Degrees of Presence:
media and “presence” in distance learning

Dr Tim Bulkeley
Laidlaw Carey Graduate School
Auckland, NZ
tim@carey.ac.nz
Backstory

**Personal**
Colleagues: presence as binary opposition
Tale of two students

**Research literature**
Short, Williams and Christie 1976
social presence = a communicator's sense of awareness of the presence of an interaction partner
Research findings

Low > group members feel disconnected
High > more engaged and involved
So: role of teacher as facilitator of such presence. (Stacey 2002)
Research findings

Cues:

text-based - like “tone”, emoticons, self-disclosing narratives

audio – inflection, ambient sound, paraverbal utterances

video – adds visual cues

This is argued to be a hierarchy (Shatzer and Lindlof 1998)
Research findings

● Student approach study differently
● Entwistle's Approaches to Study Inventory
● Students interact with media differently (Wheeler 2005)
● autonomy, surface and tenacity
• natural co-present learning space (face to face).
  • Autonomous students (independence?) neither need nor experience much social presence.
  • Tenacious students, high levels of social presence.
• Telephone effect is reversed
• E-mail > autonomy < social ("not in control") > tenacious > perceptions of connectedness.
  special affordances of e-mail: < immediate, but > permanent (p.6)
My experience

• “blog” assignment, Positive Evaluation of quick response to emails, Discussion forums

• Adobe connect “virtual tutorial”
  • microphones
  • problems of multitasking
  • failure to encourage “social” contact
  • task oriented
  • several students commented on richer experience
  • combined with other media: online tests, forums, exercises
• I don't know if this class will get better reviews, but Aragon reports that learners who have a higher level of social presence are more satisfied with online learning. (Aragon 2003)

• I do know that the course had a higher proportion of A students, and Richardson &Swain found that "students' perceptions of social presence are a predictor of students' perceived learning in online courses." (Richardson and Swan 2003)
Conclusions

- Quick response (esp. for autonomous learners)
- Social connection (virtual coffee bar, graffiti site)
- Include different media
- Facilitate interaction