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<td>Initials and surnames of ALL authors:</td>
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**Details of author to whom feedback must be submitted**

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Enhancing online social presence: The role of communication
Liezel Nel & Charity Ntomboxolo Ndereya
University of the Free State

Abstract
Online learning environments are often described as impersonal and lonesome when there is lack of face-to-face contact between students and course facilitators. With more and more courses now being presented through the online mode, the learning environment is even more de-humanised. Any online learning environment that does not offer opportunities for some social connections among students lacks the affective aspects that should complement the cognitive and technical aspects of quality and successful online course design (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). In online learning, the affective aspect is realised in social presence. A recent study (Ndeya-Ndereya, 2008) resulted in the development of a framework for the enhancement of online social presence within the context of South African higher education. In this framework, the strategies to enhance social presence are grouped according to five dimensions. One of these dimensions relates to the role that communication can play in creating and enhancing social presence in the spheres of learning design, learning facilitation and learning support. The researchers set out to assess the possibility of implementing these communication strategies in their own context. They therefore decided to implement the selected strategies, as part of an on-going action inquiry project, in an undergraduate module that was presented through the blended mode (a combination of online and face-to-face modes). Results show that the implementation of these communication strategies has led to the creation of a supportive learning environment in which both student-student and facilitator-student communications were enhanced. This paper will attempt to provide directives on how the lessons learned during the implementation of the selected communication strategies in a blended learning environment can also be applied to enhance social presence in other learning environments with online components.

Keywords: Social presence, communication, online learning, blended learning, learning design, learning facilitation, learning support.
1. Introduction

Over the past decade more and more higher education institutions have opted to utilise the Internet in delivering course content to students. While many open and distance learning courses have been reverted into fully online courses, many traditional face-to-face courses now include an online component as part of a blended learning approach (a combination of face-to-face and online modes of delivery). In most online learning environments, students typically use computers to access the institution’s online learning management system (LMS) in order to get remote access to online course content, course facilitators and other students (Rovai, 2002:1). Although blended learning courses still require some face-to-face contact between students and course facilitators (which might not be the case with most online courses), it does not necessarily mean that all blended learning students have opportunities to interact face-to-face with each other. In many large blended learning courses students are divided into class groups with different contact sessions due to the size restrictions of lecture halls. In addition, institutions that employ a parallel medium of instruction also require students from the different language groups to attend separate contact sessions. In all of these cases the LMS is the only “place” where all the students that are enrolled for a course can interact with each other. A lack of face-to-face communication in the online environment often results in online learning being described as an impersonal and lonesome activity. This tendency can in part be attributed to the physical separation of students which in turn reduces the sense of community and increases feelings of disconnectedness (Kerka, 1996).

In a typical online LMS environment, that does not require all participants to be online at the same time, students have to rely on technology-mediated communication tools (that are typically included in the LMS) as their sole means of making contact with the facilitator and their fellow students. Some instructors feel that by merely including such communication tools in the online course design, learning will occur automatically and the community of learners will take care of itself and thrive. What is, however, more likely to happen in such situations is that “the sense of community will wither unless the community is nurtured” (Rovai, 2002:8). Any online course that does not support the forming of social connections among students lacks the affective aspects that should complement the cognitive and
technical aspects of quality and successful online course design (Salomon & Perkins, 1998). In online learning, this affective aspect is realised in social presence.

