Sociocultural Factors And Social Presence In An Online Learning Environment

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Abstract

In a computer supported learning environment both in the synchronous and asynchronous mode, interaction is a prerequisite to facilitate learning. Hence to facilitate effective interaction, a good working team of learners and instructors is important. For this to happen, social presence is necessary to create sound social interaction for instructional effectiveness. Social presence is the ability of the instructors and learners to project their physical and emotional presence (Mardziah H. Abdullah (2004). However, the level of social presence in a virtual learning environment depends on the students' and instructors' sociocultural background. The sociocultural theory in language learning itself emphasizes the roles of interpersonal interaction rather than intrapersonal interaction. This article discusses some findings of a study on a computer supported collaborative learning environment. It shows how distance learners at an institution of higher learning in Malaysia responded to a questionnaire on the issues of social presence. The postings in the learner management system (LMS) and data from focus-group interviews were also analysed and discussed. The findings share some positive responses towards social presence in a virtual learning environment and calls for a more in-depth inquiry that will contribute to the literature on online collaborative learning in the Malaysian context.

Keywords: computer supported learning environment, social presence, sociocultural factors, learner management system, distance learning.

Introduction

Learning paradigms have evolved beyond traditional face-to-face approaches, especially in institutions of higher learning. With the evolution of the World Wide Web 1.0 and 2.0, there is a shift in learner centred approaches in teaching and learning. Hence in incorporating new technologies in the delivery of knowledge, practitioners have to rethink pedagogical aspects and issues related to teaching, learning and assessment. According to Pang et al (2005), integrating advanced technologies into the regular on-campus teaching methods is a supplementary measure to achieve learning goals. However, in order to achieve optimal learning outcomes via virtual modes, whether in a synchronous or asynchronous mode of learning, students must be encouraged to become self-directed and to manage and monitor their own learning appropriate to the task and their ability (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Pramela, 2006).

Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1995) explain that participation in an online environment involves giving input, responding to peers and sharing ideas. This can be seen by the number of contributions made by students in their weblog or learner management systems (LMS) which tracks all contributions in the learning forum. Students need to participate without fear of the virtual audience and this definitely allows for successful learning and teaching.

The constructivist paradigm explains how self-directed learning can be facilitated through certain types of engaging and constructive activities. Learners are not just information processors but social beings who look for support and affirmation in their learning**.** When this kind of support is received, they return to it repeatedly. This is because in an online lesson, more interactions between instructors and learners and among learners are needed. The primary challenge to the online instructor is not the efficient use of technology but the issue of social interaction. The key ingredient to this is *social presence,* which is important to understand person-to-person telecommunication (Short, William & Christie, 1976).

Social presence was initially studied in face to face situations. However, with the technological advances in pedagogical practices, this theory was used to understand and explain the situations relating to computer mediated communication (CMC) which includes emails, bulletin boards and real time discussion.

Social Presence

Short et al. (1976) regarded social presence as the most important perception that occurs in an environment and stated that it is fundamental to person-to-person communication. The authors defined social presence as the "degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of the interpersonal relationships" (p. 65). Gunawardena (1995) justified that social presence is a factor that influences social interaction. Tu (2000) links social learning theory to the concept of social presence. He contends that social presence is required to enhance and foster online social interaction, which is the major vehicle in social learning. Tu (2002) further explains the three

dimensions namely social context, online communication and interactivity as well as online privacy as important factors in impacting the level of social presence.

In the context of online communication, Mardziah Hayati Abdullah (2004) defines *social presence* as the ability of participants to project their physical and emotional presence. According to Garrison and Anderson (2003), social presence means creating a climate that supports and encourages probing questions, scepticism and the contribution of more explanatory ideas. Based on the earlier definitions, Pramela (2006) and Pramela and Wong (2009) indicate that social presence is an essential aspect of online learning both from the instructors and learners point of view. Their studies also shows that social presence helps to facilitate learner involvement in the online learning environment, where the instructors and learners have to be actively present in the network to contribute widely for an online classroom to be really interactive. Teacher dominance is not the issue in an online environment; instead, teachers' effectiveness in seizing opportunities to sustain communication with minimal intrusions and directions is important. A learner is "socially present" online only when he or she makes a comment through posting and contributions which will is seen as a participatory behaviour online by the instructor. Through such postings and contributions learners will also experience that a sense of effort is made and understand the value of taking part in the learning.

