



Criticality and the exercise of politeness in online spaces for professional learning



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ABSTRACT

This research examines masters-accredited online professional learning aimed at fostering criticality and a disposition to collective professional autonomy. Drawing on a model of online learning conceived as a nexus of cognitive, social and teaching presence, we focus principally on the interaction between cognitive and social presence, and the ways in which written language mediates social presence in fostering a critical disposition to professional learning. A key concept for analysing this is *politeness*, predicated on Goffman's construct of 'face', i.e. the work individuals do in presenting themselves to others. We conclude that the 'collective face wants' of the online community led to the creation of an online space in which participants were supported by their peers to do 'being critical'. The purpose of the analysis presented here is to contribute to theory around 'social presence' in order to further the understanding of collaborative learning in online spaces and hence to support the development of pedagogical practices aimed at facilitating this.

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1. Introduction

Online learning has become widespread in higher education and many claims have been advanced for the benefits of this mode of engagement, not least the flexibility it affords participants who wish to undertake study while in full time employment. Moreover, the social and distributed nature of learning is now widely accepted and collegiality has been identified as a key aspect of professional learning. Thus, online learning has been increasingly adopted as a collaborative mode of study for those undertaking masters level qualifications in the professions, which is the focus for this paper.

Arguably, the defining quality of masters level study is criticality, explicitly set out in the Framework for Higher Education Qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (FHEQ Level 7) and the Scottish Credit Qualification Framework (SCQF Level 11). Criticality has been defined broadly as 'skepticism, argument or suspension' in relation to a 'statement, established norm or mode of doing things' (McPeck, 1981, p.6). Criticality is not only deemed an academic attribute fundamental to masters level study within the tradition of a 'liberal education' (Johnston, Ford, Mitchell, & Myles, 2011, p. 65) but is also a characteristic of the professional who seeks to question policy and accepted

practices. Barnett (2015, p.66) argues that 'critical being' encompasses three domains. These are the domains of formal knowledge, the self, and the world. Critical being thus requires the integration of three forms of criticality, namely critical reason, critical self-reflection and critical action. All three coalesce in the notion of professional *practice*. Fostering criticality is therefore a key concern for university tutors (second only to a rather anal obsession with citation and referencing). But we know from our experience of working with masters students (see Watson & Drew 2015) as well as reports in the literature (for example, Goddard & Payne, 2013) that nurturing the development of criticality is very difficult. Tutors report across modules and programmes that students do not systematically engage critically with research, policy and practices. Students also struggle to understand what is meant by criticality and report that critical engagement with readings and writing in assignments can be problematic and challenging.

A second key issue for masters level professional learning is the development of individual and collective professional autonomy and hence the need for professionals to take responsibility for their own and others' work and learning. This understanding of autonomy, as residing within a profession and acknowledging the obligation to the other, perhaps challenges a rather taken for granted understanding of autonomy as professionals having the freedom to act without let or hindrance. This gives rise to a conundrum, that Pitt and Phelan (2008, p.190) set out quite nicely.

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In addition to [the formal attributes of a profession], members of a profession also engage in research, educational activities and discussion that explore, elaborate and transform the profession's collective identity...The relation between professional autonomy and the autonomy of a profession raises a fundamental paradox: the autonomy of a profession depends upon the autonomy of each of its members. Yet these autonomous participants must create and account for the singularity of the profession as a collective vision of autonomy.

Taken together, this leads to two significant areas for university tutors charged with developing masters level professional learning, viz. the supports required for the development of 'critical being'; and the development of pedagogies for professional learning in online spaces that promote collaborative learning and foster dispositions of individual and collective professional autonomy.

In their still influential study [Garrison, Anderson, and Archer \(2000\)](#) conceive the educational experience of formal online learning occurring within a community of inquiry as the product of cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Cognitive presence is defined as 'the extent to which the participants [in a community of inquiry] are able to construct meaning through sustained communication' ([Garrison et al., 2000](#), p.89). This, they argue, is a vital element of critical thinking. According to Garrison et al., then, the construction and maintenance of community is a key factor in the development of pedagogies for online collaborative learning. Social presence is

the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally as 'real people' (i.e. *their full personality*) through the medium of communication being used.

[[Garrison et al. \(2000, p.89; emphasis added\)](#)]

This they suggest is a necessary support to cognitive presence and hence is indirectly necessary for the development of critical thinking. Social presence therefore expedites the attainment of cognitive objectives through the supports it offers to critical thinking ([Stodel, Thompson, & MacDonald, 2006](#)). Teaching presence concerns course structure and associated pedagogies and assessment practices. Continual tutor presence in the online space, modelling critical discourse, increases student activity and is, [Garrison et al. \(2000, p.96\)](#) claim, 'crucial if higher-order learning outcomes are to be maintained'. Teaching presence is the subject of another paper in this study [in preparation]. Here we focus principally on the interaction between cognitive and social presence, and in particular the ways in which written language mediates social presence in the fostering of a critical disposition to professional learning.

