



Capitalizing on social presence: The relationship between social capital and social presence



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ABSTRACT

Online learning literature espouses the benefits of social interaction for meaningful learning and deep processing of course material. Yet, our understanding of the types of interactions that lead to these benefits may be limited by our current understanding of social presence. In this paper, we employ social capital theory to help understand the social presence experiences of students in online learning environments. We find that social presence relates more to communication between weak ties rather than within strongly-tied subsets of participants, and offer hypotheses and implications for our findings.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have long argued that learning is simultaneously an individual and social process (Brown, Collins, & Duguid, 1989), situated in its social context (Lave & Wenger, 1991). This understanding is particularly important as it “reconceptualizes learning from an in-the-head phenomenon to a matter of engagement, participation, and membership in a community” (Nasir & Cooks, 2009, p. 42). Research suggests that social interactions in learning communities play an equally important role in online education. For instance, literature indicates significant correlations between social interactions and course grades (Shea, Fredericksen, Pickett, Pelz, & Swan, 2001), satisfaction (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997), overall performance (Picciano, 2002), and perceived learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003; Rovai, 2002). Taken together, these studies suggest that active participation in learning communities is central for the success of online pedagogies. What mediates between the self and the community – between the personal and social – is operationalized as social presence.

Defined as the degree to which individuals represent themselves (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, & Archer, 1999) and perceive others in mediated environments (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003), social presence has long been employed to study human experiences in online learning environments (Oztok & Brett, 2011). Much online learning research posits that a sense of social presence is important for individuals to form social ties and develop relationships within an online community

(Rovai, 2002). Despite such benefits, we know relatively little about how social presence fosters these social ties and community-level interactions (Oztok, Zingaro, & Makos, 2013b). In particular, we do not know how social presence is manifested at the community level and how this manifestation relates to different interaction patterns. What is the relationship between social presence and types of social relation and interaction patterns? The aim of this paper is to explore such a relationship and outline its pedagogical implications.

In this paper, we offer a conceptualization of social presence using social capital theory. Since the central tenet of social capital theory is that different relationships within networks of people hold different values (Dika & Singh, 2002), we argue that it can inform the ways by which the perceived level of social presence is understood with respect to interaction patterns. We argue that this nuanced understanding of social presence may contribute to the ways in which we conceptualize, measure, and understand how social presence mediates between individuals and their communities.

2. Social presence

The concept of social presence was coined by information and communication technology scholars as an attempt to define the quality of a communications medium (see, for example, Short, Williams, and Christie (1976)). Online education scholars appropriated the concept through three phases over time (Oztok & Brett, 2011): 1) a research era that conceptualized social presence as a property of a medium, where the focus is on the capacity of media to convey nonverbal information; 2) a research era that conceptualized social presence as the behaviors and attitudes of the individuals, where the focus is less on the media

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and more on people; and 3) a research era that conceptualizes social presence as a facilitating element, where the focus is on the interactive learning activities and the development of online learning communities. From the earliest accounts (e.g., Gunawardena, 1995; Walther, 1992) to recent ones (Kehrwald, 2010; Oztok, Zingaro, Brett, & Hewitt, 2013a), the concept has been employed to study social interactions in mediated environments. Currently, social presence is regarded as the degree to which individuals represent themselves (Rourke et al., 1999) and perceive others in mediated environments (Biocca et al., 2003). It is not a static or binary construct (whether one is simply present or absent); rather, people continuously reconstruct their sense of social presence when they engage with others within a mediated context (Kehrwald, 2010). According to this perspective, social presence is constructed dialogically (Bakhtin, 1986) and is a combination of the self and others: it operates “on the boundary between two consciousness, two subjects” ((Bakhtin, 1986) p.106). Thus, social presence consists of one’s sense of self and one’s perspectives of others.

Despite the abundant evidence that social presence plays an important role in online learning, current conceptualizations have rarely discussed the role that social presence plays within the broader community (Oztok et al., 2013b). That is, while we understand the importance of social presence in terms of individual benefits, we know relatively little about how social presence is related to the formation of social ties or interactions within a community. Addressing this gap is important for our understanding of social presence for two reasons. First, an online learning community is not a coherent or homogeneous entity where individuals all share the same interests (Kehrwald, 2010; Oztok, 2013). Therefore, we cannot assume that individuals will have similar social experiences in their interactions within a community. Second, individuals are located in the webs of various social networks and hold certain positions in a social structure (Hodgson & Reynolds, 2005; Oztok, *in press*); thus, it would be erroneous to assume that different types of social relations are established, valued, or desired equally.