On the contrary, silent online behaviour or lurking can be construed as unfavourable behaviour. However, this silent behaviour can also be looked at positively because some learners who are silent may, in reality, be more engaged in the learning process. Also some silent learners who are probably weak or timid may not want to contribute for fear of making grammatical mistakes (Pramela, 2006; Pramela & Wong, 2009). However, the success of online interactions also relate very closely to the learners' personality and socio-cultural background. To learners from a culture that values clear and active two-way communication strategies for example the American culture, interacting face-to-face or online will not pose much problems. This virtual communication might result as an issue for learners from cultural backgrounds that do not put an importance on one's verbal prowess in interacting socially such as the Malaysian traditional culture.

The Malaysian Socio-cultural Background

Some descriptions that have been surfacing continuously on writings about the traditional Malaysian culture, are the unanimous consensus that harmony is the heart of any interactions, communications, or social undertakings among the Malaysians. (See for example, Asma Abdullah 1996; Asmah Hj. Omar 1992; Asma Abdullah & Pederson 2003; Marlyna Maros 2006; Teo Kok Seong, 2001.) Here, the discussions pertains to the three major ethnic groups which are the Malays, Chinese and Indians.

Generally, Malaysians of all ethnic groups will try to develop and maintain harmonious, predictable and enjoyable relationships with their immediate circle of relatives, friends, superiors, subordinates and associates. As members of the society, they will show appropriate appreciation and respect towards others, and will expect reciprocal actions. In other words, Malaysia is a collectivist society in which people from birth onwards tend to identify themselves with a family, community or organizations. They will be more likely

to speak up when they are in groups. They are expected to show collaboration, cooperation, communal responsibility, and acceptance of authority in order to function as a group-oriented society (Asma Abdullah & Pederson, 2003).

However, due to the constraint of maintaining harmony, it is usually difficult for Malaysians to assert their individual needs onto others. To do so would be regarded as valuing self-centeredness more than social harmony. Hence, they are less open and conscious in stating their views, likes and dislikes for fear of being labelled as a know-it - all, or as headstrong and self-opinionated, thus not respecting communal conventions or appropriateness. Based on the author's observation, this fear of being labelled in this manner contributes to feelings of shame('*malu*'). Ong (1987) found that 46% of teachers in the Malaysian urban schools felt that their English ESL learners were shy to use the English language and 69% of teachers in the rural schools felt the same about their ESL learners. The shyness can be attributed to low level of proficiency as well uncertainties of differences in cultural markers between English and the cultures the students were brought up with.

With respect to the issue of social presence in the online collaborative learning, it is hypothesized that Malaysian learners will exhibit these cultural values in the learning process, because of the nature of how they were brought up. Hence it was hypothesized that there would be inhibition in terms of exhibiting their social presence via online interaction that would lead to questionable benefits of online learning in the Malaysian context.

Hence the objective of this article is to report the investigation of how a total of 83 distance learners at an institution of higher learning responded to a questionnaire on the issues of social presence. This was further supported by outcomes from the entries of the online discussion that manifested cultural values with respect to online collaborative learning.

Methodology

The study utilized both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection. The quantitative data used self-reported questionnaires based on the work of (Gress, Winne, & Hadwin, 2007) and (Kreijns, 2007), while the qualitative ones were based on interactions in the learners' management system (LMS). Data was collected from learners at two distance learning centres. These 83 learners came from different disciplines of study, the majority majoring in TESL and others from Management, and Information Technology. The questionnaires were distributed to these students after their face-to face meetings in their respective learning centres. The completed questionnaires were coded and analysed using SPSS version 13. The online entries during their courses was analysed to help support the claims made. This analysis was categorized according to one of the constructs of the research, social presence in an online environment.

