

**LEARNING THROUGH SHARING :
OPEN RESOURCES, OPEN PRACTICES, OPEN COMMUNICATION**

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Designing for Open Communication

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Abstract

In 2010 the Open University's (OU) Department of Languages launched its first fully online module, English for academic purposes (EAP). To prepare the tutors for teaching in an online only context a 6-week training programme - also fully online - was set up.

We will present and evaluate some of the materials developed for the programme to illustrate how Open Communication, that is reciprocal and respectful exchange in online learning (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), contributed to establishing social presence among participants and thus to the success of the training.

Our study suggests that social presence (SP) as defined by Kehrwald (2008), namely the ability of the individual to demonstrate his/her availability for and willingness to participate in interaction, is the central driving force for successful online communities of inquiry (COI) as understood by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000). However, drawing on our data and Morgan's (2011) critique of Garrison *et al.* (2000) we will argue for a fundamental re-consideration of the Col's tripartite approach which separates social presence from cognitive and teaching presence. Instead, we propose Galley's (2010) "community indicators" as an alternative framework for openness in online education in general and CALL in particular with SP as the guiding principle for material and task design for both (language) teaching and learning and teacher education purposes. This approach seems more apt to promote

the open, democratic, learner-centred, and identity building processes online which new electronic media facilitate (Warschauer 1999).

1 Introduction

The concept of SP and its role in mediated interactions including computer-mediated-communication (CMC) has been a research topic since the early 1970s. Definitions of SP have developed from being an attribute of a communications medium like, for example, the telephone, in the early years (Short, Williams & Christie, 1976) to a relational understanding of SP such as the sense of belonging to a community experienced by the interacting participants, a couple of decades later (Gunawardena, 1995).

Several studies report the positive influence of SP in the context of learning and teaching. Thus Gunawardena & Zittle (1997) and Richardson & Swan (2003) mention positive correlations between SP, perceived overall learning and satisfaction in distance education. More specifically, in the context of distance language learning, White (2003, p. 59) underlines the role of SP “to support interaction and the social and affective dimensions of learning and to maintain engagement between those present”, a view that is also prevalent in the CALL literature. SP tends to be perceived as a secondary element, mainly relevant in terms of meeting the learners' social and affective needs, and as a facilitator of cognitive processes or deep learning. This understanding is informed by the educational experience model of Col developed by Garrison et al. (2000) in the context of the “Study of the Characteristics and Qualities of Text-Based Computer Conferencing for Educational Purposes” project (<http://communitiesofinquiry.com>). The model distinguishes between cognitive, social and teaching presence – as relatively static entities - and remains to date one of the most commonly referenced frameworks for investigations of formal higher-level online education.

In CALL, Donaldson and Kötter (1999), for example, see the significance of SP in creating a “far more effective and enjoyable” environment (p. 543). Lomicka and Lord (2007) propose that SP “may facilitate the success of cognitive presence” and that it “engages groups in interaction and communication and thus sustains and furthers critical skills” (p. 211). And Arnold and Ducate (2006) conclude that social activity might even outweigh cognitive density, especially if tutor presence is missing.

We question such isolating and hierarchical views of the social and cognitive dimensions of computer mediated collaborative (language) learning in a Col and move SP right into the centre of the learning and teaching process. Our findings assert the role of SP as the *conditio sine qua non* for learning in CMC contexts and thus as a core e-literacy skill rather than a facilitating element. In our study we have explored aspects of task design that promote the development of SP skills such as sending, reading and interpreting SP clues. Section 2 is dedicated to a brief overview of published research to date on social presence with a focus on asynchronous teaching and learning contexts as this is also the backdrop to the present study. In section 3 we outline the project which informs this contribution – set-up, methodology, participants, task design and content – as well as the approach to data collection and evaluation. Our findings will be presented and discussed in section 4. Here, we will also argue for an alternative framework for Cols in general and CALL and CMC-based language learning and teaching in particular. In this framework SP is at the centre of material and task design for both tutor training and language learning and teaching purposes. Section 5 draws the chapter to a conclusion and provides a summary of the main findings.

Eliminato: s

2 SP in asynchronous learning and teaching environments

[...]

