Socialization in the Online Classroom

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Abstract

The potential represented by the use of computer-mediated conferencing and instruction offers access for and collaboration among learners around the world. Yet, an important aspect of successful online learning experiences—student socialization in cyberspace—appears to suffer from a somewhat fractured research history. Some research indicates that difficulties exist with consistent definitions of socialization while other studies struggle with the issue of efficacy of socialization in achieving desired learning outcomes. The purpose of this paper is to look at the different ways in which socialization has been conceived and studied; examine the underlying theoretical structure of online learning that is affected by socialization in the online classroom and consider effects of teachers upon the online classroom.

Nearly every student who ventures into the realm of online learning has wrestled or will wrestle with the question of online socialization at some point. It is such a central element in the experience that one can hardly avoid it. Still, not everyone is aware of the fact that online socialization is so much more complicated than it seems at first glance. It is evident that face-to-face communication is not available in online courses and that class "meetings" may either be more flexible or altogether non-existent. These factors combined can give the online student a great sense of freedom; however, with that freedom is a commensurate anxiety that is also brought about by these self-same factors. In this respect, these factors may give the student a sense of isolation and discomfort. Research done by Nicol, Minty and Sinclair (2003) featured comments made by students in a Masters-level course who reported that they withheld their input in online exchanges because "they were uneasy about the impoverished social nature of online discussions" (p.274). Orey, Koenecke and Crozier (2003) concluded that the students with whom they worked during an online learning experience developed stronger connections outside of the online environment than they did within that milieu. Hill (2001) also found a lack of gratification with Web-based learning that dashed the hopes of many who championed it.

Elements of Socialization that Affect Online Education

The term "socialization" is quite broad and can mean different things to different people. Socialization is about people being able to mingle and establish connections on one or more levels. They speak with to one another; share ideas and information and confirm the connections made through an agreed upon means. Understandably, the research that seeks to probe socialization appears to break this complex dynamic down in a similar way by discussing the parts that make up the whole of socialization. Many deal with student interaction while others focus upon the development of community, but none seem to use an agreed upon meaning. In this paper socialization will be used to conceptualize "how

participants in an ALN [asynchronous learning network] relate to one another" (Wegerif 1998, Introduction, ¶1). This sufficiently captures the gist of speaking, sharing and confirming. Though most often studied separately, each of parts of the online dynamic come into play to compose the overall character of online socialization. Research examines all three of the elements as interaction, online presence, and knowledge construction.

Interaction, along with the term "interactivity," is a word often seen in the literature that almost seems to be interchangeable with the word socialization. A great deal of research concern has focused upon the idea of interaction. Soo and Bonk (1998) developed six categories of interaction by calling attention to the communication between the teacher, the learner and the material as well as distinguishing between the synchronicity and asynchronous communication. Shin (2002) suggests that there is a liberal application of the term that may have been caused by the lack of agreement in its meaning. He lists sample meanings from various researchers: it can be an event (Wagner,1994, p.8), a situation where people are engaged in order to evoke a response (Reis & Wheeler, 1991,p. 269) and it can be taken as a process (Vrasidas & McIssac, 1999, p. 25).

In addition to the basic distinction between interaction and socialization is the idea of the necessity of interaction in online learning. It sounds like a "no-brainer" to conclude that parties online should interact with one another to facilitate the class. Many researchers concur, feeling that interaction is an essential part of class proceedings that should be given special attention (Shin, 2002). But the manner in which interaction is woven into the course at the design stage reflects an interesting dilemma. One interesting view is that online interaction should seek to mimic a place-based type of meeting, apparently to allow students the comfort of retaining face-to-face conventions (Northrop, 2002). Another idea is that the handicap of distance can be overcome by increasing the amount of interactivity designed into the course. This runs the risk of overloading the students with superfluous activity (Berge, 1999 in Northrup, 2002).

Interaction is an important aspect of socialization and can be a measure of socialization. But the term "socialization" has a much broader implication than does "interaction". Socialization requires more than just engagement for its own sake or for the sake of a response. For example, students can go through a routine exchange of basic information such as introducing themselves or giving one another their telephone numbers. By definition, these people would be interacting. But it requires more than just talking to constitute socialization, especially in the online sense of the term. There seems to be an idea that simple exchanges between students can be construed as socialization. As if to say that, by counting the frequency of online student contacts made one with another, an accurate assessment of socialization is therefore made. Yet, if interaction is a requirement, and its use must be carefully balanced, then a question that arises is: What value does interaction bring to the online learning experience?

The value of interaction in online learning lies in its contribution to the participants' (teacher and learner) ability to establish a sense of being in the virtual environment. This is the idea of online presence.

