado, 2008). From an institutional perspective, blended learning brings administrative benefits regarding access, teaching resources, campus, student number, and assessment (Garrison, 2011). All of these advantages can justify the wider adoption of blended learning in higher education.

2.2. Social presence

The term dated back to 1976 in a book about social psychology and communication by Short, Williams, and Christie. According to the authors, social presence meant the level of importance of other interlocutors in the interaction and the significance of interpersonal relationships.

The perception of social presence keeps changing through time. In education, whilst some researchers defined social presence as how people portray themselves, be aware of others, and construct interpersonal communications in a computer-based environment (Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 2000), Gunawardena (1995) argued that social presence is essential in enhancing instructions in both traditional and computer-based learning.

In view of its undeniable significance and its construct, social presence within this research is defined as “the ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of protecting their individual personalities” (Garrison, 2009, p.352).

2.3. Some principles to establish and strengthen social presence

The COI model has shaped three categories of indicators of social presence, including affective expression, open communication, and group cohesion (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Firstly, in a community, the expression of emotions such as humor and self-disclosure will lower social

distance, help start a conversation, and build trust between members. The second category, open communication, is indicated by mutual awareness and recognition. It means when a member of a learning community acknowledges that other members are present and attends respectfully to their comments and contributions. Lastly, group cohesion involves activities that construct and maintain a sense of group engagement, which means each student regards himself as part of a group instead of an individual, and feels that he must participate in building a community of sharing, collaboration, and empathy.

Regarding some strategies to foster social presence in an online course, Aargon (2003) recommended:

- Teacher having a welcome video introducing himself and the course
- Showing students bios on the course page
- Ensuring a limited number of students in a class
- Using audio-visual meetings
- Employing collaborative assignments and activities
- Giving students options in interacting with the teacher
- Encouraging conversations
- Calling students by their name
- Using humor
- Expressing emotion in text-based communication by using emoticons
- Sharing personal experience and stories
- Giving frequent feedback

Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013) highlighted that instructors should bear in mind some principles in instructional design namely organization, delivery and assessment of a blended course to establish social presence. Some main techniques are briefly listed as followed:

- Teacher writing a welcome letter or video clip on YouTube
- Building trust before and during the first class (class members providing a short bio, having individual and small group introductory activities) online or face-to-face

- Involving students in online discussion forums or group projects with clear guidelines on expectations and etiquette
- Designing and facilitating powerful collaborative activities such as pair work and group work
- Appropriately using formative feedback, which means constructive feedback and guidance, and encouraging peer feedback from students

More recently, Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) suggested some similar techniques:

- Having introduction activities for both instructor and students
- Featuring orientation videos at the beginning of the course
- Utilizing social network platform such as Facebook or Twitter to boost interaction
- Providing individual feedback

While the techniques of Aargon (2003) and Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018) are for online learning, they suggested some overlapping strategies compared with those of Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013), which are for blended learning. They all highlight the necessity for activities that can remove the unknowns of the instructor, class members, and the course at the beginning. Then other activities and tools are meant to construct open communication and cohesion. Also, all of them emphasize the need for prompt, personalized and constructive feedback.

2.4. The importance of social presence in learning

Most researchers concur on the role that social presence plays in a learning environment. Garramone, Harris and Anderson (1986) claimed that interaction is low when the level of social presence is low. When social presence is missing, instructions will be ineffective, which then leads to frustration and poor learning outcomes.

In their research, Tu and McIsaac (2002) found that by opting proper computer-mediated communication media and instructional design components, social presence can raise the level of interaction.

Picciano (2002) also found that social presence positively and significantly correlated with the written assignment performance of students.

Richardson and Swan (2003) added that the level of social presence in the online course significantly affects learners' performance and satisfaction with the instructor. Participants in their study acknowledged that some social presence factors such as interaction, feedback and peers' perspectives motivated them to join the activities that benefited their learning.

Similarly, Jusoff and Khodabandelou (2009) asserted that social presence reduced the distance and served as a platform for better teacher-learner and learner-learner communication. Thereby, social presence did improve the performance of the students in their research.

