

Collaborative activity in an online bilingual exchange: social presence in an emergent collaborative community.

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Abstract: The paper explores the discursive construction of social presence in an international online collaboration of distributed language learners from different cultural, institutional and linguistic backgrounds. It utilizes and extends Galley et al.'s (2014) 'community indicators' as an explanatory framework relatively new to the second language acquisition context. Tentative findings from this research in progress highlight the prominent role of discursively constructed social presence as a building block in constructing and maintaining cohesive social ties. It is argued that *collaborative floor* and playful conduct are key contributors to cohesion and the development of community.

Introduction

This paper reports on research in progress on patterns of community building in an international online exchange of two groups of undergraduate students in a German and New Zealand university. The learners collaborated on a joint project via a multimedia learning environment, using synchronous and asynchronous communication tools. The students were not known to each other as they embarked upon the project, hence the development of a productive, non-threatening learning community was crucial. The second language learning environment placed particular demands on the students as they negotiated their task and constructed a space within which they could actively engage with each other and through both target languages English and German. How did the students manage and sustain their interactions, especially in the early stages? How did their social presence evolve in the development of cohesive ties and to what extent is this evident in their discourse?

Social presence (SP) is known as a constitutive element of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison & Anderson, 2003) which has been given increasing attention in second language acquisition (SLA) research, albeit with an emphasis on text-based interactions in asynchronous environment (Hauck and Warnecke, 2012). Research has emphasised the facilitating role of SP for cognitive presence which "engages groups in interaction and communication and thus sustains and furthers critical skills" (Lornicka & Lord 2007, p. 211). Elaborating on this definition from a language learning perspective, authors have called for SP to be understood as an essential condition for the construction of computer-mediated learner discourses (Walker, 2010, p. 60) and thus a "sine qua non" requirement central to the learning and teaching process (Hauck & Warnecke, 2012, p. 97). In other words, SP is not only about "the degree to which a person is perceived as 'real' in mediated communication" (Richardson & Swan, 2003, p. 69), but also the extent to which it fosters learner interaction. This makes SP particularly relevant for language learning contexts where participation in an emerging target language presents challenges, particularly for distributed learners. The availability of digital technology does not result in interactivity by default as learners need to have a sense of each other as potential interaction partners they can trust. This involves complex processes which need to be better understood, with a particular focus on social dimensions manifested in learner discourses. The *Community Indicator Framework* (CIF) by Galley et al. (2014) was adapted for this research as an interpretive lens to illustrate the role of social presence in the creation of cohesive online learning communities.

Interaction and participation have long played a critical role in fostering communicative competence in second or foreign language learning through comprehensible input and negotiation of meaning (Long, 1996). Communication in virtual learning environments requires (co)presence of potential interaction partners and their joint construction of interactive space, subject to the ability and willingness to recognise and trust others as potential interaction partners (Beißwenger, 2007). The interactive potential of networked language learning (Chun & Plass, 2000) is of particular importance in distance learning contexts as a source for authentic target language input and output and a catalyst for building learner communities. However, research on international telecollaborative projects has highlighted not only the opportunities for language learners, but also the constraints and risks such as "failed communication" (O'Dowd & Ritter 2006). The 'social turn' in applied linguistics and computer-assisted language learning (CALL) has led to a

growing focus on the role of social dimensions, interaction and communicative competence in a globalised world (Hauck & Youngs, 2008; Kramsch & Thorne, 2002; Petersen, 2009). A small-scale study by Walker (2010) found the *CoI* framework a useful, albeit limited lens through which to examine and understand social aspects in computer-facilitated language learning. Galley et al. (2014) have provided a more fine-grained explanatory framework (CIF) to help analyse and understand the circumstances under which learners engage in and construct community in mediated environments. The exploratory research reported in this paper utilizes and extends the *cohesion* dimension of the CIF to examine social presence in online learner discourse.