Like the idea of interaction, much also seems to have been written about online presence. And, just like the idea of interaction, the idea of presence has not been absolutely defined though studied in several academic disciplines (Shin, 2002). The term "presence" is also used in different ways and with different prefix attachments that create different connotations and applications. Shin speaks of "telepresence" and defines it as the ability to envision geographic locations. "Social presence", according to Shin, is when students are "feeling intimacy or togetherness in terms of sharing time and place" (Shin, 2002, p. 122). Such feelings are

important to establish in a class when students separated by great distance and time. Social presence theory is born of communication and media studies and relatively new. Its basic premises are that communication media are not identical in their ability to make people in disparate locations feel as if they are connected with one another and that interaction is directly affected by the quality of the interpersonal relationship that is born of this contact (Shin, 2002, p.126).

Also of interest here are the more specific applications of the social presence definition that, Shin says, include ideas of the "feeling that other actors are jointly involved in reflective communication" (Walther, 1992 in Shin, 2002), "'the feeling of contact' in a mediated communication situation" (Williams, 1978 in Shin, 2002) and "the degree to which a person is perceived as a 'real person' in mediated communication" (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997 in Shin, 2002). Tu and McIssac define it similarly as "the degree of awareness of another person and the consequent appreciation of an interpersonal relationship" (Tu and McIssac, 2002, p.133). Taken together, these give an overall sense that online social presence is about relationships, connecting with others despite physical separation.

Another major researcher also speaks of the idea of "transactional presence" that seems to align itself sufficiently with the concept of socialization. Shin defines transactional presence as a "relational construct" that is concerned with the online student's feeling of being connected to other online parties and with the responsiveness of those parties to one another's needs and desires. This iteration of the idea of presence seems to extend the importance of connectedness so that connectedness is more than student empathy for one another; instead, it becomes a vital tool necessary for successful navigation through the learning experience. The point is made by the students in the Nicol, Minty and Sinclair (2003) study who stated that the time lag, lurking and a lack of defined procedures they encountered made their asynchronous discussions very frustrating. These characteristics could be perceived as inhibitors to the establishment and/or sustenance of online social presence and, in turn, inhibitors to effective socialization. Shin acknowledges the scant research evidence that exists to support a causal relationship between social presence and academic achievement, but acknowledges that transactional presence exhibited by students, teachers and the hosting institution can act as predictors of student success in online courses (Shin, 2003). Other research also supports a positive relationship between online social presence and learning as well.

We can see then that the connections made between learners online and the exchanges between them, whether required or not, are vital to the concept of socialization as they can be seen as having an impact upon student learning outcomes. Under what construct do these two online forces come together to contribute to learning? This question can be explained by the idea of social knowledge construction.

How Online Socialization Relates to Social Knowledge Construction

Among the theories of learning upon which researchers have attempted to built sound frameworks for practical online application is "situated learning theory" which is based simultaneously upon social development theory and constructivism. Situated Learning Theory acknowledges the context of the learning environment as one of the many influences upon which the learner draws as s/he makes sense from various learning materials. The influence of social development theory upon situated learning is evident in that situated

learning seeks to incorporate the culture in which the learning occurs to assist with the learning. By doing this, the proponents say, learning is kept in context rather than being taught in the abstract. It is postulated that this method promotes the formation and facilitation of "communities of practice" wherein learners in the community move from novices to experts through apprenticeships of learning by doing and problem-solving.

Social interaction is a significant factor in the sustenance of these communities of practice since the communities and the knowledge acquisition within them are sustained by collaboration. Rather than through a top-down hierarchy, knowledge is "passed on" as if from a mentor to the person being mentored. This collaboration implicitly requires that each learner feel connected, respected and that the persons with whom s/he is working is available and, at the very least, sensitive to his/her needs if not immediately aware of them. Constructivism contributes its portion to situated learning when learners, using social interaction as the vehicle, independently determine the meaning of what they are taking in without necessarily having to validate it with an "authority". This gives the learner, and the community of practice, an enormous amount of power and authority and is the most direct casualty of socialization. Interaction and online presence are simply tools, means to and end. Social knowledge construction (which is actually situated learning) is the end itself and the chief raison d' ere for the existence of the community of practice.

Another interesting point of indecision on the part of researchers working in the field of computer-mediated communication is that the term "community of learners" almost seems to be interchangeable with the term "community of learners". The two expressions are used to arrive at similar, if not the same, conclusions.

Much of the literature that concerns itself with online communities suggests that the development of "community of learners" or "learning communities" is what distance educators should be striving to do. But, what does this community look like and how does it come to be? The characteristics of an online learning community will be discussed next.