2.1 Social presence within a community of inquiry

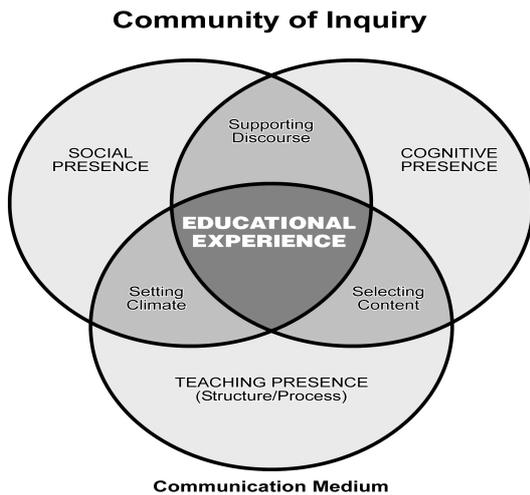


Figure1: Community of Inquiry by Garrison *et al.* (2000)

In a Col cognitive presence is described as “the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication” (Garrison *et al.*, 2000, p. 89). Social presence is understood as the projection of learners’ personal characteristics into a Col through use of emotional expression, open communication, and various means to establish group cohesion. Cognitive presence is perceived as the core element of successful learning while SP supports critical thinking through meeting the learners’ social and affective needs, thus providing indirect support for cognitive presence. It is accepted as a direct facilitator when sustaining interaction throughout a course is of significant importance, as, for example, in the case of distance education. Teaching presence is reflected in appropriate design of learning materials, facilitation of online discussions, and subject area (“directed”) instruction, and seen as supporting and directing cognitive and social procedures.

[...] Rourke *et al.* (1999) developed a content analysis framework for the interpretation of learner group interactions via online discussion boards in order to support their theory with empirical data. This framework has been the basis for most content analysis work carried out in SP research to date including language learning and language teacher education studies. Others like, for example, Swan (2002) and Lomicka and Lord (2007) have built on and expanded the original framework of 15 equally-weighted SP indicators grouped under the three aforementioned categories. The version proposed by Swan (2002) looks as follows:

Affective	Interactive	Cohesive
Paralanguage	Greetings and salutations	Acknowledgement
Emotion	Vocatives	Agreement/disagreement
Value	Group reference	Approval
Humour	Social sharing	Invitation
Self-disclosure	Course reflection	Personal advice

Table 1: Swan's (2002) adaptation of the SP template developed by Rourke *et al.* (1999)

3 The project: Set-up, participants, methodology, and task design

3.1. Set-up, participants and methodological approach

[...]

Aims	Tutor familiarisation with their peer group, the teaching materials, the learning and teaching environment (a bespoke version of Moodle), and forms of moderation in asynchronous settings (forum and wiki).
Duration	6 weeks in total whereby 4 weeks overlapped with the tutors starting to teach the module.
Design approach (methodology)	The programme was inspired by a. Hoven's (2006) "experiential modelling approach" where the tools and processes the tutors were expected to use in their teaching were experienced beforehand from a learner's point of view; b. Allwright's (2003) and Allwright and Hanks' (2009) understanding of "exploratory practice" or inclusive practitioner research which allowed us to foreground the learners' (tutors as learners) perspective.
Participants	9 tutors representing a multifaceted CoI with many being new to the British Open University, new to teaching in an online only

	context, but with some experience of using e-mail for teaching and learning purposes, yet also new to the unique blend of students (native speakers of English and speakers of English as an additional language). Seven participants were new to tutoring via a forum.
Students	A similarly mixed cohort of adult learners in terms of academic histories, linguistic backgrounds, range of e-literacy skills and objectives for studying beyond EAP online.

Table 2: Project overview

Apart from experiential modelling which aims at immersing future tutors “in the use of the technologies, while at the same time providing them with the freedom and framework within which to experience the practical application of the theory in their own learning” (Hoven 2007, n.p.), the programme was also influenced by Allwright and Hanks’ (2009) understanding of “exploratory practice”. [...]

3.2 Task design

[...]

Figure 2 shows an example:

Week 3 Task 1 - Patterns of participation: forum

Dear all,

This week we will consider two key issues with regard to the tutor role in asynchronous communication: motivation and participation. We want to find out to what extent our work can tip the balance either in favour or against participation and whether what [participant] calls 'let students get on with it' is something we need to take on board and to communicate to our learners.

Now:

- Think about your own patterns of participation (either as a moderator or as a student). How often, when, why, how intensively do you participate?
- Then have a look at the attached document which is a collation of common patterns of online participation as categorised by Salmon (2002).
- Which one applies to yourself? Is there anything you have learned that you want to practise in order to help your group become / be / stay (inter)active?