The Project

Learners of English for the Humanities and Social Sciences at a German University joined distance students of German as a foreign language at a New Zealand University for a 6-week long online collaboration, involving three cohorts in 2007 and 2008. The project aimed to provide the New Zealand distance learners with opportunities for contact with speakers of their target language and to promote language acquisition and intercultural learning through authentic communication about real-world issues. In turn, the German learners of English would gain similar opportunities and access to native speakers of their target language. The task-design aimed to promote experiential, situated and inquiry-based learning. Guided by an overarching theme called ‘Localisation and Globalisation: opportunities and challenges’ the students were expected to explore and reflect critically on this theme from environmental (e.g. Green politics), cultural (e.g. diversity), or economic (e.g. tourism) perspectives, with reference to both Germany and New Zealand. This approach helped to broadly align the course content and accommodate mutual curricular demands with a focus on contemporary issues. Students could draw on a range of synchronous and asynchronous tools via two digital platforms to engage with each other and course content, for example via taster readings to stimulate curiosity and prompt ideas for developing topic areas within small groups. However, the mere availability of technology could not guarantee uptake by students who were expected to self-direct to a high degree in the completion of their joint task. Not only did they have to navigate their virtual learning environments and construct interactive learning spaces, but they had to overcome the challenge of working in different institutional, cultural and curricular contexts and develop strategies for drawing on different linguistic and cultural repertoires. Teacher-facilitated initial meetings assisted with introductions to the task and modelled bilingual practices. The project was underpinned by the principles of reciprocity, learner autonomy, and inquiry-based learning. The research in progress reported here focuses on one interactive sequence of 3 learners who were amongst a total of 18 New Zealand and 38 German students who participated in the three iterations of the project over three separate semesters.

The study

Transcripts of spoken and written interactions were coded using NVivo software to support the analysis of SP construction in the learners’ synchronous and asynchronous engagements, using Galley et al’s (2014) adapted CIF. For the purposes of this paper, one interaction is examined for manifestations of social presence in a live online chat. In this instance one learner had no microphone and the students utilized the written mode only.

Cohesion and Social Presence

Social presence has its source in multiple layers of cohesive ties which help build and maintain a sense of community. Table 1 below foregrounds *cohesion* descriptors based on an expanded version of Galley et al.’s (2014) CIF, with social presence dimensions embedded within. Added features are shown in *italics* and include affective, interactive, and cohesive dimensions of SP based on Rourke et al. (2001), as well as the notion of *collaborative floor* (Cherny, 1999), which aimed to capture how learners construct a shared conversational floor discursively.

COHESION Recognising & reinforcing mutual ties	Ways to build & maintain discourse community through engagement & interactive activity	Social Presence Project self, perceive others’ co-presence	Community indicators Emergence of cohesive, productive groups
<i>Collaborative floor</i>	Managing turn-taking <i>Start/continue topic or thread;</i> <i>refer to each others’ ideas or</i> <i>content/give feedback</i> Affirmation/challenge Clarification/elaboration ,	Mutual responsiveness, interest and support; willingness to engage and contribute. Joint construction of interactive space.	PARTICIPATION – engaging in activity ➤ Exploratory talk ➤ Core group activity

	Show comprehension, paying attention Interjections, questions, backchannels Repetition, overlap <i>Phatic/vocative functions</i>	Confidence and tolerance cooperative frame, context for experimentation with language(s); willingness to listen/learn. RECIPROCITY	➤ Work & play IDENTITY – awareness of community and place within ➤ Positioning ➤ Common purpose ➤ Shared linguistic repertoires CREATIVE CAPABILITY – constructing knowledge & joint artefacts ➤ Collaborative agency ➤ Exploiting difference ➤ Knowledge creation ➤ Sociolinguistic/intercultural agilities
Humour / Playfulness	Joking, small talk, banter, sarcasm, ritualised talk.	Ability to handle complex matters or potential conflict	
Emotion	<i>Self-disclosure</i> ; emotive language; show <i>gratitude/thank</i> ; <i>compliment</i> ; expression through multiple means including emoticons, laughing etc.	TRUST emotional self-projection; intimacy	
Mutual support and tolerance	Positive responses to others, willingness to listen/learn, encouraging less confident participants, emerging leaders who model cooperative spirit	TRUST & SOLIDARITY comfortable to take risk mutual support, becoming attuned to each other	

Table 1: Social presence indicators embedded in *Cohesion* CIF dimension

The table shows descriptors for each of the four cohesion dimensions, how these map across key SP elements of Reciprocity, Trust and Solidarity and link to the CIF dimensions Participation, Identity and Creative Capability.