Currently, online learning is chiefly characterised by asynchronous communication, mediated via text in the form of discussion forums, blogs, wikis etc. These text-based forms of communication have attracted the widespread attention of scholars working in sociolinguistics who, over the past 25 years or so, have analysed online communication first as media-related interactions but more latterly as user-related interactions which focus on identity and the formation of community ([Androutsopoulos, 2006](#)). While this more recent wave of scholarship has rejected the notion of technological determinism as a conditioning force in online interaction, none-the-less, it is clear from the literature that collaborative learning in online environments presents particular challenges, requiring adaptation of the 'normal' linguistic rules governing communication. In particular, whereas face-to-face communication is attended by the social niceties of turn taking etc., which often depend on visual cues, this is attenuated in the online environment ([Lapadat, 2007](#)). Effective communication is therefore dependent on discursive strategies employed by participants that foster engagement and so, it is often claimed, lead to the co-construction of knowledge.

Recognising this, online tutors often invest time in setting out the rules for engagement, sometimes referred to under the portmanteau

term 'netiquette'. Netiquette concerns the exercise of *politeness* defined by [Lakoff \(1990, p.34\)](#) as 'a system of interpersonal relations designed to facilitate interaction by minimizing the potential for conflict and confrontation inherent in all human interchange'. Politeness is a calculation around social need and statuses which aims at relieving the possible difficulties that arise when communicating one's intentions or wants ([Eelen, 2001](#)). Politeness is thus fundamental to social interaction, far exceeding the demands of acceptable table manners. Politeness theory, as advanced in the seminal work of [Brown and Levinson \(1987\)](#), draws on Goffman's dramaturgical notions of 'face', the work individuals do in presenting themselves to others, and is predicated on the idea that all speech acts potentially threaten either the speaker's or hearer's 'face wants'. For Goffman the possibilities of shame and the fear of being laughed at underpin all human interaction, (see [Scheff, 2014](#), cited in [Watson, 2015](#)). Thus, [Goffman \(2005, p.10\)](#) says, with delightful archness, while any individual's social face 'may be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it'.

This gives rise to what Goffman refers to as the 'rules' of self-respect and considerateness. Under ordinary circumstances, it is in everyone's interests to maintain each other's face in order to prevent the humiliation of 'losing face'. Hence, politeness is necessary to mitigate speech acts which might be construed as threats to face. Such face threatening acts (FTAs) include speech acts such as requesting favours, interrupting another, disagreement, bumping into, requests for information and all the routinely mildly (and on occasions acutely) embarrassing encounters one meets in the daily round:

On this basis, three main strategies for performing speech acts are distinguished: positive politeness (the expression of solidarity, attending to the hearer's positive face wants), negative politeness (the expression of restraint, attending to the hearer's negative face wants) and off-record politeness (the avoidance of unequivocal impositions, for example hinting instead of making a direct request).

[[Eelen \(2001, p.4\)](#).]

[Brown and Levinson](#) propose this as a universal theory, though subject to cultural elaboration. More recently, scholars have mounted a challenge to [Brown and Levinson](#), not least the claim to universality (see [Haugh, 2007](#)). Moreover, while generally giving due recognition to [Brown and Levinson's](#) theoretical framework (unless they are merely being polite), [Locher and Watts \(2005\)](#) argue that its focus only on polite behaviour downplays the 'discursive struggle' over politeness, which encompasses polite, impolite, as well as merely appropriate behaviour, and they emphasise the evaluative role of the hearer in determining the im/politeness of a remark. They therefore prefer the term 'relational work' which covers all these speech acts as 'the work individuals invest in negotiating relationships with others' ([Locher & Watts, 2005](#), p.9). Thus they argue, in terms of politeness, behaviour may be 'positively marked' as polite/politic/appropriate; 'negatively marked' as impolite/inappropriate (or conversely, over-polite); or go unmarked or unnoticed as non-polite (rather than impolite), or just 'appropriate'. Strict analytical categories cannot be defined since it is precisely the boundaries between these strategies that are discursively negotiated by those engaged in relational work. This accords more closely with Goffman's concept of 'face' as a discursive achievement 'diffusely located in the flow of events in the encounter' ([Goffman, 2005](#), p.8), which [Garcés-Conejos Blitvich](#) suggests, has been misappropriated by [Brown and Levinson](#) as a cognitive and individualistic construct rather than a social negotiation. This shifts the epistemological assumptions underlying politeness theory away from the construction of positivist models which can be used for predictive or explanatory purposes and towards a consideration of how politeness is negotiated and perceived by social actants ([Watts, Ide, & Ehlich, 2005](#)). Within this discursive framing the focus of research shifts to a consideration of how im/politeness is

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