Social presence can be described as “the ability of students to project themselves as ‘real people’ in an online community” (Greyling & Wentzel, 2007:654). Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (2001:4) trace the development of social presence from the concept of immediacy defined by Mehrabian (1969) as “those communication behaviours that enhance closeness to and non-verbal interaction with another”. In this paper, social presence is regarded as the sense of being affectively connected to another person in a way that opens up opportunities for communication. Rourke et al. (2001) claim that social presence plays a significant role in the learning process of online students in that it supports both cognitive and affective objectives, thus leading to an increase in academic integration. Due to the fact that technology-mediated communications are regarded as less personal and possessing diminished social presence and social context cues (when compared to face-to-face communication) it is vital that support is provided to students in the form of heightened awareness of social presence. “As cues are fewer, social presence is lower, and as social presence goes down so does [the] sense of community” (Rovai, 2002:8). Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000:89) also emphasise that social presence is necessary to sustain a critical community of online learners. Social presence is also the factor that brings about reality in facilitator-to-student and student-to-student communication. It is, however, dependent on the quality of the communication exchange (Kehrwald, 2007) since it is derived from the interpretation of the conveyed messages during interaction (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Kehrwald, 2007). For online interactions to be deep and meaningful, immediacy and intimacy are crucial factors (Tu & McIsaac, 2002; Kuyath & Winter, 2006; DuVall, Powell, Hodge & Ellis, 2007). Such characteristics do not ordinarily exist in technology-mediated interactions and therefore need to be cultivated. Consequently, online students should not only be provided with enough opportunities to have high quality interactions with their facilitators as well as with their fellow students, but online facilitators also need to plan for the enhancement of social presence in their courses (Rovai, 2002:8).
A recent study (Ndeya-Ndereya, 2008) resulted in the development of a framework for the enhancement of online social presence within the context of South African higher education. This framework (see Figure 1) reveals that the strategies employed by different online facilitators to enhance social presence mainly serve functions that can be categorised within the three spheres of learning design, learning facilitation, and learning support. The borders separating the spheres in Figure 1 are indicated by dotted lines, implying that the boundaries between the three spheres are not clear and that overlapping will occur.

![Diagram](Source: Ndeya-Ndereya, 2008)

**Figure 1**: Outline of a framework for the enhancement of social presence

The three spheres depicted in Figure 1 are supported by the work of Weiss (2000) as well as Greyling and Wentzel (2007) who agree that in order to create a social dimension in technology-assisted learning, opportunities to interact must be integrated in online course designs (*learning design*). Research by Weiss (2000), Rourke *et al.* (2001), Aragon (2003) as well as by Greyling and Wentzel (2007) suggests several means of developing and enhancing social presence in online learning through facilitation (*learning facilitation*) and support (*learning support*).

In Ndeya-Ndereya’s framework (see Figure 1), the strategies to enhance social presence are grouped according to five dimensions. The first dimension relates to the
role that communication can play in creating and enhancing social presence in the spheres of learning design, learning facilitation and learning support. Table 1 provides a summary of the communication strategies suggested by Ndeya-Ndereya (2008) that could assist in creating and enhancing online social presence.

Table 1: Communication strategies to enhance online social presence

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<tr>
<th>Learning design</th>
<th>Learning facilitation</th>
<th>Learning support</th>
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<tr>
<td>• Create opportunities for online communication.</td>
<td>• Clarify communication objectives and expectations.</td>
<td>• Enhance online communication skills.</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Determine the basic levels of technology skills required by students to get access to and use online communication tools.</td>
<td>• Establish social connections.</td>
<td>• Encourage self-disclosure.</td>
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<td>• Encourage open communication through the use two-way communication tools.</td>
<td>• Provide easily accessible and friendly technical support.</td>
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<td>• Assist students in developing online communication skills.</td>
<td>• Use SMS messages.</td>
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<td>• Develop online cultural skills.</td>
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(Source: Adapted from Ndeya-Ndereya, 2008)

Concern about the general lack of interaction and intellectual engagement in the online component of many higher education courses, prompted the researchers to embark on an action inquiry. As part of this inquiry they investigated how these communication strategies (as depicted in Table 1) could be easily implemented in their own context to create and enhance social presence in the online component of a blended learning course.

The aim of this paper is to provide directives on how the lessons learned during the implementation of the selected communication strategies in a blended learning environment at a South African higher education institution can also be applied to create and enhance social presence in other online learning environments.