Except for some studies focusing on actual performance such as Picciano's (2002), most research employed qualitative design, which involved interviews with a limited number of participants and emphasized teachers and learners' feelings and opinions. Therefore, further studies with larger scale and better measurement instruments are necessary to accurately evaluate the benefits social presence brings to teachers and students in terms of perceptions as well as learning outcomes.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Research design

The researchers employed a mixed method of quantitative and qualitative design. A survey questionnaire was handed to students provided quantitative data. Qualitative data came from voluntary interviews with 17 students, which help triangulate the data from the questionnaire and provide in-depth evidence about the students' expectations of a more effective blended learning environment.

3.2. Participants

The participants are 132 students, including 82 females and 50 males, studying English for International Communication level 4 at HSU, majoring in different academic disciplines. All have internet access at school, home or other places, and go online with at least one technological device such as smartphone, laptop, or tablet, and have experienced blended learning at HSU for at least one semester.

3.3. Course design

The blended course in this research included 8 weeks of fully online learning and 5 weeks of face-to-face learning. The online component was designed on Moodle as a Learning Management System (LMS), which is called “m-learning” at HSU, with all necessary features such as course outline, users’ profile pages, academic and non-academic discussion forums, lessons, quizzes, and extra materials. At the beginning of the course, students were divided into groups to do group presentation projects on given topics. Synchronous class meetings during the Covid-19 pandemic were run on such platforms supporting conferences as Google Meet and Bigbluebutton. In the rest 5 weeks of the course, besides face-to-face class meetings, the LMS was still used for homework, discussions, writing assignments and so on.

3.4. Social presence factors

Based on the techniques suggested by Aargon (2003), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018), and Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013), the researchers synthesized and selected 11 factors to evaluate how they construct social presence in the blended learning course:

- The teacher’s email prior to the first class meeting
- The content of the orientation session
- The teacher’s prompt and effective feedback
- The teacher’s friendliness and humor
- User’s profile picture and information on m-learning
- Ice-breaking activities
- Academic forum discussions
- Group projects
- Pair and group work
- Non-academic forums and social networking platforms
- Peer feedback

3.5. Data collection

The survey questionnaire with 3 sets of 17 questions. The first 2 sets include Likert-type items from 1 to 5, indicating from “Strongly disagree” to “Strongly agree”. The first set of questions focuses on how students perceive some social presence techniques employed by their teacher. The second one explores how social presence was built by students themselves and their classmates. Finally, the last question asks the students to rank the importance of 11 social presence factors.

The direct interviews with students were recorded by the researchers for later analysis. The interview questions investigated how students evaluated the importance of social presence, the amount and quality of the interaction in the blended course compared with only face-to-face learning; and what factors affecting social presence most.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The data analysis was divided into two parts: (1) Students’ perceptions of social presence in their blended course and (2) the techniques they considered as most and least important in constructing social presence.

The quantitative data with Likert-type items are analyzed by median since the response items are ordinal data. The qualitative data from the interviews are used to further discuss ideas related to the quantitative results.

4.1. Students’ perceptions of social presence

Nearly 85% of the students regarded social presence as important or extremely important. They said that social presence improved their confidence (students 2 and 10) and teamwork skills (student 1); enabled them to raise their voice and share opinions (student 3), made learning more interesting (students 4, 5, 6, and 14), improved student-teacher interaction (students 7 and 13), encouraged cooperative work (students 5, 6, 14, 15, and 17), and established new and quality relationships (students 2, 12, and 17) and especially improved academic performance (students 7, 14, and 16). These opinions are parallel to what was reviewed in the literature.