Data Analysis

Table 1 presents the students' responses using a Likert scale of 1-4, Scale 1- being strongly disagree (SD), 2 disagree (D), 3 agree (A) and 4 strongly agree (SA). Responses received on scales 1 and 2 were categorised   as negative responses and scales 3 and 4 were positive responses. The data from the entries in the LMS was analysed according to theme, mainly on the issue of social presence.

Findings and Discussion

This section discusses the responses on social presence by learners – refer to Table 1. The findings were grouped into the LMS environment, students' reaction, tutors' role and peer participation in the LMS.

Table 1: Learners' responses to social presence

No.	Statements	Negatively Responded		Positively Responded	
		SD	D	A	SA
1	Messages in the LMS were personal and private.	17.6	61.2	17.6	3.5
2	The LMS environment is an excellent medium for social interaction.	1.2	27.1	56.5	15.3
3	I felt comfortable conversing through this text-based LMS environment.	4.7	20.0	60.0	15.3
4	I felt comfortable introducing myself in the LMS environment.	1.2	23.5	58.8	16.5
5	Introducing myself enabled me to form a sense of online community.	1.2	22.6	60.7	15.5
6	I felt comfortable participating in discussions in the LMS environment.	1.2	14.1	65.9	18.8
7	The tutors created a feeling of an online community.	1.2	10.5	74.4	14.0
8	The tutors facilitated discussions in the LMS environment.	1.2	17.6	68.2	12.9
9	I felt comfortable interacting with other participants in the LMS environment.	-	15.3	72.9	11.8
10	I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other participants in the LMS environment.	-	8.4	74.7	16.9
11	I was able to form opinions about other participants in the LMS environment.	1.2	7.1	77.6	14.1

The LMS environment

To the statement on *messages in the LMS were personal and private,* the majority (78.8%) disagreed. This could indicate that students were quite open when they sent and received message in the LMS. This could also mean that the learners considered the LMS as a friendly platform for sharing. There is also a high probability that messages sent are course related and hence they did not regard them as personal and private.

A large number of students responded positively to the statement *"The LMS environment is an excellent medium for social interaction" whereby* 56.5% strongly agreed and 15.3% agreed. Students acknowledged the opportunities for social interaction provided by the LMS . This is evident because other than discussing course-related matters they used this platform for friendly discussion on other matters with their course mates. The following section will discuss this issue further.

Learner reactions to the LMS

I felt comfortable conversing through this text-based LMS environment received positive responses. A total of 75.3% of respondents were positive about this and only a small percentage that is 24.7% responded otherwise. This could mean that learners did not feel threatened to communicate in this virtual environment.

To the statement *I felt comfortable introducing myself in the LMS environment,* 75.3% responded that they felt comfortable introducing themselves in this virtual environment. This finding or response is also related to the following statement *introducing myself enabled me to form a sense of online community* where 76.2% responded positively. To further emphasise learners' positive responses, 84.7% expressed being *comfortable participating in discussions in the LMS environment.* This indicates that students generally responded positively about their participation in the LMS.

Tutors' role in the LMS

The role played by the tutor was clearly positive as 88.4% responded positively to the statement *"the tutors created a feeling of an online community"*. Only 11.6% did not agree to this. The students (81.1%) also indicated that their *tutors facilitated discussions in the LMS environment.* Facilitating online discussions adds to the learners' sense of belonging to the online "community" because the is very much similar to the teacher teaching and learning in the classroom and this contributes to the active learning.

Peer Participation in the LMS

84.7% indicated that they *felt comfortable interacting with other participants* in the LMS environment. 91.6% also responded positively to the statement *I felt that my point of view was acknowledged by other participants in the LMS environment.* In addition 91.7% was

able to *form opinions about other participants in the LMS environment.* This is related to the findings discussed in the earlier section on learner reactions to LMS.