2. Research Methodology

The findings reported in this paper forms part of a larger project, referred to as an action inquiry, which has already run through six completed cycles (over a period of almost seven years). Tripp (2003) describes action inquiry as an umbrella term for
the deliberate use of any kind of a *plan, act, observe/describe, and review* cycle for inquiry into action in a field of practice. Common varieties of action inquiry include reflective practice, action learning, action research and researched action. In this project overlapping phases of several kinds of action inquiry can be identified, with action research as the dominant inquiry method. Incidence of reflective practice as a more researcher-centred type of inquiry in particular is acknowledged. The emphasis is undoubtedly on the reflection after action; and the description of the action inquirer’s experience tends to be more informal. Action research also includes action learning, which is learning from experience and critical reflection on that learning, usually through group discussion (Zuber-Skerritt, 2002:114). Action researchers, however, “aim not only to learn from their own and each other’s work, but also to improve it and to change their own situations … as well as to contribute to public knowledge through publishing their learning” (Bawden & Zuber-Skerritt, 2002:136).

In the view of Hubball and Burt (2003), action research methodologies and the variety of data collection sources provide distinctive opportunities to integrate research into university teaching and learning. In addition, it provides effective strategies to develop learning communities that cross traditional boundaries between facilitators and students, and enhance professional development and pedagogy in multidisciplinary settings.

The course that was selected for this action inquiry is an undergraduate (first-year), Information Technology course that was presented using a blended learning approach. The selection of this module for investigation was partially based on convenience considerations as the facilitator/researcher (the first author) has been facilitating this module for several years. The students registered for this module was also representative of the typical profile of an undergraduate student group at the researchers’ institution with a relatively large number of students (more than 100) divided into two language groups (Afrikaans and English). The module consisted of three face-to-face contact sessions per week for each language group (for 13 weeks) while the Moodle learning management system (LMS) was used for delivery of the online component.
This paper reflects on the experiences of the course facilitator in incorporating the various communication strategies (see Table 1) during one cycle of inquiry. Data collection included multiple sources such as a comprehensive review of contemporary literature, keeping an extensive research journal, facilitator observations as well as student questionnaire surveys, reflection exercises and analyses of large amounts of student feedback. The re-planning for the next cycle of inquiry can be regarded as a direct outflow of the findings up to this stage.

3. Enhancing social presence through communication
This section provides suggestions on how Ndeya-Ndereya’s (2008) communication strategies (see Table 1) can be easily and successfully implemented by a course facilitator in the online component of a blended learning course. As none of these communication strategies require any face-to-face contact between students and the facilitator, the researchers are of the opinion that all of the suggested implementations could easily be duplicated in any learning environment (open, distance, or blended) that contains an online component.

3.1 Learning design
The design of any online learning environment requires careful consideration from the course facilitator. Not only do the facilitator need to ensure that the course design is appropriate and effective in supporting the pedagogical objectives(Furner & Daigle,2004:61) and activities of the course, but s/he also need to “understand how to apply the technologies and approaches that will work best” (Picciano, 2009:5) for the particular student group. By including communication strategies into the learning design the facilitator can ensure that the LMS course site is not just a dump for learning material but also a place where students are encouraged to become more actively involved in deep and meaningful discussions that will ultimately enhance social presence.

In an attempt to enhance online social presence through the design of the learning environment, the facilitator firstly needs to ensure that the course design creates opportunities for online communication. After reviewing the pedagogical objectives of the course and deciding what it is that students should accomplish, the facilitator needs to decide what type or kind of communication activities will be
needed to support students in achieving these objectives. The facilitator then needs to evaluate the various communication tools at his/her disposal (as part of the selected LMS) and decide which of these tools will be best to support each of the specified communication activities. In selecting appropriate communication tools it is, however, important that course facilitators do not become overwhelmed with the magnitude of tools available to them. Some of the most common communication tools available in LMS environments include:

- **News/Announcements**: These one-way communication tools are typically used by facilitators to communicate important announcements to the entire class. Students can read these messages but cannot reply to them. Most LMS environments include some type of notification which will clearly indicate to the students when new announcements are available. Another communication tool which can also be used very effectively in this regard is SMS messaging. Although an SMS messaging functionality is not typically included in the LMS environment (an additional third-party application is required) it can be a very useful tool in communicating important information to students.