4.1.1. Factors from the teacher

Table 1. Students' perceptions of factors from the teacher that enhance social presence

	Factors from teachers that enhance social presence	Median (N=132)	Opinion tendency
1.	I am satisfied with the fact the teacher sent me an email prior to the first class meeting, introducing the course and guiding me on how to use the m-learning system and other related tools such as Big Blue Button or Google Meet.	5	Strongly agree
2.	I am satisfied with the content of the orientation given by my teacher.	4	Agree
3.	I am satisfied that my teacher encourages us to have a profile picture and information on m-learning.	4	Agree
4.	My teacher interacts with me more in the blended learning course.	4	Agree
5.	I am satisfied with how promptly my teacher responds to my message/ email.	5	Strongly agree
6.	My teacher frequently gives me feedback on my speaking and writing activities.	4	Agree
7.	The feedback from my teacher helps improve my speaking and writing skills.	5	Strongly agree
8.	The friendliness and humor of my teacher engage me to be a part of the class.	5	Strongly agree

As can be seen, most students highly appreciated what their teacher did to enhance social presence in the course. For instance, they were strongly satisfied when receiving an email from the teacher before the first class, giving them instructions on how to use the m-learning system and video conference platforms. This was clarified by the interviews with students 2, 5, 11, 12, 15, and 17. They said this email was very meaningful to them, especially when they had to learn online from the first class due to

the Covid-19 pandemic. “The email gave me a clear vision of who I am in this class and what responsibilities I should take” (student 5), “it made me already a part of a class” (student 2), and “it helped me be ready and well-prepared for the course” (student 17). Students 7 and 8 also highlighted the similar salience of the orientation session. “The orientation session gives me some first clues about my teacher’s characters and teaching styles, as well as some class members’ personalities” (student 7). All of these findings support what Aargon (2003), Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018), and Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013) suggested in their work.

Similarly, the prompt email response from the teacher was highly valued by the students. Most students expected their teacher to reply to their email within a day. Interestingly, while some students preferred contacting their teacher via email because “it seemed appropriate in an academic environment” (student 6), some suggested that teacher and student could also communicate through Facebook or Zalo outside the classroom besides email because these social networks “make people feel closer to each other” (student 3). Compared to the literature review, while mentioned researchers did not analyze the role of email in supporting teacher-student interaction, this finding shows that the students were well aware of the benefits of email.

78 out of 132 students considered teacher’s feedback was remarkably effective in improving their skills, especially writing and speaking, and 52 students thought the feedback enhanced these skills but to some extent. Student 4 said, “the feedback from my teacher reveals that she is very attentive and takes care of every one of us”, student 6 added, “my writing skills can improve thanks to the detailed, private and personalized feedback from my teacher.” This last comment perfectly matches what was found by Picciano, (2002) about the relationship between social presence and students’ writing performance.

Most students acknowledged that the friendliness and humor of the teacher were salient. Nearly 80% of the students thought it was extremely crucial in improving the connectedness of the class. “The teacher’s closeness clears the unknown factors and encourages me to confidently take part in all activities” (student 5), since “no student likes a strict teacher” (student 14). Certainly, this result compliments what was stated by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000).

Most importantly, in contrast to what was found in previous literature, regarding the level of teacher-student interaction in the blended course, only 46% of the students thought blended learning slightly increased their

interaction with their teacher. Some students said that the online component makes them feel less stressed to express their idea because “I do not have to show my face” (students 1 and 8), “I am not afraid to make mistakes (student 4) or “I feel less shy” (student 15). Student 16 said online learning “improves the interactions a lot especially during the Covid-19 pandemic” and that “online features help me seek help more easily from my teacher as well as peers.” However, 28% thought that the interaction level in blended learning did not change compared to a traditional class. To explain this, student 4 said that interaction depends a lot on students’ characters. Student 14 added, “Some students are more confident in online learning, but the others are more active in a face-to-face class. For me, I stay the same in both learning modes”.