Figure 2: Task on patterns of participation

Here the trainees were asked to consider Salmon's (2002) patterns of online participation which are as follows:

Type	Behaviours	E-moderator response
The wolf	Visits once a week, lots of activity, then disappears again until next week, or even the week after!	Nudge wolf by e-mail to encourage to visit again and see responses that s/he has sparked off.
The elephant	Steady – visits most days for a short time.	Congratulate. Ask elephant to encourage and support others – especially mouse and squirrel.
The squirrel	Always catching up: completes two weeks in one session then disappears again for some time.	Nudge squirrel by e-mail to suggest life is easier with more regular access. Check on other commitments. Provide regular summaries and archiving to enable squirrel to catch up easily and contribute.
The mouse	Visits once a week, reads and contributes little.	Check that mouse can access all messages. Check language difficulties. May need boost of confidence. Give

		specific role.
The mole	Inclined to post disembodied comments in a random way.	Try to include relevant comments from mole in summaries and invite responses. Needs support and e-stroking.
The rabbit	Lives online, prolific message writer, responds very rapidly.	Rabbit may need counselling to hold back and let others shine through. Give structured roles such as summarizing after a plenary.
The stag	Tendency to dominate discussion at certain times.	Invite stag back frequently. Offer a structured and specific role.
The magpie	Steals ideas without acknowledging.	Foster a spirit of acknowledgement and reinforcement of individual ideas. Warn magpie directly if necessary.
The dolphin	Intelligent, good communicator and playful online.	Ensure dolphin acknowledges and works well with others. May annoy participants who think it's all very serious.

Figure 3: Patterns of participation (© G. Salmon (2002) *Etivities: the key to active online learning*. Kogan Page, p. 171)

[...]

Closely related to reflections on patterns of participation was the following task that instigated exchanges about learner motivation:

Week 3 Task 2 - Motivation: forum

Dear all,

searching the web for information on 'motivation techniques' for online forum groups I often come across statements like this:

'However, motivating students to use the online discussion groups is one of the main challenges. It is often the case that the better performing students engage in the debates, whilst the remainder of the class either offer limited debate or fail to engage at all. This lack of engagement could be due to poor motivation, confidence or fear of embarrassment at posting a message that the student perceives will be interpreted as being stupid by their peers. It is therefore important that the tutor manages the online discussion and its progression to ensure that viewpoints are constructively received and further debate can be instigated.'

(http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/hlst/documents/case_studies/using_online_discussion_forums_as_a_learning_tool.pdf)

I guess you would all agree to this. However, the question remains: **HOW** can this be done?

1. I also discovered a slide show with some facts about what motivates people to be active on the Social Web. This gives some clues as to the range of motivation we will come across in our work. See here: http://www.slideshare.net/trebor/motivating-people-to-participate?from=share_email.
2. Have you found anything you had not been aware of? Can you draw any conclusions from this for your work on EAP online?
3. And a bit more input... :-)) The University of Newcastle put together a very useful website with information, tips and tricks regarding many aspects of online distance learning including motivation. Please have a look: http://www.newcastle.edu.au/ctl-resources/Teaching-in-the-online-environment/Facilitating/Motivating_students.htm
4. Select two points you would include in a short guideline for forum moderators. Please post these points here and explain your choice.

Figure 4: Task on motivation

[...]

A relatively wide range of topics was covered during the training dealing with aspects such as getting to know the module website and sharing icebreaker ideas, early on in the programme, challenges associated with motivation and participation, half way through the programme (see Figures 2 and 4), and issues related to error correction and assessment of forum contribution towards the end of the programme. In section 3.3 we explain our approach to analysing the interactions that took place with a particular focus on SP which gradually emerged in the text-based exchanges among participants as a result of their task performances.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

[...]

The diversity in task performances due to a wide range of academic, cultural, and personal backgrounds is evident in the participants' individual approaches. Thus the focus of our study was not on task completion but on what happened while trainees were carrying out a task.

We therefore decided to look at the contributions to the training forum from a broader perspective to explore how the trainees were gradually developing awareness of the interactions they were involved in and thus of their own and others' SP and its impact.

[...]

4 Findings and discussion

[...] we have found that the CoI does not provide sufficient scope for the constant shifting of roles, identities and patterns of participation that are characteristic for CMC-based interactions.

4.1 Shifting roles and identities and varying patterns of participation

[...] Salmon's description of how behaviour patterns manifest themselves and what kind of moderator responses they should ideally meet seem rather rigid as they do not take account of the transient nature of online participation. [...] highlight the need to distinguish between participatory literacy as a prerequisite for SP and SP as such, and suggest that what we can actually train for in CALL teacher education is participatory literacy as defined by Pegrum (2009, p. 42), i.e. "digital communicative literacy, which provides a foundation for online interactions, [...] and which facilitates the collaborative processes at the core of participatory literacy". [...]

4.1.1 Experiential modelling and exploratory practice

[T]here is a direct link between experiential modelling and SP as the ways in which others position and re-position themselves in a CoI presents a model which one can adopt and follow. To that effect the moderator-colleague who ran the training intentionally positioned herself in a variety of ways during the event which – in turn – afforded her the possibility to make shifting of roles and identities the topic of the exchanges. [...]