- **Instant Messaging/E-mail**: This is a two-way communication tool used for communication between everyone registered for the course (including the facilitator). This is generally the preferred tool for communication between the facilitator and individual students. It is, however, not advisable to use these messages for general communications to the entire class group (News/Announcement messages are considered to be more effective in this regard). E-mail/IM messages should therefore be used for individual student-student and facilitator-student communication. Students should be encouraged to use this tool if they want to communicate procedural queries to the facilitator that does not necessarily require a one-on-one visit to the facilitator's office. Although some LMSs have the functionality to send e-mail messages to personal e-mail accounts (that are external to the LMS), messages that can be viewed directly from within the LMS (for the sake of keeping all course related activities in the same place) is preferred.

- **Discussion forums**: This is an asynchronous communication tool which means that all the individuals participating in the discussion are not required to be online at the same time. It is typically used to facilitate asynchronous
discussions where the student postings should either be visible to the entire class or just to groups within the class. A discussion topic is normally set to be “open” for a specific period (e.g. number of days) to allow all students with ample opportunities to participate.

- **Chat rooms/Whiteboards:** These synchronous communication tools require all participants to be online at the same time. Participants therefore need to be informed beforehand of the scheduled time of the chat/whiteboard session to ensure that everyone will be present.

- **Personal student web pages/Blogs/Journals:** All of these tools represent personal web based spaces where students can communicate information about themselves (Armstrong, Berry & Lamshed, 2004). These spaces can typically be used either as “a public, personal communication zone” where students introduce themselves to the rest of the class or “post results of their work or reflections”. Alternatively, it can be used as “a private personal space, reserved for students’ thoughts” and feedback from the facilitator (Downs, 2004:14). In cases where these web spaces are continually updated it has the potential to become a learning journal that not only reflects the student’s learning but also serve as a source for “self-analysis and reflection” (Armstrong et al., 2004). Blogs and journals can also be used very effectively to support collaborative activities in student groups.

Once the appropriate communication tools have been selected for incorporation into the course design, the facilitator needs to **determine the basic level of technology skills that students will required to get access to and use these online communication tools.** The skills required by students can be presented in the form of a basic skills set. Tu and McIsaac (2002), for example, caution that text-based online communication requires participants to have computer literacy skills. Without these students may not be able to fulfil the immediacy factor required for successful interaction since “lack of immediacy results in a lack of social presence” (Tu & McIsaac, 2002:136). The presence of a basic skills set will not only assist the facilitator in facilitating the course but will also allow him/her to provide better support to the students. The actual level of support needed by students will only become
known once the students are enrolled and the facilitator becomes more familiar with their backgrounds and preferences.

3.2 Learning facilitation

As social presence can be regarded as a significant predictor of students’ satisfaction in an online learning environment (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997) it is interesting to note that many of the factors contributing to students’ satisfaction levels are considered to be directly related to the way in which the facilitator moderates (or facilitates) communication activities in this environment. These communication-related variables include feedback, preparation, encouragement, accessibility and professionalism (Bolliger & Martindale, 2004). The facilitator’s role as a moderator is generally regarded as the most essential factor in encouraging student interaction and creating a sense of community within the online learning environment (Wise, Hamman & Thorson, 2006). Although being a good facilitator is essential in this regard, Bolliger and Martindale (2004) also emphasise that students need to be provided with ample opportunities to interact with each other in order to feel involved and stay engaged in the online course.

