The Relationship Between Social Presence and Social Capital in Online Learning Communities

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Abstract: For many years, social presence has been deemed important for communication and collaboration in online learning environments. Yet, the specific types of interactions fostered by social presence have been ignored. In this paper, we propose the use of social capital theory as a means of distinguishing interaction patterns. We urge researchers to study social presence with the appreciation that not all types of interactions are equally valued by participants and that social presence does not necessarily lead to all types of such interactions.

Introduction
Research into online learning environments consistently finds important links between social interaction and social presence. Purposeful interaction and supportive community can be generated in an online environment where social presence has been established (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Kehrwald, 2008). With particular interest to deep and meaningful social interactions, the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model is likely the most influential theoretical framework for studying social presence in online learning communities (Oztok & Brett, 2011). This framework evolved from the social constructivist paradigm and attempts to empirically test the concept of social presence in relation to other dynamics in online learning (i.e. cognitive presence or teaching presence). Employing the CoI as a theoretical framework, researchers have examined individuals’ interactions in online communities as they engage with their peers in collaborative learning processes (e.g., Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Rourke, Anderson, Archer, & Garrison, 1999; Swan & Shih, 2005; Tu, 2005). Focusing on “the degree of feeling, perception, and reaction to another intellectual entity in the CMC environment” (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p.146), much research has productively explained how social presence plays a role at one’s interactions (e.g., Garrison, 2006; Richardson & Swan, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). However, while the literature is rife with conceptions of social presence as an attribute of individuals' experiences, it rarely extends such conceptions to the broader community level. That is, while we understand the importance of social presence in terms of individual benefits, the relationship of social presence to interaction is less clear. While social presence and interaction are related, it would be erroneous to assume that the same types of interactions are equally-valued by the various members of the learning community. For instance, while some individuals
might prefer to interact more often with a small number of online peers, others might prefer to interact more broadly with as many other peers as possible. Indeed, it is likely that different types of interactions would lead to different educational outcomes. Nevertheless, while the educational value of interactions within a learning community has been deemed vital by much online learning research (e.g., Aragon, 2003; Rourke & Kanuka, 2009; Swan, 2005), the relationship between social presence and types of social interactions remains relatively under studied. Given the educational importance of social interactions within a community, it is prudent to further explore these links. Such exploration would shed light on our understanding of the dynamics, outcomes, and purposes of social practices in online learning, such as group assignments or collaborative practices.

In this article, we are similarly concerned with the relationship between social presence and individuals’ interactions. Here, we explore the problem through a sociological perspective by employing social capital theory. Social capital refers to ‘the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition’ (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992 p. 14). In this sense, social capital theory can help us to analyze the ways by which different interaction patterns might be related to the level of perceived social presence. Therefore, this article argues for an investigation of the relationship between social presence and social capital. Analyzing this relationship may generate fruitful discussion about the educational value of different relationship patterns among individuals, and whether individuals should try to develop closer relationships with a few online members or develop diverse relationships with a larger proportion of their online peers. Such discussions could inform our pedagogical and curricular design decisions about particular online learning practices.

**Social Presence**

When social constructivism is employed as a theoretical framework -- that is, when learning is seen to be shaped by context (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989) -- social presence becomes critical as it connects individuals in an online learning environment and motivates them to take an active role in knowledge construction and meaning-making processes. Researchers have shown that social presence is prerequisite for meaningful social interaction in online learning environments (e.g., Fung, 2004; Henning, 2004; Stacey, 1999) since it is thought to play a supporting role in the formation of relationships and the exchange of information within a mediated environment (Oztok & Brett, 2011). For instance, Hill, Song, and West (2009) suggest that online environments should support social presence so that individuals can “interact and observe the results of their interactions while responding to and engaging with others” (p. 89). To summarize, literature suggests that social presence not only supports and facilitates the communicative actions of individuals, but also potentially enables learning in online environments.

While there is no consensus on the definition of social presence (Oztok & Brett, 2011), the literature leverages social presence to study a wide range of aspects of the online learning experience, including sense of community, perceived learning, satisfaction, performance, and interactions (Danchak, Walther, & Swan, 2001; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Richardson &
Swan, 2003; Russo & Benson, 2005; Walther, 1992). Focusing on the relationship between social presence and sense of community, scholars suggest that individuals are not isolated entities in a community and, consequently, that it is important to examine the interactions involved in different forms of collaborative groups. For instance, Hiltz, Coppola, Rotter, Toroff, and Benbunan-Fich (2000) employ social presence theory to investigate the ways in which individuals interact socially, question each other, share knowledge, and engage in activities in a technologically-mediated environment. Another important research focus in the literature is on the relationship between social presence and students’ online behaviors. The literature shows that social presence is a key construct for understanding individuals’ experience in this context (Oztok & Brett, 2011). For instance, Gunawardena and Zittle (1997) suggest that when students participate in activities, they project their own identities into cyberspace, “feel the presence of others online”, and create “conventions and norms that bind them together in exploring issues of common interest” (p. 11). Yet another example can be found in Moore and Kearsley’s (2005) work in which they posit that social presence stimulates peer-to-peer interactions, and thus fosters sociability in online environments.