3. Social capital

Social capital has been employed by many sociologists to study connections within and between social networks. While the definition of social capital remains open to debate, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam offered conceptualizations that are frequently cited in the relevant research. Bourdieu (1986) 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). For Coleman (1988), social capital is an attribute of a given community and is inherent in the structure of relations between and among actors. Consequently, Coleman’s interpretation of social capital theory can offer a means to study the structures of social relations among community members (Fetter, Berlanga, & Sloep, 2010) by allowing systematic investigations into the ways that relationships and connections are diffused in communities (Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998). Three conditions for diffusion are described: “(a) level of trust, as evidenced by [social] obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). Putnam (2001) describes social capital as a “function of network qualities, norms of reciprocity and trust” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 60). Both Bourdieu’s and Coleman’s definitions emphasize the benefit gained by the individual within the community whereas Putnam’s definition focuses on how the community can benefit from social capital through the development of interaction among its members. These accounts emphasize the benefits attained by participating in a community as a dynamic that exists as a result of the community itself and the individuals that comprise it. Thus, the central tenet for social capital is that different relationships within and between social networks hold different values.

According to Putnam (2001), two types of social capital are most prominent: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital refers to the relationships with people from other communities, cultures, or socio-economic backgrounds. Typically, bridging social capital provides “a basis for collective action” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 68) by allowing individuals to “share their histories and experiences, as well as establish their common values and prosocial goals” (Tseng & Kuo, 2010, pp. 1044–1045). Indeed, similar claims – though not explicitly referring to bridging social capital – can be found in social presence research (Garrison, 2006; Rovai, 2002). For instance, research suggests that social presence in online learning environments “[has] to do with getting to know each other [and] committing to social relationships... [because] if group members are initially not acquainted with each other and the group has zero-history (which is often the case in distance education institutions), then group forming, developing a group structure, and group dynamics are essential to cultivating a learning community” (Krejins, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003, p. 342). It is possible to argue, then, that bridging social capital can help to explain the relationship between diverse social interactions and social presence as they relate to online learning environments.

Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties of attachment between relatively homogeneous individuals. In this sense, individuals with similar interests or backgrounds develop higher levels of bonding social capital (Lesser & Prusak, 2000), which leads them to establish and maintain peer relationships (Tseng & Kuo, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). These stronger relationships, then, provide important environmental conditions for knowledge exchange (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006) by allowing information to flow throughout the existing social contacts (Fetter et al., 2010). Bonding social capital, therefore, improves the acquisition of knowledge and fosters learning in a community (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2007). Similar to the case for bonding social capital, social presence research indirectly offers support for the fruitfulness of studying bonding social capital to inform community-level understanding. For example, the literature argues that senses of affinity, belonging, and closeness are required for individuals to both appreciate the benefits of collaboration and learn from peers’ ideas, critiques, and suggestions (Garrison, 2006). Consequently, bonding social capital may help explain the relationship between strong social interactions and social presence.

The educational value of social capital lies in its ability to provide opportunities for members to establish a common ground where a relatively coherent sense of community can be created (Hunter, 2002). Having established a strong sense of community, norms of reciprocity can be cultivated (Daniel et al., 2003) through which individuals can share knowledge and negotiate meanings (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998). Indeed, socio-cultural learning scholars deem that having a shared language for disseminating knowledge is vital (e.g., Brown et al., 1989; Lave & Wenger, 1991). However, while there is a growing body of literature on social capital and its relationship to educational practices (Dika & Singh, 2002), the application of the concept in online learning environments is notably limited. It is necessary to explore the relationship between social presence and bridging and bonding types of social capital in order to understand how social presence is related to the formation of social ties or interactions within a community.

In this paper, we make progress toward this goal. We adapt a social capital scale from the information studies literature, argue for its relevance to online learning, measure students’ social presence and social capital, and then relate these measures to inform our understanding of social presence at a community level.

4. Data sources and method

We collected data from 11 fully online, graduate level courses over four terms between September 2011 and April 2013, in a large North American research university. The courses are offered through our in-house online learning environment, which allows both asynchronous

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