The lack of student-to-student interactions is considered to be one of the main factors that prevent online students from actively engaging in online learning communities. In many cases this phenomenon can be attributed to “a lack of social presence in [the] online learning environment” (An, Shin, & Lim, 2009:750) as low levels of social presence often points to low interaction levels (Garramone, Harris & Anderson in An et al., 2009:751). These interactions are, however, unlikely to occur voluntarily (An et al., 2009:750). It is entirely up to the facilitator to ensure that all communication activities are facilitated in such a way that course-wide utilisation of the communication tools are encouraged among students (Fakhraie & Hewitt, 2010:3348).

The first step in facilitation is to clarify communication objectives and expectations. If students do not understand the value of the learning opportunities presented by the various communication activities it is unlikely that they will engage actively and constructively in these activities (Dabbagh, 2007:220). Students should therefore be made aware of communication objectives and expectations as soon as
possible by including them in the course orientation. Here the facilitator needs to explain the purpose for which each of the different types of communication tools will be used. This will ensure that students know, for example, which tool(s) to use when they want to send a personal message to the facilitator and which tool(s) to use for class or group discussions. It is also important to inform the students which communication tools are used solely for one-way communications so that they do not, for example, try to reply to messages send through a bulk SMS system.

Students should also be provided with some guidelines on how often they are expected to visit the online course site. Although general communication objectives and expectations can be clarified as part of the course orientation, more specific objectives and expectations should also be provided for each individual communication activity. Students need to know exactly what will be expected of them in participating in the activity (e.g. topic, length of contributions, minimum number of postings required, etc.). They also need to know why it is important for them to participate in the activity and how it relates to the general course objectives. By having communication activities that are clearly linked to the course objectives students will be able to see that these activities are not just add-ons but are specifically designed to help them to achieve the course objectives.

The second step in facilitation is to establish social connections. Students in an online learning environment require the highest level of affective communication at the initial stages of their learning process as they try to establish their social connections (Ubon & Kimble, 2004; DuVall et al., 2007). Here, the facilitation process can already start prior to the commencement of the course with the facilitator sending an introductory SMS message to the students. In this short message the facilitator will typically introduce herself/himself, welcome the students to the course and remind them of when the course will start (or when the first contact session will be). This SMS message can be considered as the first step in creating a social connection between the facilitator and the students. As some students might not have cellular phones it is important that this welcoming message is “repeated” on the LMS course site (to ensure that everyone receives the message). This online welcoming message (sent using the LMS e-mail tool) will typically be more detailed than the original SMS message and should already be available when students login to the course site for the first time. The facilitator should ensure that this message
uses the same appropriate salutations and language that students will be expected to use in their own messages. Alternatively, a podcast (recorded by the facilitator and posted on the LMS site) can be used to deliver introductions and welcoming messages (Stacy, 2002). This is a great way to enhance communication and humanise the online learning environment (Northcote, 2008). In order to further enhance the student-facilitator connection students can be asked to write an introductory e-mail/IM-message to the facilitator. This communication activity can typically be included as part of the students’ first online assignment. In this introductory message students can tell the facilitator more about themselves, reveal their expectations of the course and ask course related questions. Students can also be asked to make suggestions for the online course site. Although students (especially on first-year level) are unlikely to have the necessary technical knowledge to make “valuable” suggestions in this regard, it might help the facilitator to identify aspects of the online course that do not work well or are difficult to locate. From these messages the facilitator will be able to learn more about her/his students, identify misconceptions regarding course expectations and identify students who might need additional support in improving their online communication skills. It is important that the facilitator acknowledges receipt of each student’s message and answers personal questions in the reply. More general questions can be combined and answered in a general message that is sent out to the entire class. These introductory messages are especially useful in large courses or courses where there are no or very limited face-to-face contact between the facilitator and the students.