The LMS discussions were presented as information to be shared with the course mates. This is evidence of social presence in which the members share information regarding the course content and also by inviting others to participate in knowledge-building. The discussion include sharing of information, sharing information and posing question as inviting more interaction but with no response, and finally sharing information and posing question as inviting more interaction with response. This study supports earlier findings by Siti Hamin Stapa (2007) where she found that students used LMS for three purposes: asking for information, asking for clarification and sharing of information.

The LMS entries revealed positive group behaviour in the form of offering extra information for assignment. There was exchange of information on assignment matters among this group of students.

> *Dear friends, after going through the module, I think you can get the info for the assignment from these chapters.*
>
> A8

> *How many examples need to be given to each part of the language units stated? and how many pages for each part?*
>
> A5

The above two examples supported the collectivity spirit where the learners were willing to speak up when they realized that they were interacting as a group.

The interaction in the LMS also showed that students were comfortable and not inhibited when discussing the assignment. For example, it was common to find self-expression or a posting to ask a question such as exemplified below,

> *I'm not happy when read the wordy book.*
>
> A5

> *Hi,*
>
> *so do we need to explain all these in our assignment?*
>
> A6

In fact, the interactions also show some openness in sharing knowledge, views, and information with other learners as shown by the following excerpt.

Hi friends, There are four types aspects and tense
simple
progressive
perfect
perfect progressive
bye.

While the above excerpt examplifies the sharing of information among students, the following excerpt indicates knowledge sharing and clarifications which may not happen if the learner was inhibited by shyness and the fear of being labeled as a know-it-all.

The excerpts below indicate a discussion thread on a question posed by student C1 to his classmates.

Dear friends,

Can (i) good, better, best
*   (ii) bad, worse, worst*
be considered as inflectional morphemes?
Hope to get your answer

C1

The following response was recorded from his classmate, C2.

Dear friend,
Inflectional morpheme for adjective is as follows:
a) Comparative – add 'er' (eg. taller)
b) Superlative – add 'est' (eg. tallest)
*Therefore **good, better and best** are not derived from inflectional morphemes but the whole word is changed to the comparative (better) and superlative (best) degree.*
Hope to have helped u.
Regards.

C2

C1 and C2's interactions and responses were very elaborate. This shows the existence of social presence that the learners exerted into the LMS, it also showed a positive quality of interpersonal interaction needed to foster knowledge acquisition.

In other words, the examples above indicate that some of the students were comfortable participating in the online discussion forum.

The tutorial data also gave evidence for online positive group behaviour in which participants engaged in open discussions below:

Hi,

When we talk about tacit and focal knowledge, <u>I agree</u> that as teachers, we need to have more focal knowledge of the language. But what about our students, do they need to think about the rules and what not each time they were to communicate in English? Back then when I was schooling, we had to repeatedly drill on tables provided. I was not able to tell the rules of grammar but I can certainly point out to an error in a sentence and correct it on the spot. Now, we do away with drills and explain in length the rules and our students can only smile and say nothing. In their mind, I is plural. but then again I is one person. So how?

<div align="right">

D1

</div>

<u>I do agree with you</u> Laila. I just can't figure out why actually our way of teaching grammar in schools is not following the Primary School Curriculum Evaluation was where we were drilled with substitution tables. Students, our time can speak English with correct application of grammar as well as in written despite what race they were. This is because the method used was such. Why can't we stick to the same method if that benefits. Of course, we need to change according to time but always remember old is gold.

<div align="right">

D2

</div>

The above excerpts indicate that learners were willing to share their opinions based on their experiences as L2 learners in school and as English language teachers. Aside from that, the reinforcement of acknowledging each other's experience by the phrases "I agree" or "I do agree" were examples of socio-cultural promotion of harmonious and enjoyable relationships that they are adhering to. For promoting online learning, the phrases exemplified positive group behavior that enhances social interaction, which, according to Tu (2000) is the major vehicle in social learning.

