

Conceptualizing Social Presence as a Motivational Component in E-Learning: a Case Study in Blended Teacher Education

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Abstract

To date there is no consensus definition of the construct of social presence. It is even not clear whether the construct does have any sort of influence on e-learning situations. In this study this construct is approached from a socio-cultural perspective and thus recognised as an essential component of the virtual and blended collaborative learning process. Socio-cultural and social identity theory give support to interpret the development of a small group collaborative writing activity within a blended program of Educational Psychology at a School of Teacher Education. Social presence is understood as the result of participants' enacted strategies to create and maintain a group identity and a shared goal, that is, social presence is seen as the sum of individuals' *actions that contribute to the creation of a community feeling in such a way that the learning process is emotionally supported*. Fifteen student-teachers participated during seven weeks in the study, working in small groups of 3 and 4 members. They were expected to write a collaborative argumentative text by means of a non-specific asynchronous device (a forum space). Through qualitative content analysis we classified the participants' interventions along two dimensions with each two opposite values: individual-oriented versus group-oriented, task-oriented versus people-oriented. Each of these dimensions holds three categories that contribute to draw a picture of each of the four groups in terms of their motivational characteristics, highlighting different motivational aspects that appear to be playing a key role in their learning process.

Keywords

e-learning, collaborative writing, socio-cultural theory, social presence

Summary

Background

Social presence is a construct initially imported and adapted from social psychology into the field of computer supported collaborative learning (CSCL) (So, 2009). Early definitions present some important differences; for instance, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) defined social presence as “the degree with which a person *is perceived as* a ‘real person’ in mediated communication” (p.9); Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer (1999) put the responsibility on the subject by defining social presence as “the ability of learners *to project themselves* socially and affectively into a community of inquiry” (p.50), whereas Tu and McIsaac (2002) tend to a different, subjective focus when defining the concept of social presence as “a measure of the *feeling of community* that a learner *experiences* in an online environment” [all italics added by author] (p.131). These different definitions are not merely nuances but highlight the lack of consensus about this concept. Indeed, Tu (2002) regrets the lack of appropriate instruments for the measurement of social presence. Early studies, he claims, mainly used post-hoc semantic differential questionnaires focused at grasping participants' satisfaction, based on the dimensions ‘personal-impersonal’, ‘sensitive-insensitive’, ‘warm-cold’, ‘sociable-unsociable’. Another frequent strategy for

studying social presence has been through content analysis of the participants' contributions, in such studies social presence is mostly identified with off-task communication. Social presence has been equalled also with students' satisfaction and learning *post-hoc* perception (Richardson & Swan, 2003). Swan and Shih (2005) contributed to the field with qualitative data that allowed the identification of different personal attitudes towards online participation and hence different perceptions of social presence and learning in online discussions.

Aims

Most of the previous studies have focused on online *whole class* discussions with no other expected shared result than the discussion itself. A quite different situation shows up when considering *small group collaborative learning* with different sorts of *complex activities expected as group products*. In that case, it seems necessary to rethink the concept of social presence from a different perspective. In this study, hence, we look at social presence from a socio-cultural perspective and put the following research questions: How does social presence contribute to the collaborative accomplishment of a writing task? Which motivational aspects are addressed by this process? How can e-learning be enhanced by improving social presence?

Method

We carried out a qualitative case study (Yin, 2006). Four small groups of student-teachers participated during seven weeks. The students worked together for a whole academic year in a blended program but the data were gathered just at the very end of the course, during the realization of the last course assignment under complete on-line conditions. The writing work was performed by means of a particular e-learning platform which offered asynchronous instruments (moodle), but no specific collaborative writing device was used. Qualitative content analysis of all the forum contributions (274 postings) was carried out, searching for inter-judges agreement.

Results

The recursive analysis led us to define a set of categories along two dimensions concerning the self-positioning of the individuals' in front of the task and in front of the other collaborators. Box 1 presents the detailed categories.

Box 1. Dimensions and categories of social presence in collaborative small group work

The individual in front of the task	The individual in front of others
C1 > The individual (singular subject) feels competent and satisfied with his/her performance or his/her expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered easy.	C4 > The individual opens him/herself up to others and offers his/her support to carry out the task right from the first moment.
C2 > The individual (singular subject) feels competent and satisfied with his/her performance or his/her expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered challenging.	C5 > The individual offers his/her support after detecting some real or potential challenge.
C3 > The individual (singular subject) feels incompetent and unsatisfied with his/her performance or his/her expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered difficult.	C6 > The individual refuses to support others with the performance of the task.
The group in front of the task	The group identity
C7 > The group (plural subject) feels competent and satisfied with his/her performance or his/her expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered easy.	C10 > The group members, jointly or individually, contribute to create and maintain a sense of group identity.
C8 > The group (plural subject) feels competent and satisfied with his/her performance or his/her	C11 > The group members, jointly or individually, contribute to create and maintain social interaction.

expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered challenging.

C12 > The group members, jointly or individually, express positive feelings of belonging to the group itself.

C9 > The group (plural subject) feels incompetent and unsatisfied with his/her performance or his/her expectations of performance in front of a task which is considered difficult.

The results show clear differences between the four participating groups, in terms of their group identity and their general style of tackling the task with motivational handling resources (see table 1).

These results are important as far as they permit to rethink the concept of social presence within the field of collaborative computer supported learning (Conrad, 2009; Rogers & Lea, 2005; Shen & Khalifa, 2007) in situations in which a real shared goal and product is expected from the participants, in contrast with previous studies. Thus, now it is possible to identify poor motivational situations and intervene appropriately as a teacher in order to enhance e-learning processes.

Table 1. Proportional inter-group comparison results.

	C1	C2	C3	C4	C5	C6	C7	C8	C9	C10	C11	C12
Group 1	0	0	0,22	0	0	0,25	0,5	0,4	0,17	0,5	0,76	0,77
Group 4	0,5	0,67	0,11	0	0,5	0,75	0,07	0,3	0,17	0,12	0,12	0,19
Group 7	0,33	0	0	0,17	0	0	0,07	0,1	0,17	0	0	0
Group 8	0,17	0,33	0,67	0,83	0,5	0	0,35	0,2	0,5	0,37	0,11	0,05

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