4.1.2. Factors from students themselves

Table 2. *Students’ perceptions of factors from themselves that enhance social presence*

	Factors from students that enhance social presence	Median (N=132)	Opinion tendency
1.	In the first class meeting, ice-breaking activities are necessary to establish the relationship with other class members.	4	Agree
2.	Interacting with someone who has a profile picture and information on m-learning makes me feel he/she is real.	4	Agree
3.	I usually participate in forum discussions on m-learning.	4	Agree
4.	Taking part in forum discussions makes me feel like a part of a group.	4	Agree
5.	Non-academic forums and social networking platforms are necessary to connect me with the others.	4	Agree
6.	Working in a group project strengthens the bond among team members.	4	Agree
7.	Pair and group work increases my interaction with other classmates.	5	Strongly agree
8.	Peer feedback improves the interaction between me and my classmates.	3	Neutral

As can be observed, with the median of 4, the students widely appreciated the necessity of participating in ice-breaking activities. This was further clarified when 78% of the participants would be willing to take part in those activities in the first class meeting. They responded in the follow-up interview that the ice-breaking activities helped them remember each other's names and feel more relaxed and connected to other classmates.

Regarding having a profile picture and information on m-learning, most students agreed upon the benefits of seeing a short bio on the web page such as feeling that person is real or close and being easier to remember the other's name. Also, students 2 and 17 emphasized that having some bio information on the page made them feel the person they were communicating with was real, and vice versa. This reinforces what was recommended by Aargon (2003) and Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013).

The participants valued the sense of belonging when they participated in the forum discussions. They emphasized that forums were a good way to enhance interactions because they were encouraged to "share their ideas without being afraid of making mistakes" (student 3) and "understand each other's opinions" (student 6). Student 8 added that the forums helped him "become more active, more confident" because he could check all the mistakes before posting anything online.

In addition, the participants agreed that embracing non-academic forums and social networking platforms in order to connect with other class members as being reflected in the median of 4. They addressed the significance of employing social networks such as Facebook or Zalo since these platforms "facilitate students' communication" (students 13 and 14). This strengthens the use of social network platforms to increase interaction as suggested by Lowenthal and Dunlap (2018).

Concerning group projects, the students highly supported this type of work. Data from the interviewees highlighted the key ideas in strengthening the bond among team members. Students 4, 6, 11, and 14 all agreed on the significance of the group project in increasing the interaction and understanding among members as it ran over a long time. Consequently, they could "become best friends" (student 6), or "be more confident asking something they didn't know in their small group rather than asking the whole class" (student 11). However, students said that the topics of the project were sometimes dry and suggested they be more appealing (students 6 and 7).

In fact, with the highest median of 5, the students completely supported pair and group work both online and face-to-face meetings since these activities increased their interaction and collaboration with classmates. This could be distinctly shown in the results that 94 out of 132 participants preferred working in pairs or teams. Students 11 and 15 both thought they interacted more when paired with their classmates and felt more connected while taking part in many different activities. Interestingly, student 3 firmly stated she was willing to join a different group every day.

Nevertheless, most students had neutral opinions on peer feedback in improving their interaction with partners. Among the interviewees, there was a considerable difference in their answers. Although 4 in 17 interviewed students tended to support peer feedback, they had never experienced it before. They welcomed peer feedback since they thought there were no gaps between peers, so it was easier to give straightforward comments (students 10 and 11). Also, “different students had different background knowledge and were good at different skills, they could learn from each other (student 15). However, some did not consider peer feedback as crucial in blended-learning due to the incompatibility of the students’ levels (student 7), or considered the peer feedback as invalid because students might lack knowledge and skills (students 13 and 14).

4.2. The most and least important factors in constructing social presence

Among the 11 elements that affect social presence as listed in III.4, the top three most decisive factors are (1) the teacher’s friendliness and humor, (2) the teacher’s prompt and effective feedback, and (3) pair and group work. Firstly, as being asked what made a teacher seem friendly and humorous, over 87% of the students said it was when the teacher often smiled at them, 62% said they felt closer to a teacher who usually encouraged and praised them, 50% concurred it was the teacher’s jokes, and about 37% appreciated when the teacher addressed them by name.

