Enhancing Social Presence of Students in Online Sport Management Courses: A Qualitative Assessment of Techniques

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The number of online learning offerings from institutions of higher education has expanded rapidly throughout the last two decades (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online offerings allow colleges and universities to reach students who would otherwise be unable to attend the institution because of time and location barriers (Hiltz & Turhoff, 2005). At the same time, online learning offerings provide additional revenues to schools (Byrne, 2015), leaving many to believe that they are critical to the long-term viability of their institutions (Allen, Seaman, Poulin, & Straut, 2015). Like educators from other disciplines, an increasing number of sport management faculty find themselves charged with teaching students in online settings (Harrolle, Bopp, Keiper, Ridinger, & Ryan, 2013).

Online courses offer many benefits for students and universities, yet there are also many challenges that must be overcome. One of the primary issues associated with online education are student perceptions that online courses are less effective than traditional face-to-face courses (Song, Singleton, Hill, & Koh, 2004). Student perceptions are often driven by feelings that it is more difficult to establish themselves as an active participant within a community without immediate responses and peer interactions common in traditional classroom settings (Song et al., 2004). Recreating senses that students find familiar in traditional classrooms, commonly referred to as student engagement (Dixson, 2010), is steadily becoming an important area of scholarly inquiry.

Although the number of online sport management offerings continues to grow (Harrolle, et al., 2013), there is a dearth of literature exploring issues specific to the discipline. The current literature explores topics related to development of online sport management programs (e.g. Bennet, 2002; Steir & Schneider, 2009) and new technologies available to instructors (e.g. Edwards & Finger, 2007). Scholarship exploring pedagogy and teaching practices in online sport management courses is lacking. However, in a review of literature from other disciplines, Martinez and Barnhill (In press) explored the effectiveness of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) framework, providing suggestions for its implementation in online sport management courses. Although new to the sport management literature, the CoI is one of the most referenced teaching frameworks within the broader body of knowledge relating to online education (Arbaugh, Bangert, & Cleveland-Innes, 2010).

The CoI focuses on the effects of teaching presence, social presence, and cognitive presence of instructors and students in online course offerings (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Although each element of the CoI has been found to impact student outcomes related to comprehension of course content, perceived learning, and improvement in students’ grades (Dixon, 2010; Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007; Boston et al., 2014), social presence specifically addresses students’ concerns about the loss of interaction common in face-to-face courses. Defined as the degree to which one is perceived by others as “real” in mediated communication (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), social presence focuses on the student’s ability to portray themselves as an active participant, much like students would in a traditional face-to-face course (Garrison & Arbaugh, 2007). Because the vast majority of interaction in online courses involves written text, students who rely on visual cues, lack confidence in their writing ability, or are introverted may become withdrawn in the online setting (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2002; Borup, West, & Graham, 2013). In addition, knowledge retention and perceived learning are negatively affected when students’ transfer attention from content to writing efficacy (Borup et al., 2013). Activities designed to enhance social presence breakdown the aforementioned barriers, allowing students to become more comfortable in the online setting and return their focus to course content (Lyons, Reysen, & Pierce, 2012).

The purpose of the current study was to explore the impact of social presence in online sport management courses. Social presence is critical in management-based courses, such as those in sport management because of the generally
promoted aspects of networking and group activities (Dane-Staples, 2013), and case-study evaluation (Johnson, Judge, & Wanless, 2013). Although Martinez and Barnhill (In press) offered insights into possible outcomes of increased social presence in sport management courses, their suggestions are largely theoretical without examination. Yet, in other disciplines social presence has been attributed to increased student satisfaction with course offerings (Arbaugh, 2014; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson & Swan, 2003), student retention (Gazza & Hunker, 2014; Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009), enhanced perceptions of learning (Arbaugh, 2014; Caspi & Blau, 2008), and higher actual grades (Joksimovic, Gasevic, Kovanovic, Riecke, & Hatala, 2015; Liu et al., 2009).

Social presence in online settings is enhanced when communication barriers are removed, allowing students to communicate freely with their instructor and classmates. With barriers removed students can comfortably communicate their emotions, acknowledge the contributions of others, and build community (Garrison et al., 2000; Hughes, Ventura, & Dando, 2007; Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999). The current study utilized students enrolled in one of four online, graduate level, eight-week sport management courses offered by a large university in the southeastern United States. The courses were offered during the Fall 2016 and Spring 2017 courses and contained between 15 and 25 students. To facilitate social presence, instructors introduced activities designed to enhance communication among students, classmates, and instructors.

Although course content demanded that activities related to social presence enhancement vary between courses, all met theoretical guidelines outlined by deNoyelles, Zydney, and Chen (2014) and Hughes et al. (2007). At the conclusion of the course, students were asked to respond to open ended questionnaires comparing social presence enhancement activities to other activities offered in the course. Content analysis will be utilized to analyze student responses. It is expected that activities designed to enhance social presence will improve students' satisfaction with the course and contribute to students' perceptions of learning. Recommendations for online course instructors and scholars interested in online education of sport management students will be conferred.