

Chapter 4.9

Collaborating with a (Non)Collaborator: Interpersonal Dynamics and Constructions of Identity in Graduate Online Learning

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ABSTRACT

In a climate of increasing globalization with calls for the development of online learning communities that thrive on diversity, it is important to consider how diversity might influence the nature of interpersonal action and the dynamics of collaboration in computer-mediated education. This chapter considers the case of problematic collaboration in an online graduate program. Discourse analysis grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics is applied to illustrate how various aspects of stakeholders' identities can be traced in the discourse related to online collaborative processes. A model of situated multidimensional identity is used to consider how localized constructions of identity may be linked to

broader frames of reference. Findings suggest that when stakeholders from a range of backgrounds are drawn together, online collaboration becomes a complex social practice.

INTRODUCTION

Despite various definitions of collaborative learning, those who hold to a participatory view of education recognize human communication as fundamental to collaborative processes (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004; Sorenson, 2004, p. 244). In the case of computer-mediated learning communities, stakeholders are frequently drawn together from a wide range of contexts, including diverse geographical, sociocultural, and ideological backgrounds to name a few (e.g., Hudson, Hudson, & Steel, 2006; Reeder,

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Mcfadyen, & Chase, 2004; Tapanes, Smith, & White, 2009; Treleaven, 2004). How might this diversity influence the nature of interpersonal interaction and the dynamics of collaboration in the online learning environment? What happens when there is a clash between a participant's sense of self and the action needed to reach collaborative goals?

To investigate questions like these and ultimately enhance understandings of best practice in online education, it is necessary to expand conceptual frameworks presently applied to the evaluation of diversity in computer-mediated learning. One of the current challenges is for researchers to "conceptualize identity...to go beyond simplistic stereotyping, and use qualitative methods to understand how people define themselves" (Gunawardena, Wilson, & Nola, 2003, p. 771). This chapter takes a step in that direction by considering the case of problematic collaboration in an online graduate program. Discourse analysis grounded in Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) is applied to illustrate how various aspects of stakeholders' identity can be traced in the discourse related to the online collaborative process, and a model of Situated Multidimensional Identity (Kristjánsson, 2006; 2008) is used to consider how localized constructions of identity may be linked to broader frames of reference.

BACKGROUND

Good teaching and learning practice deserve strong theoretical conceptualization (Treleaven, 2004, p. 174). The framework for this discussion is drawn from studies pertaining to the conceptualization of social interaction in online learning, work that views self and identity as inextricably intertwined with social situation, and a theory of language that understands linguistic choice as being constitutive of and constituted by features of social context.

Social Presence

There is wide recognition that social interaction is vital to rich learning in online environments (e.g., Belz, 2002; Dirkx & Smith, 2004; Garrison, 2000; McLoughlin & Luca, 2003; Rovai, 2007). Effective interpersonal communication is seen as a key factor in facilitating group involvement and collaboration (Park, 2007). To bring focus to an understanding of interpersonal interaction in online learning, it is helpful to consider the construct of social presence, one of three overlapping "presences" that have been proposed to frame and account for meaningful online educational experience (the others being teaching and cognitive presence) (Arbaugh et al., 2008; Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000; Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2001). Social presence is defined as "The ability of participants to identify with the community (e.g., course of study), communicate purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop interpersonal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities" (Garrison, cited in Arbaugh, et al., 2008, p. 134). Among a range of findings, studies conducted in recent years provide evidence to suggest that social presence is indicative of the feeling of community that a learner experiences in an online environment (Tu & McIsaac, 2002, p. 131), is essential to developing cohesion and facilitating collaboration (Na Ubon, 2005; Paloff & Pratt, 2005), is an integral component of shared knowledge construction (Goertzen & Kristjánsson, 2007), and correlates with perceptions of overall learning (Richardson & Swan, 2003). In a recently developed quantitative survey tool, social presence has been operationalized with reference to the overarching categories of open communication, group cohesion, and personal/affective projection (Arbaugh, et al., 2008).

Although research conducted to date indicates that the construct of social presence is a significant factor in online education, as far as can be determined, with rare exception (e.g.,

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