The concept of social presence can be understood through an examination of the ways in which the theory has been instantiated. The literature suggests that two research themes are consistently present: 1) the relationship between social presence and sense of community, and 2) the relationship between social presence and interactions and behaviors. Currently, social presence studies build on the premise that it is the individual who makes an online environment a productive space in which collaboration and social learning practices occur. Therefore, the contemporary social presence research focuses on individuals within online learning communities.

Social Capital
Social capital has been employed by many sociologists to study connections within and between social networks. The central tenet for social capital is that relationships within and between networks have value. Although the definition of social capital is still being debated, Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam have been repeatedly cited in social capital research. Bourdieu (1983) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 249). Coleman has focused on the functionality of social capital and has conceptualized it as part of a wider exploration of the nature of social structures. Coleman (1988) defined it as “a variety of entities with two elements in common: they all consist of some aspects of social structures, and they facilitate a certain action of actor within the structure” (p. 98). Putnam has explored social capital through civic communities in society. According to Putnam (2000), social capital refers to “connections among individuals – social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In that sense social capital is closely related to what some have called civic virtue” (p. 19). It can be summarized that Coleman and Bourdieu conceptualize social capital on an individual level while Putnam emphasizes the benefit of social capital to the community. Taken together, social capital theory could offer concepts and means to study social relations, thus allowing systematic investigations about how relationships and connections are diffused in communities.
According to Putnam (2000), two types of social capital are most prominent: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital occurs when people with weak ties from different backgrounds bring in novel information, whereas bonding social capital is found among people with strong ties who provide emotional support and a sense of belonging for one another (Granovetter, 1983). According to the bonding type of social capital, communities that have strong bonds among their members have strong ties of attachment between relatively homogeneous individuals. In this sense, individuals with similar interests or backgrounds can better make sense of each other. Online learning literature demonstrates that for individuals to recognize collaboration as a valuable experience and to understand their peers’ ideas, critiques, or suggestions, certain conditions, such as a sense of affinity, belonging, and closeness, should be satisfied (Garrison, 2006). The bonding dimension of social capital could provide opportunities for satisfying such conditions. The bridging type of social capital refers to ties between relatively more socially-distant individuals or groups. In this sense, the bridging type of social capital focuses on the relationships with people from other communities, cultures, or socio-economic backgrounds. Similar claims, though not explicitly referring to social capital, can be found in online learning literature (e.g., Garrison, 2006; Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003; Rovai, 2002). For instance, Kreijns et al. (2003) suggest that social interactions in collaborative online learning practices “have to do with getting to know each other, committing to social relationships, and building a sense of on-line community” (p. 342). They further articulate this idea and claim that “[i]f group members are initially not acquainted with each other and the group has zero-history (which is often the case in distance education institutions), group forming, developing a group structure, and group dynamics are essential to developing a learning community” (p. 342).

Through social capital, individuals might explore and learn about other community members (bridging) and decide whether they want to further their interactions (Nickerson, 1999). It is particularly through this notion that social capital theory becomes critical since it would make the resources inherent in an online learning community available and accessible to others. Indeed, it is likely that any interactivity between individuals can contribute to knowledge sharing to some extent, but we argue that it is the dimensions of social capital that lead to a greater level of knowledge sharing, both in quantity and quality. And while there is a growing body of literature on social capital and its relationship to educational development (Dika & Singh, 2002), the exploration of the concept in online learning environments is notably limited.

What we are claiming is that the bridging and bonding dimensions of social capital may prove to be useful tools with which to further probe the relationship between social presence and interaction. Since the online learning literature has essentially collapsed the effects of social presence across these vastly different group interaction patterns, the reported effects of social presence may be weakened or inconclusive due to the importance of social capital as moderator. For example, the question of whether there is a correlation between heightened social presence and heightened learning is constantly under review (Oztok & Brett, 2011). We suggest that progress can be made toward answering such questions by taking a more nuanced approach: one that takes issue with a one-size-fits-all model of interaction.
Conclusions
Current conceptualizations of social presence are limited to identifying the interplay between social components and their effects on individuals' behavior and learning. Additional theory is required to promote the study of social presence to the level of the community at large. We have suggested the use of social capital as the link between social presence on one hand and community dynamics on the other. Our review suggests a new direction for social presence research; one that focuses on the manifestation of social presence in the community at large. Grounded in social practice, the conceptualization of social presence should include how social and cultural dynamics manifest themselves in individuals’ practices and affect perceptions of presence. Such perspectives may provide more holistic ways to understand individuals in a mediated environment and better support collaborative learning practices in online educational contexts.

References


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