Findings

The analysis of community indicators in this paper focuses on one example of a synchronous interaction between 3 students. Figure 1 illustrates the prominence of *cohesion* dimensions in the group's interactions, in particular *collaborative floor* and *humour/playfulness*. The former may play a crucial role in scaffolding students' abilities for deeper reflection through *exploratory talk* (Barnes, 2008) and creating knowledge with others they have come to trust

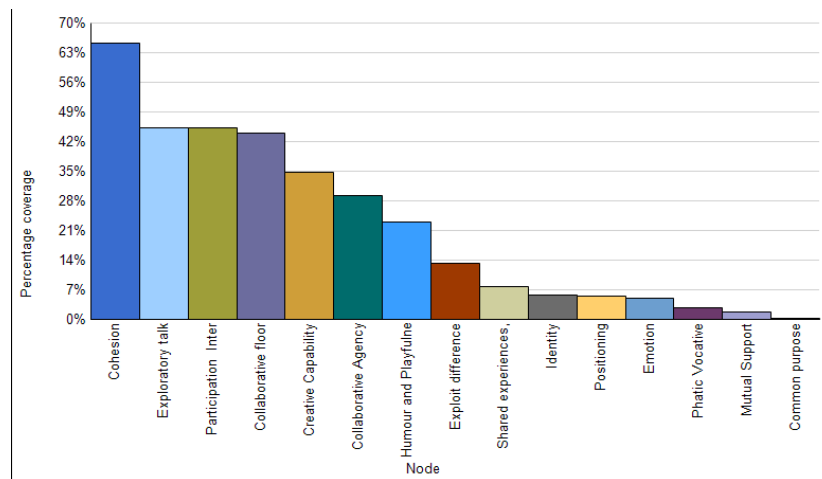


Figure 1: Expanded *community indicators* (Galley et al., 2014) in an early-stage online interaction

and talk things through with. In the flow of on-task/off-task interactions the students' exploration of ideas is often framed by humour and playfulness, 'oiling the wheels' of their interaction. Notably, of 333 turns in total, 209 turns involve expressions of humour and emotion. Levity contributes to minimizing potential conflict, which is especially important during this early stage of forming relational ties where sociality seems to be "characterised not by a separation but by a combination of work and play" (Wittel, 2001, cited in Galley et al., 2014). Selected extracts from the group's hour-long exchange are presented below to demonstrate some of the ways in which cohesive means were constructed discursively, in particular strategies to manage turns (collaborative floor), providing mutual support and utilising humour and emotion to handle demanding or complex situations. S and D are students in Germany and L is a participant from New Zealand.

Collaborative floor

The way students occupy and manage their conversational 'floor' demonstrates how they engage with each other's ideas and keep the conversation going. This is illustrated in the following sequence where questions, seeking clarification and providing elaboration help progress their initial reflections on cultural diversity.

1. S what is your experience?
2. L with multiculturalism?
3. S do your friends speak two languages fluently too?
4. L yes my friends come from Korea, China, Italy, Japan, Brazil etc etc... I don't have many full kiwi friends
5. S wow
6. L I know
7. D This is really different to Germany.
8. L you have russians though... and turkish people...
9. D You're right. But most often, the different ethnic group don't "mix"
10. L oh ok... so thats a difference, here they mix mostly "in general"
11. D It starts in school. When young immigrants are "seperated" from German kids who have better language skills...
12. S we have many people from all over the world here in münster, too. but they are tourists
13. L are you talking about the university or Muenster in general
14. D Or students who come for university and who won't stay
15. S I'm talking about the city
16. L ok