The third step in facilitation is to encourage open communication through the use of two-way communication tools. The main idea here is to encourage wide utilisation of these tools in both student-to-facilitator and student-to-student interactions. One way in which this can be achieved is by creating open problem discussions where students can post questions related to a specific assignment. Although many of the questions will typically be answered by the facilitator, students should also be encouraged to answer each other’s questions (as a form of peer feedback). These student-to-student interactions are also likely to have a higher impact on the students’ learning outcomes than student-facilitator interaction alone (LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2004:88). By making these individual questions and
answers visible in an open discussion forum the facilitator can ensure that other students, who might have the same problem but are afraid to ask questions, can also view the answers. It also eliminates the need to answer the same question more than once. Open communication can be further encouraged by creating a student lounge discussion area where students can discuss non-course related issues. Such open discussions can play a vital role in the building of online learning communities.

The fourth step in facilitation is to **assist students in developing their online communication skills**. In cases where students are new to the online environment, facilitators should consider the gradual introduction of new communication tools into the LMS learning environment (Nel & Wilkinson, 2008:168). This will ensure that students are not overwhelmed by too many new things at once. Students should also be provided with ample opportunities to practise the use of these new tools in a safe and non-assessed environment (Nel & Wilkinson, 2008:168). The facilitator can, for example, create a type of online survey (using the LMS quiz tool) that students are required to complete. In participating in this non-graded activity students will gain experience in using the quiz tool without being penalised for incorrect answers. The introductory e-mail message to the facilitator (as discussed in the second facilitation step of this section) can also serve as a way to introduce students to the LMS’s e-mail tool. By providing students with opportunities to gain confidence in using these communication tools they are likely to feel more at ease in the online environment and will be better prepared to participate in the graded online communication activities. In any online learning environment the students’ level of comfort in using these tools are vital for the enhancement of social presence (Fakhraie & Hewitt, 2010:3346).

### 3.3 Learning support

Although learning support can be regarded as very closely linked to learning facilitation, the level of support discussed here refers to the additional support a facilitator needs to provide to those students who feel isolated in or are completely unfamiliar with the online environment. As online communications are regarded as less personal than face-to-face communications and more likely to weaken social presence (Rovai, 2002:8) facilitators need to take additional care in ensuring that students get the “affiliation, support and affirmation” (Kreijns, Kirschner, Jochems &
van Buuren, 2007:178) that they are typically looking for in an online environment. At South African higher education institutions, the facilitation of online communication is further complicated by the fact that a large section of the current student population have had limited prior exposure to technology. Most of these students are completely unfamiliar with the LMS communication tools and will typically need additional support in using these tools (especially on first-year level). If the students are not comfortable in accessing and using the selected communication tools, the ultimate goal of enhancing social presence through communication is very unlikely to be achieved.

The first step in supporting these students is to enhance their online communication skills. In many South African online learning environments, English is used as principal language of instruction to ensure that everyone understands everything. However, students who have a poor English-language proficiency might find it difficult to express themselves in this foreign language. These students are likely to need additional support in improving their writing and reflection skills (Nel & Wilkinson, 2008:163) before they can be able to interact at the level required to create social presence. In an attempt to further enhance students’ online communication skills they should also be provided with suggestions on the proper salutations that are required when using specific communication tools. Students should also be provided with additional resources that explain various online communication behaviours, for example, what is considered as acceptable and appropriate online language (also referred to as Netiquette), and the meanings of commonly used emoticons (such as 😊 and 😕).

The second step in supporting students is to encourage self-disclosure. These self-disclosures can be in the form of a personal web space (such as a public personal web page or blog) that is visible to the entire class. When students are required to collaborate in group activities, these self-disclosures can alternatively be in the form of an initial group discussion where group members are required to introduce themselves to the rest of the group. To ensure that students do not get too personal, it is advisable to provide them with some guidelines on the level of disclosure that is required (for example, their home town, school they attended, field of study, hobbies, favourite TV shows, favourites sports team, etc.). If the facilitator,
however, feels that public self-disclosures are not appropriate, students can be asked to disclose this information in a personal (private) e-mail message to the facilitator (such as the introductory e-mail message to the facilitator discussed in Section 3.2).

