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Teaching presence in telecollaboration. Keeping an open mind

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ABSTRACT

This article looks at teaching presence (TP) in online intercultural exchanges (OIE) and its impact on student satisfaction. The question is examined on the basis of a study carried out as action research during two telecollaborative exchanges, both involving EFL teacher trainees from the Department of Modern Languages and Literature of the Pedagogical University of Krakow (PUK), Poland and their foreign partners from: Pädagogische Hochschule, Freiburg (PHF), Germany and University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB), the United States.

The study examines how teaching presence was perceived by the different groups, and how the perceptions influenced the students' evaluation of their telecollaboration. Based on the data gathered by means of (i) an anonymous survey; (ii) two anonymous reflection questionnaires; and (iii) classroom observation it is argued here that in telecollaboration TP is likely to be perceived differently by the individual groups participating in the exchange even if its different aspects had been discussed by the telecollaborating teachers during the set-up phase. This is because online intercultural exchanges are extremely complex and dynamic educational contexts. For the same reason, the relationship between teaching presence and student satisfaction, reported in publications to-date, seems to be less straightforward and more multifaceted in telecollaboration.

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1. Introduction

The advent of social media has opened up new opportunities for language learners. Cognitive inquiries, up to that point mainly solitary, could become collaborative in two different senses: in terms of shared endeavour and, more importantly, because learning could now be mediated by others. The nature of this mediation is explained by [Kuh \(2008\)](#), who identifies two key goals of collaborative learning: “learning to work and solve problems in the company of others, and sharpening one's own understanding by listening seriously to the insights of others, especially those with different backgrounds and life experiences” (10). The latter aspect of learning is explained by [Sharples \(2005: 147\)](#), who argues:

[a] framework for learning in the mobile age should recognize the essential role of communication in the process of coming to understand the world and in negotiating agreements among differing perspectives. It should also indicate the importance of context in establishing meaning, and the transformative effect of digital networks in supporting virtual communities that transcend barriers of age and culture.

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Admittedly, the concept of mediation is not new, and the language teaching literature offers numerous insights into learning *with* and *through* other people. This involves, among others, such popularly cited classics as Dewey, Vygotsky and Feuerstein, whose writings have informed collaborative language learning for many years now. What has changed, owing to the immense popularity of networking through social media, is the scale of the phenomenon, the roles of its participants and the literacies needed to partake in what has come to be called a *community of inquiry*.

According to Garrison (2006: 25), such a community in higher education, which is the context of the present study, is “[a]t the heart of a meaningful educational experience” and relies on “two integrated processes: reflection and discourse, ... two inseparable elements of inquiry”. These processes are activated “for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, & Archer, 2001: 5). As Anderson et al. (2001) argue, such learning outcomes always depend on how well the inquiries are mediated within a given community. They enumerate three forms of such mediation; or – as they call them – three presences: cognitive, social and teaching. Numerous publications, some of which are cited later in this article, have addressed the influence of these three presences on learning. Among other things, it has been demonstrated how the cognitive and social presences – defined, respectively, as the higher thinking processes enabling the construction of meaning in sustained communication (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2001), and the skills helping to create a positive learning environment (Anderson et al., 2001) – intertwine and scaffold each other in the process of this specific networked, socially-mediated form of learning (cf. Chun & Turula, 2015, pp. 198–207).

Such mediated intellectual stimulation is actually quite frequent in all the various online contexts (blogs, forums, statuses, tweets, etc.) with which we engage. It results in learning that is often incidental, unplanned, and definitely out of school. This raises the question of the role of the teacher in the new learning; the role of teaching presence. Starting from Biesta's (2012) claim that teaching should be given back to education I argue that this is crucial in telecollaboration.

The article starts with a review of the literature addressing teaching presence, offering an insight into relevant research to date. Then it goes on to discuss teaching presence and its impact on student satisfaction in two online intercultural exchanges, between the Pedagogical University in Krakow (PUK), Poland and (i) the Pädagogische Hochschule, Freiburg (PHF), Germany; and (ii) the University of California in Santa Barbara (UCSB), USA. All the aspects of teaching presence, as defined by Anderson et al. (2001), are examined in the telecollaborating groups, and students' perceptions of them are compared between the groups participating in the exchange as well as analysed vis à vis student satisfaction with the two exchanges. It is also argued here that while good quality teaching presence is critical to learning, in multicultural contexts, one needs to keep an open mind about its quality, quantity, timing and distribution, as well as its effectiveness.

2. Teaching presence: literature review

Community of Inquiry (CoI) is a model of critical thinking and practical inquiry. It was proposed by Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2000) for the purpose of studying teaching and learning in a text-based online environment. The educational experience resulting from students engaging in asynchronous forum discussions – with the help of the teacher – was seen as multifaceted and based on three components of CoI: cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence.

Within this framework resting on the mainstays of the three different presences, teaching presence seems to have a special place and an exceptional role to play. It is both a part of the network and its organizing force; the “binding element in creating a community of inquiry” (Garrison et al., 2000: 96); the source of “online instructional orchestration” (Shea, Vickers, & Hayes, 2010: 17). As such, it boils down to the “design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (Anderson et al., 2001: 5). The obvious question to ask here is how such a presence is exercised in practice and what teacher role(s), attitudes and routines should be assumed for this purpose.

In language pedagogy the question of the role of the teacher has always been defined in relation to the method(s) being applied. With the increased popularity of eclectic and communicative approaches to language learning, the role of *teacher-as-facilitator* has come to the fore. If we understand facilitation as mediation between the learner and what is to be learned, the new role seems to fit well into the concept of teaching presence and the overall framework of the community of inquiry (CoI), as proposed by Garrison et al. (2000). This is particularly because “[a]n online learning environment reflects a ‘group-centred’ interaction pattern versus an ‘authority-centred pattern’ of a face-to-face environment” (Garrison, 2006: 25).

However, there is one problem in this equation which needs to be addressed, irrespective of shift from teacher-centredness to learner-centredness: this is the quality of teacher mediation/facilitation. In other words, what does it mean for the teacher to facilitate? Should s/he simply make learning easier? Should s/he be just a helping hand? A midwife? These questions are addressed by Biesta (2012). He rejects the interpretation of teaching as mere midwifery and argues for mediation as intrusion: invading the learner's intellectual comfort zone to inspire and to challenge. Very much along the same lines, the proponents of teaching presence argue that:

Fulfilling the complex responsibilities of a teacher necessitates sustained and authentic communication between and among teachers and students. While control must be shared and choices provided, the discourse must also be guided toward higher levels of learning through reflective participation as well as by challenging assumptions and diagnosing misconceptions. (Anderson et al., 2001: 3).

And they continue:

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