The extract below indicates the development of a cooperative frame, supported by tolerance particularly displayed by L who is attending to two questions posed simultaneously by her German partners. S refers to a comment by L the day before (8), followed by a question by D on an entirely different topic (9), while L attends to the first question. D acknowledges the multiple questions 'in a while' [all at once] (12), though L deftly manages her turn-taking with the use of vocatives to help target her responses to both S and D (13, 14), demonstrating that she has 'heard' them and is willing to contribute. Although S seems "ok" with L's apparent closing down her topic (14), L then qualifies her statement further (15), which prompts another question from S. At this point D takes the floor again, redirecting the subject matter to her topic (17). While the German students place simultaneous demands on L, she appears to read them as indications of interest and stays responsive, for example, by multitasking and sharing information she googled in relation to D's question (18).

1. D It sounds very strange. Have you ever heard it, L? STudium im Alter ;) [*mature students' study*]
2. S never mind.
3. D I do. Never mind. ;)
4. L I've heard it I rofl
5. S another question?
6. L sure
7. D Ok, let's switch back to our subjects.
8. S you told me yesterday, there are no dialects in NZ,
9. D I've got also a question: Since I will write about volunteering in developing countries... Have you ever heard about the Global Volunteer Network?
10. L not as distinctive as for example german dialects
11. S I read there are differences in maori language. have you ever heard of moriori, taranaki,..
12. D Oh, too many questions in a while...
13. L D: I haven't heard of it would you like me to find out how new zealand contributes?
S: I haven't heard about the different Maori dialects...

14. S ok.
15. L but I could imagine that all Maori tribes have a different way of talking..
16. S maybe you heard about the Maori language week? last July
17. D I found it on the internet. It is an NZ organisation which tries to offers volunteer service opportunities in community projects throughout the world. I wondered if people know this organisation or not.
18. L well I just found out about it because I looked on google... but as I said, world vision is really popular in new Zealand do you know about world vision?
19. D I don't know anything.... Could you explain it?

In response to (19) L shares a lengthy extract copied from the internet, which prompts an acknowledgment from D: "This is super interesting to me! Thanks for your answers! ... wow! thank you very much for this answer."

Mutual support

Further into this exchange we see more expressions of acknowledgment which signal support for L:

1. D sorry for the weird questions L? are you ok?
2. L wow.. another hard question :-) let me think...
3. C yes, I know ;) take your time
4. L ahh its 23:00 here... my brain can't think
5. C yeah, sorry- so philosophical questions at night ;) I'm a bad German- do you see he he we can go on with the interview tomorrow, if you want?!

L continues to engage, despite C's suggestion to continue the next day. Both German partners employ humour and irony to minimize the perceived stress for L and avoid potential conflict through self-deprecation, smiley emoticons and an explicit apology (5).

Humour & Emotion

1. D sorry. that you have to talk to us. You could change the room
2. L :-)
3. D ;)
4. S :-----)
5. L I was only joking...
6. D ohoh. I said bullshit I'm sorry L.

The exchange continues for another 20 minutes during which the participants weave together conviviality and on-task engagement with ideas of culture as well as potential ways to define their topic and manage their task together.

Conclusion

The research in progress reported in this brief paper provides limited but important insights into the discursive construction of social presence, highlighting its transformative potential for collaborative practice and construction of virtual communities of learners. Emerging community is evident in the students' social dynamics and their ability to manage and sustain a shared floor. The addition of *collaborative floor* to the CIF *Cohesion* dimension (Galley et al., 2014) helps examine how students manage their turn-taking, build safe collaborative spaces and hone their participatory skills, particularly at the early stages when they embark on a new journey with unknown partners and unpredictable outcomes. Learners are less likely to do so, "unless they feel relatively at ease, free from the danger of being aggressively contradicted or made fun of" (Barnes, 2008, p.5). Tentative findings from this research in progress highlight the prominent role of discursively constructed social presence as a building block for constructing and maintaining social ties. Collaborative floor and playful conduct appear to contribute to the development of

cohesive social ties in important ways. It is argued that SP needs to be understood and fostered as a catalyst for interaction and a crucial foundation for scaffolding trust and common purpose in an emerging community.

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