The third step in learning support is to provide easily accessible and friendly technical support. This should preferably be in the form of a manned helpdesk that is typically managed by the institution. The facilitator needs to ensure that the students are aware of the existence of this facility and the full contact details for the helpdesk should be clearly displayed somewhere in the LMS. Students should be encouraged to contact the helpdesk if they are experiencing any technical difficulties to access the online course site or the online communication tools. The facilitator also needs to make his/her own contact details and consultation times available to the students.

The fourth step in learning support is to use SMS messages. Although an SMS tool is not typically part of the LMS, this can be a very valuable tool in contacting at-risk students who are, in most cases, those who are not visiting the LMS course site on a regular basis. Students typically regard SMS messages sent to their own cellular phones as very personal and they are normally very quick to respond to these messages (DuVall et al., 2007). A friendly SMS message from the facilitator reminding a student about his/her outstanding assignment or enquiring about his/her online absence can be invaluable in creating a feeling of trust between the student and the facilitator. In these messages students should also be encouraged to contact the facilitator directly to discuss personal problems that are preventing them from actively participating in the course.

The final step in learning support is to encourage students to develop their online cultural skills. In most South African higher education courses, facilitators and students represent a diverse range of cultures, each with their own values, beliefs and language. These differences not only influence teaching and learning approaches, but also the overall student learning experience (Jordan, Carlile & Stack, 2008:82). Weiss (2000) and Scollins-Mantha (2008) encourage the development of online cultural skills such as netiquette, collaboration and
cooperation skills through facilitator and student communication. In developing online cultural skills it is vital that students are not only exposed to different viewpoints but also learn how to be sensitive on an intercultural level. This can be achieved by using random group allocations when students are required to participate in online collaborative activities. In cases where students are normally separated based on their language preferences, the online environment provides the ideal meeting place from students from the different language groups. When students are required to remain in the same groups for the duration of the course, the facilitator should (if possible) arrange for the students to have their initial meeting during one of the face-to-face contact sessions. In cases where group members have had an initial face-to-face introduction they are much more likely to actively (and regularly) participate in their online group discussions and collaborations. In an attempt to develop sensitivity on an intercultural level, the facilitator needs to carefully monitor all online group communications and reprimand students when they cross culturally acceptable boundaries.

4. Conclusion

Although online communication tools are regarded as an integral part of any online learning environment, many online facilitators fail to effectively utilise these tools in overcoming the physical separation, lack of community and feelings of disconnectedness typically experienced by online students. The mere inclusion of communication tools in an online learning environment are unlikely to encourage student interactions and subsequently support student learning. Failure to actively engage students in deep and meaningful online communications are more likely to lead to low levels of social presence. Social presence is a vital element in influencing online interaction (Rourke et al., 2001) and sustaining a critical community of online learners (Garrison et al., 2000:89). But, for social presence to be created and enhanced appropriate online facilitation is necessary (An et al., 2009:758).

As this paper suggests, it is vital that online facilitators carefully plan how they will design, facilitate and support communication activities in an online learning environment. The discussion of the implementation of the selected communication strategies (see Section 3) has shown that it is possible to utilise online communication tools in creating a supportive learning environment in which both
student-student and facilitator-student communications are enhanced. The lessons learned from the implementation can serve to further enhance the existing framework for the enhancement of online social presence (Ndeya-Ndereya, 2008). The researchers also noted that most of the communication strategies suggested by the framework can be easily implemented by using the basic communication tools already available in most online learning management systems. This serves as further proof that this theoretical framework can be successfully implemented in South African higher education online environments.

Communication can be regarded as an important dimension in creating and maintaining online social presence. When communication activities are properly designed, facilitated and supported, the degree of social presence is likely to be high. In such instances a real community of learning is likely to be formed despite the fact that the online participants (students and facilitators) are separated by distance and/or time.

5. **List of References**


LaPointe, K. D., & Gunawardena, C. 2004. Developing testing and refining of a model to understand the relationship between peer interaction and learning outcomes in computer-mediated conferencing. *Distance Education* 25(1):93-106.