Positive group behavior as an element of social presence was also evidenced by the amount of information shared among the students. Most of the sharing was related to general information and administration of the course. For example information on the date the assignment was uploaded, seasonal greetings, and other spontaneous informal conversations. The underlined phrases in the followings are a couple of the examples of general information that were shared:

Dear friends please take note that <u>the assignment question is out</u>. <u>Only one page question</u> but <u>looks like a lot of work to be done</u>. Enjoy yourself. Happy Chinese New year to all Chinese friends.

<div align="right">

E2

</div>

<u>First time in three years</u>. Good to be in the final year .... cant wait for Dec to come...........when finally no need to study.

In the following, there was a positive feedback to reinforce the information shared earlier.

yes exactly that's what I meant. Thanks madam.

<div align="right">

A6

</div>

Dear Ms Sonia,
Thank you, I have a clearer understanding now.
Regards.

<div align="right">

A7

</div>

Throughout the discussion here were displays of cultural factors such as greeting and thanking the tutor/course-mates who have contributed towards the discussions. Informal salutations such as *Hi friends*, *Dear friends*, *Hi* , showed that although students were quite informal in their discussions with peers, they still believed in using appropriate salutations. In addition these students expressed appreciation by thanking the audience online. Similar findings were reported by Siti Hamin Stapa (2007) when she claimed that for the interaction amongst peers, it is found that only informal forms of greetings and salutations are used. This happened due to the fact that they were communicating with their course mates, or peers from the same social status.

There are many factors that contribute to formality or informality of a social interaction. Yule (1996) uses the term social distance and closeness among the participants to describe this kind of interaction. He emphasizes two factors - namely external and internal factors that relates to social distance and closeness. According to Yule (1996, p.59) 'external factors are established prior to an interaction'. This factor involves the relative status of the participants based on social indicators such as age and power. In the present study, students were found to use formal greetings and salutations when they interacted with the tutor, as they perceive the relative social status and social distance due to age and power differences. On the other hand, there were also internal factors such as the '… degree of friendliness which are negotiated during an interaction' (Yule 1996, p.59). In the course of interaction, the social distance may change as the degree of friendliness increase. This is evident in some of the informal interactions between student and teacher as they are familiar to one another. The reason for the increased familiarity is because the concerned teacher has taught the students prior to this class. As for the student-student interaction, familiarity to one another may enhance the use of informal greetings and salutations. Apparently, the students are trying to build rapport with the tutor and peers by closing the social distance between them. By being close to the tutor and peers then they will get assistance in their course work and also the assignments.

Entries in the LMS indicate that the online environment facilitates sociability and social presence. In social space, we could see a lot of evidence for positive group behavior. No negative group behavior was found. The positive group behaviour encompassed students working together on their assignments by being involved in open discussion. The online

environment allowed students to interact without fear as they appeared to be comfortable in sharing information or even requesting for information on matters relating to their assignments and tutorials. Some universal elements such as greetings and thanking were also displayed throughout the online discussions.

Conclusion

The findings of this study have shown that social presence is a significant factor in the online environment in improving instructional effectiveness. Therefore social presence needs to be given a lot of emphasis for the success in online participation. This study is also prepared with the foresight that learners would give a positive reaction to social presence in the virtual learning which is considered necessary This changing social environment facing instructors and learners has definitely brought about new challenges in the online teaching and learning Hence continuous research using a variety of methodologies is necessary as the issue of social presence possesses potential for future studies in the new face of computer supported learning Finally this article concludes by agreeing with Goldmann-Segal (1998, p. 52, as cited in Russell, 2006, p. 167), that education should pay more attention to the "*effects of*" technology" rather than the "*effects with*" technology, so that successful autonomous learning may be achieved. Therefore the area of social presence, particularly in the online environment, invites further inquiry.

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