Regarding the prompt and effective feedback of the teacher, students treasured this because of all the benefits it brought to their skills. The interviewed students added that their teacher’s feedback helped them recognize their mistakes and guided them on how to fix those problems. Student 4 and 6 said the m-learning system allowed the teacher to have more time to give individual and private feedback, which was quite difficult in

a merely face-to-face writing period. This is worth-noticing because social presence is more than interaction (Picciano, 2002), it is also about the privacy a person feels in a learning environment (Tu, 2002).

Thirdly, pair and group work is one of the cores of social presence since these collaborative activities enable students to understand other members as well as position themselves in the group (Aargon, 2003 and Vaughan et. al, 2013). Obviously, some students said that online learning with the use of “break-out room”, a feature of Bigbluebutton, still allowed them to work in groups synchronously. Perhaps to make students feel free to discuss with their team, teachers should not join the group and only offer help when students ask for it (student 1).

On the other hand, the least three important factors toward social presence are (1) peer feedback, (2) user’s profile picture and information on m-learning, and (3) forum discussions.

The interview data may reveal why most students did not highly evaluate peer feedback. This was because the language competence of students was incompatible (student 7) and students may not trust the feedback of their peers (students 13 and 14).

Although the qualitative data from the interviews showed that some students acknowledged the importance of profile picture and bio on m-learning with sound reasons, most did not think so when they ranked this factor one of the least salient elements because they learned in blended mode, which means they still had the chance to meet each other face-to-face. Having bio- information may play a more important role in a fully online class, as claimed by Aargon (2003).

Lastly, while forum discussions were highlighted by researchers in boosting social presence, the students in this study did not feel the same. Many reasons might affect this result; for example, the forums in the research were not fully utilized. Student 7 said she read the posts of other classmates but never replied to those in the forum as she was not accustomed to how to maintain a forum discussion. Student 4’s idea suggested a solution to this problem, that “the teacher should set clear guidelines and etiquette for those forums”, which matches what was stated by Vaughan, Cleveland-Innes and Garrison (2013).

5. CONCLUSION

The findings suggest that most of the students highly valued the salience of social presence in their learning. They detailed some benefits that a high level of social presence brought to their interaction with their peers and teacher, writing and speaking skills, cooperative activities, confidence and so on. However, compared to a traditional place-based class, the majority of students considered there was no big difference in social presence in a blended course.

Among the 11 factors that affect social presence, most of the factors students perceived as top important were the ones coming from the teacher, such as the teacher's closeness and humor, and his/her feedback. The factors regarded as least important were peer feedback, a short bio and profile picture, and forum discussions. These results mean despite the undeniable potentials of online components such as the LMS or conference platforms, students did not fully grasp the opportunities to optimize their interaction experience. Furthermore, the students tended to place the central role in the hand of their teacher in establishing social presence.

6. IMPLICATIONS

6.1. Implications for students

Accordingly, students should be more aware of their own importance and responsibilities in improving social presence. Teachers should thoughtfully design a blended course and do their best to facilitate students' social presence, but students themselves must recognize their role and autonomy in a learner-centered environment like blended learning.

6.2. Implications for teachers

As for teachers, because some factors are critically appreciated by students, they must always keep in mind these elements before designing and when delivering a blended course. For instance, the topics assigned to group projects must be interesting enough and relevant to students' life and concerns; or the teacher should be friendlier, more attentive and supportive toward students to make them feel comfortable and open enough to communicate and engage in the course.

Also, teachers should reconsider the real effectiveness of some instructional design elements if students are reluctant in participating in

certain activities, for example forum discussions and peer feedback in this research. It means they are not accustomed to those activities, so it is essential to give them clear instructions and set out the etiquette for those activities and leave students some time to get used to them.

6.3. Suggestions for future research

Finally, this research has some implications for future research. Although the sample size is not very small and the research combines both types of quantitative and qualitative data, there was no widely accepted model for this questionnaire to be based on. Therefore, a more valid questionnaire model is left for future studies. Moreover, it is hoped that future research will cover a number of universities in Vietnam in order to have a more holistic picture of how social presence is perceived, not only by students but also by teachers, and to be able to measure the actual effect of social presence on the quality of blended learning.

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