The question arises how we can capture SP as a phenomenon that emerges through task performance in CMC-based CoIs? How can the insights gained from this study contribute "to

equip educators with a state-of-the-art underpinning theoretical framework so that they are better placed to guide teaching and learning efforts, to convert hunches and intuition into demonstrable student gains” (Pegg *et al.* 2007 quoted in Pegrum 2009)? As a potential answer we propose the Community Indicator Framework by Galley, Conole and Alevizou (2011).

4.2 The Community Indicators Framework

[...]

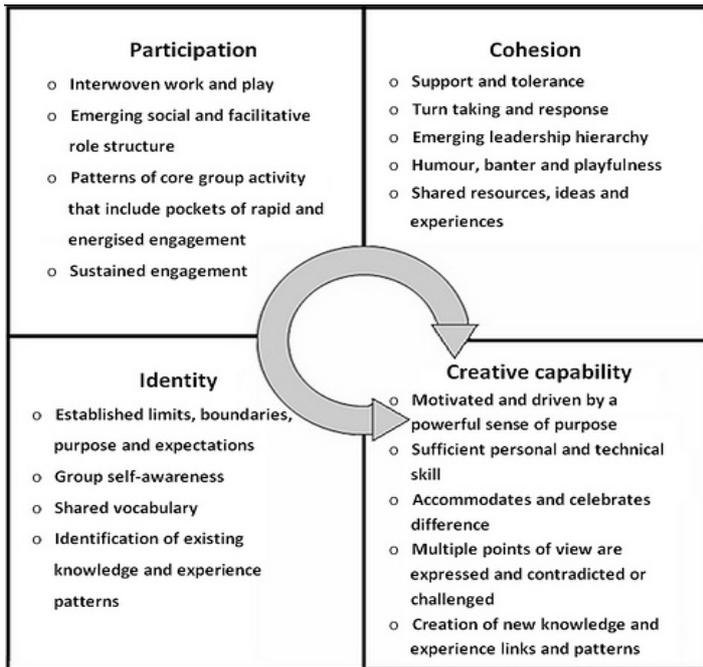


Figure 5: Community Indicators Framework by Galley *et al.* (2011),

Galley *et al.* try to reflect the organic nature of communities by taking account of the constant movement and dynamics that link all aspects of the framework. Significantly, the category of identity found its way into the understanding of online communities and the distinction between teacher and learner has been removed.

We suggest a re-consideration of the SP construct in the light of this framework as an overarching concept that is both the means *and* the end of online communication and interaction and the result of participatory literacy as understood by Pegrum (2009).

5 Conclusions

Morgan (2011, p.1) suggests “that a shift to understanding teaching presence within a sociocultural perspective has important implications for teaching and design”. The same, we propose, holds true for SP. On the basis of our study we would argue that tasks designed to spark collaborative reflection on issues related to participation, motivation and thus SP, seem particularly well suited to foster SP itself and should therefore be more systematically trialled and integrated into CALL and CMC-based teacher education and learner preparation for online interaction. However, as they operate on a meta-cognitive level and try to raise awareness for the very phenomenon that is at stake while trainees engage in task performance, such tasks constitute a particular challenge for all involved. Still, we can claim with some certainty that it was the participants' interpretation of tasks designed to trigger exchanges on motivation and participation that led to reflection, discussion, and thus learning about the relevance of SP in online communities and – at the same time – helped SP emerge among the trainees. By witnessing how others “project themselves into the environment, how others interact with one another and how others react to their personal efforts to cultivate a social presence” (Kehrwald, 2010, p. 47) participants acquired the skill to send, receive and interpret SP cues. They found out about the shifting of roles and identities which are typical for online learning communities and which – in turn – allowed them to continually re-conceptualize their position in the online interactions and to accept the transient nature of their role.

However, most of SP research to date is based on text-based and mainly asynchronous CMC interactions and has largely ignored the influence of multimodal elements on and skills needed for the projection of the self via emerging CMC technologies. It also largely reflects the teacher-researchers' perspective rather than the learners' view. The present study has bridged the second gap to a certain extent by working with teachers as researchers of their own learning. A significant exception in terms of investigations of SP and emerging CMC technologies is Satar's (2010) work which explores SP in online multimodal communication. A joint way forward for SP training and research in both asynchronous and synchronous online contexts and echoing the spirit of open source instructional materials, might be the use of teacher and learner ethnographies building on and expanding the “storyline approach” of the study presented here: once captured in the shape of an online journal, then re-purposed, customised and integrated into open textbooks or journals for subsequent cohorts of teacher trainees and/or learners, the exchanges resulting from tasks such as the

ones used in this study could be the basis for further and new reflections and interactions and evaluations thereof.

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