Title: Developing social presence in the virtual classroom

Introduction
Issues of isolation and disconnect experienced by many learners studying at a distance are well documented in literature (e.g., Anderson, 2005; Brady, Holcomb & Smith, 2010; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins & Shoemaker, 2000; Lee & McLoughlin, 2010; Moore, 1997). Research indicates that these factors can have negative effects on student participation, performance and retention in distance learning programmes, due to difficulties in establishing effective learning communities when learners and teachers are geographically dispersed (Keegan, 1996). Much attention has focused on the need for distance learners to feel a sense of connection with their teachers and other learners through the development of social presence, which has been identified as “the ability of learners to project themselves socially and affectively into a community of inquiry” (Rouke, Anderson, Archer & Garrison, 1999, p. 53).

Recently, attention has focused on the potential of Web2 tools to support the development of social presence for learners studying online, in particular, the use of social networking sites (SNS) such as Twitter, Facebook, and Blogger, and online community-building using tools such as Ning and LinkedIn. While literature indicates as much divergence in the definition of social networking as there are online tools identified as supporting it (Hoffman, 2009), Anderson (2005) comments that within the context of education, social networking software can be defined as “networked tools that support and encourage individuals to work together while retaining individual control over their time, space, presence, activity, identity and relationships” (p. 4). He terms this “educational social software (ESS)” (p. 5), and identifies a pivotal role for it in helping to establish social presence, maximise learner freedom, encourage collaboration, and build better-functioning communities of online learners. Hoffman (2009) goes even further, by commenting that use of social software could ultimately prove to be critical to student engagement and motivation in online learning, as it greatly enhances student-student interaction – “one of the keystones in student satisfaction with distance learning” (p. 96).

The virtual classroom as educational social software
The following briefly describes outcomes from the use of a virtual classroom environment, Adobe Connect Pro, with two groups of teacher education students at Waikato University in New Zealand. Adobe Connect is a web-based 'meeting room' that allows users to interact synchronously using a variety of tools such as IP video and audio, a whiteboard, file sharing, text chat and polling. The participants comprised self-selected sample groups of 10 undergraduates in the final year of their three-year teacher education degree who were studying school assessment via blended delivery; and 12 teachers and principals, industry training personnel, and people involved in online media production, studying completely online for their Postgraduate Diploma in e-Education.

Initially, both cohorts were involved in a number of structured sessions using the virtual classroom that were programmed at regular intervals into their half-year semester courses. Most of these hour-long sessions were the equivalent of
campus tutorials, where module content, readings and assessments were discussed. The post-graduates also participated in a longer session of two and a half hours, which served as an assessed forum where each led a presentation of outcomes from a short research study they were required to do (see Figure 1). In total, nine structured sessions were held during the semester courses, at the conclusion of which each student was interviewed by a research assistant and completed an anonymous online likert-scale/short response survey, to determine their perspectives on the value of the classroom and the impact it had on their online learning experience.

*Insert Figure 1 about here: Screenshot of the virtual classroom during a student presentation*

**Outcomes**

Analysis of the interviews and survey revealed some interesting perspectives on the use of the classroom, and just where students saw it contributing to their coursework. While many commented on the value of the content of the sessions for guiding their learning and helping consolidate understanding of course concepts, a significant number indicated the real benefit lay in the social aspects of interacting synchronously, in particular, the value of the streamed audio and video in helping develop trust and a sense of connection with each other. Many students referred to a ‘bonding effect’ created by being able see, hear and interact ‘live’ with each other for the first time, and how this allowed them to gauge a better sense of the personality of their colleagues and develop an atmosphere of friendliness and acceptance within the group. As one overseas ESL student commented...

...I feel that they are not only pictures. I see them as real people. I can talk with them. We talk not only about the learning, we talk about other things like another participant’s cat. I see how they act. In the last week, I didn’t write many comments in Moodle as I’m afraid I’d mistake or something (sic), but after I’d finished that classroom, I went to Moodle and wrote two or three comments including jokes from me because I feel, ‘Oh, they are friendly. It’s OK to make mistakes with them’ (Julia, interview, 18 August, 2010).

Other students mentioned how visual and audio synchronicity supplemented the asynchronous forums by better conveying passions, emotions and personalities, making “the whole learning experience more real” (Helen, interview, 4 October, 2010). Although a few students noted some inconvenience in needing to ‘attend’ the sessions and commented how this detracted from their autonomy and choice, they appeared ready to accept this as a trade off against the social benefits described above.

Following the planned sessions, some students requested the virtual classroom be made available to them to use independently for study groups, collaborative assignment work, and for getting together to discuss other course work. As a result, two students were promoted to meeting administrators and shown how
to set up and schedule meetings, and manage resources in the classroom. They subsequently coordinated other interested group members in additional meetings where value could be gained, leading and managing these independent of tutor support. While no formal data were gathered during these occasions, anecdotal feedback from those involved indicated these sessions built upon the social foundation established during the scheduled meetings, helping consolidate the group as a learning community, diminish isolation, enhance student support networks, and build friendships. It is also interesting to note that the undergraduate students (now in their first year of teaching) have continued to use the classroom on occasions for collegial support, and to develop and share teaching resources.

**Discussion and summary**
While virtual classrooms may not be viewed by some as fitting the classical definition of educational social software (if there is one), this limited study demonstrated that they can effectively perform valuable social functions, assisting by building student group cohesion, course engagement and participation, and social presence. The study also indicated that while some initial input and modeling was required from the tutor, students were quick to recognise the potential of the environment for their own purposes, and were keen to use it to bridge some of the social and collaborative challenges they perceived to online learning. It might well be argued that in this case students benefited more in these respects once choices about using the classroom had been placed in their hands, perhaps indicating the need for more open access to such environments, and student education on their availability and technical operation.

If, as the literature suggests, one of the benefits of using social software in online learning is to promote student presence and support the formation of effective communities of learners, then a case could be made for inclusion of virtual classroom environments in the definition of tools available for that purpose. However, as Anderson (2005) points out, one important consideration in the use of educational social software is the ability of learners to maintain some flexibility and control in when they are used, and for what purposes. It may be that the overuse of timetabled virtual classrooms could lead to a decrease in learner autonomy and choice – two of the very reasons many students opt for studying via online distance learning. It may indeed be more prudent to limit the number of scheduled coursework sessions, but allow students more open access to independently use the resource, as and when they see fit.

**References**

Brady, K., Holcomb, L., & Smith, B. (2010). The use of alternative social networking sites in higher educational settings: A case study of the e-Learning


*Figure 1. Screenshot of the virtual classroom during a student presentation*