Successful online learning communities are extreme examples of social knowledge construction in that they apply the practice over great distances and under more demanding conditions. It is one thing to facilitate collaborative learning in a traditional, face-to-face classroom setting, but quite another to do so over thousands of miles that span several time zones and cultures. In this context, the learning community exercises some special qualities.

Lock (2002, p. 396) points to constructivism as the cornerstone of a learning community, calling the community an "opportunity to interact with other learners in sharing, constructing and negotiating meaning [that] leads to knowledge construction". Brown (2001, p. 22) also mentions the importance of interaction claiming that interaction promotes the discovery of similarities among connected parties. The learners in Brown's community concurred with so many of the descriptors given throughout the literature that tell what a learning community is supposed to be. They were essentially in agreement with words like trust, support, common goals, mutual support and shared history. Yet, they actually advanced the concept an impressive step further when they characterized themselves as responsible for their classmates' learning as well as their own (Brown 2001, p. 22). This statement is a striking example of the spirit behind the online learning community. It embodies the notion that it's not just about me, but it's also about you and even about us. Commitment like this requires a special glue to bind its members together. Lock says that the purpose of the group can serve to provide a sense of exclusivity that serves this purpose.

Lock further suggests that an online learning community is not a fixed structure. In contrast, she describes it as being fluid in nature, being more process than product (Lock, 2002, p.

395). Kowch & Schwier further describe the online learning community as an organization of people who maintain tightly knit relations based upon personal affiliation and mutual reliance. In addition, the community is extremely interactive and operates under a very loosely structured organizational principle (Kowch & Schwier, 1997 in Lock, 2002, p. 395). This is what a learning community looks like and an examination of the barriers to community formation as well as the tools and process of building that community will more fully illustrate the potential that such groups have.

Barriers to Online Learning

It is likely that learners everywhere are attracted to online courses for the much same reasons. The convenience and flexibility of not having a fixed, physical meeting space coupled with the ability to work from convenient locales often gives students the impression of distance learning as being pretty easy. One of the difficulties that learners have with online course comes in the area of adjusting to asynchronous interaction, if this is the communication mode of the class. A few of the qualities of asynchronous communication--the time lag between interactions, the frequent lack of clear norms of communication and the absence of visual/auditory conversation cues—created anxiety for many students. Learners remark that the time lag inhibited spontaneity and made it difficult to sustain focus because learners are often distracted by activities in between interactions. A few students mention how frustrating it was to have to wait for a response when they were especially excited about a particular topic and anxious to discuss it, but could not discuss it immediately because the asynchronous structure meant that, more often than not, they had to wait for a reply (Nichol, Minty and Sinclair, et al, p. 274). Ambiguous conventions of dialogue created confusion about taking turns as would normally occur in face-to-face conversation. Lastly, learners are often put off by how the lack of visual contact prevents the accountability that would call all class members to task so that everyone would contribute rather than hide. An extensive study by Berge and Muilenburg (2005) revealed that social interactions were second from the top in a list of the eight greatest barriers to online learning. The study also broke the student responses down into sub-groups including race, gender and class level (graduate and undergraduate students). An interesting item of note with regard to one of these sub-groups is that barriers to online learning decrease as age increases. Nicholson's (2002) study of the use of instant messaging (IM) in asynchronous interaction offers an opposing viewpoint when it found that there might be a negative correlation between age and the use of that service for online learning. Berge and Muilenberg cite additional research (Clark, 1993; Russell, 1999) that shows no differences should be expected in how effective online learning is when compared to distance learning of the same caliber. The differences, they further add, continue in students' minds.

Teachers as Solutions to Online Learning Barriers

It is the students' attitudes about online learning that good pedagogy has the best chance of affecting. It is likely that, after a positive online learning experience, students may willing to be more flexible in their attitudes about engaging in this enterprise. Dorit Maor (Maor, 2003) mirrors the framework set forth my Salmon (Salmon, 2000 & 2003) by constructing a four-part framework for instructors. The parts include social, managerial, technical and pedagogical categories in which instructors must work to develop sound and satisfying online learning experiences for students.

Conclusion

The issue of efficacy of online socialization is challenging in that a consistent and comprehensive definition for socialization makes research on the topic difficult to synthesize. Anyone interested in examining how this complex dynamic contributes to achieving desired student learning outcomes must plod through a number of studies, each with a wealth of data that seem to examine only the constituent characteristics of socialization without considering the phenomenon as a whole. It is clear, though, that teacher planning and intervention has a significant impact on socialization.

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