LETTER to EDITOR

The social presence theory in distance education; the role of social presence in web-based educational environment

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Dear editor-in-chief, The Future of Medical Education Journal

The emergence of new theories of learning and education and a paradigm shift from being teacher-centered to student-centered alongside with advancement of novel communication technologies have set the grounds for modern human to use new methods of teaching-learning and free himself of the chains of time and place and keep on learning everywhere in accordance with his needs [1].The use of technology in education would reduce training costs, save time, increase opportunities for teaching-learning, increase academic success, and offer quick access to information. Therefore, in recent years, education policy makers in many developing countries including Iran, have paid a particular attention to e-learning. [2] Nowadays, the traditional methods are not enough for effective education of students. Internet and other electronic technologies have had a deep impact on traditional methods of education and brought forth new methods for effective education [1]. Distance education by changing education paves the way toward learner-centered education by the simultaneous access of the teacher and student to information and mutual relationship between the students and teachers, the quality of the course can be enhanced. Using new paradigms of educational services and access to IT can pave the ground for the increased autonomy and exchange of the teacher, learner and enhancement of participative learning [3] IT progress with social changes has created new paradigms for organizational education. The considerable changes have great impact on educational systems. In this educational paradigm, the participants need suitable learning environment [4]. In recent decades, the change of educational behavior and the image of educational system are with the use of education content without any dependency on time and place and the access to information in different networks is with the less limitation and rapid learning [3].

Beriwills (2007) believes that distance education is performed when the teacher and the learner are encountered with physical distance and their relationship is performed by different technologies (press, telephone, Radio, TV, computer) to close the gap between them. These plans can create an opportunity for the adults in academic education to eliminate the barriers as the limitation of time, distance and disability. This type of education is useful to update the required knowledge of employees at their work place [5]. In comparison to traditional education system, distance education system has some features as centrality, learner-centered, time and place distance, individual learning and continuance. Distance education is based on new learning styles of students, planning and assessment. By this education,

many people who cannot be present in traditional classes for different reasons or they attempt to go to their living place, can have flexible learning opportunities ignoring the geographical distance. This education method based on the present higher education requirements can be consistent with the needs of learners [3].

Distance education has three stages in terms of historical trend and the following features are considered for each of stages: The first generation is based on published texts and corresponding learning: the required institutes present distance education by post. One of the most important features of this generation of e-learning education is maximizing freedom and autonomy of learners and this educational system is called "Independent study system". The second generation, the second generation was emerged with the invention of Radio in the first world war and TV in 1950s and the progress of audio-visual media and the global nature of these two medias. In this stage, besides the protection of the autonomy of learners, the cognitive learning theories were emerged to help the educational content designers to provide effective education. Third generation; this generation of distance education was emerged using computer in the curriculums. In this generation, human interaction is possible as simultaneous and non-simultaneous by computer and web-based networks and different learning theories are raised. In this generation, effective theories as the Industrial Model of Distance Education, Guided Didactic Conversation, Independence Autonomy, Transactional Distance, Control theory, Interaction theory, Sociocultural Context and Social Presence were emerged [3]. Most of distance education experts believe that distance education needs a new educational technique. This method is different qualitatively and it is formed based on the unique relationship between the teacher and student. Thus, the current distance education is not a good method and the learners don't have any presence. This study aims to evaluate the role of social presence as an effective theory on distance education. Thus, in this study, social presence theory is evaluated. The e-learning users have found that this technology has potential capacities to support the participative learning experiences. This has caused that new challenges are created to create learning environments to meet the educational demands of technology. One of the challenges is the issue regarding similar experience of classroom. Also, the explorative social learning is evaluated [6]. The researches have shown that e-learning has not been more than words and image as learning in its best form is learning in explorative and social form. Thus, social presence theory is raised. Social presence is a concept that has its base in the telecommunications literature. Short, Williams, and

Christie (7) developed social presence theory as a model for analyzing the social - psychological dimensions of mediated communication from a "social cues perspective" [8]. They defined social presence as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships". Short et al. [7]described social presence as a construct comprised of two concepts: intimacy [9]and immediacy [10]. Argyle and Dean asserted that intimacy in a communication medium is influenced by the factors of physical distance, eye contact, smiling, and personal topics of conversation. Short, et al. [7], suggested that social presence should be added to the list of factors that contribute to intimacy of a communication medium. [11] Social presence is a complex structure. This complex structure includes privacy, social relationship, communication style, work nature, feedback and no medium [12]. Grison, Anderson and Archera (2000) defined social presence as the participation of learners in an explorative society as real people in emotional and social self-expression via communicative media [13].

The researches on higher education regarding social presence showed that social presence had significant impact on interaction, enhanced learning and motivation of students [8]. Tu et al., (2002) believe that social presence can increase interaction in online classes and has positive impact on learning levels [12]. Richardson and Saven (2003) in a study evaluated the relationship between social presence and performance of students. The results of study showed that social presence could predict the performance of students [14]. Three categories of social presence are identified in the model: expression of emotion, open communication, and group cohesion. Emotional expression includes humor and self-disclosure. Open communication consists of reciprocal and respectful exchanges. Examples of open communication are mutual awareness and recognition of each other's contributions. Group cohesion refers to activities that foster a sense of group commitment and a sense of belonging [11] Social presence is the learners' participation in an explorative society as real people in emotional and social expression via communication media. Indeed, social presence is defined as belonging and acceptance in the group and by creating intimacy among the learners. Social presence can create education, participation, interaction, activity, motivation, increased learning, presence feeling and critical thinking effectiveness. Social presence is an important part of communication, whether at the bedside, in the community or even in the classroom. Instructors manifest their presence in a number of ways: in person, by telephone, or via the Internet. Although there are limitations and constraints in projecting social presence through technology, it can be done successfully. Social presence, which can promote learning interaction in online learning environments, is considered as an essential element for social learning. When learners perceive a high degree of social cues from other people, they will get a better perception of social presence. In order to facilitate learning interaction in online classrooms Based on the result of this study, it is recommended to the authorities of e-learning and distance education to be familiar with social presence in design of courses and apply the principles and by creating friendly learning environment can increase presence.

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