"Not the same person anymore": groupwork, identity and social learning online

Rowaida Jaber, Eileen Kennedy

Rowaida Jaber, Education, Laureate Online Education – University of Liverpool, Liverpool UK,

Jaber_row@yahoo.com

Corresponding author: Eileen Kennedy, 1) UCL Knowledge Lab, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 23-29 Emerald Street, London WC1N 3QS, UK, 2) Education, Laureate Online Education – University of Liverpool, Liverpool UK,

eileen.kennedy@ucl.ac.uk

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This paper argues that identity may be key to understanding why social presence has been considered so important to successful learning experiences. A qualitative case study of 10 students and 4 tutors in an online postgraduate education program was conducted. The research applied the work of Goffman to explain the relationship between social presence and support for the social production of identity online. Semi-structured individual and group interviews revealed the importance of trustworthy social interaction to support students' performance of identity and identity shifts in fostering deeper social learning. Implications for the design of effective online learning experiences are provided.

Keywords: social presence; groupwork; interaction; learning technology; distance education

Introduction

Online groupwork has been championed for its capacity to produce deep, productive, social learning (Laurillard, 2012), with the potential to enable learners to achieve a degree of metacognition and even social metacognition or co-regulation of learning (Garrison & Akyol, 2013, 2015). This kind of learning has implications for the learners' sense of identity, in its capacity for transformation of learners' relationship to self, and to their relationships with others and the world around them (Hughes & Oliver, 2010). Social Presence has been argued to play the vital role of mediating online interactions that create knowledge by providing a "supportive learning environment in which students feel comfortable" (Akyol & Garrison, 2011, p. 188). However, a lack of clarity over what creates social presence and how it contributes to learning may explain why online classes can still be "impersonal and lack the simple but meaningful verbal and nonverbal cues and the overall social presence and immediate response-time" (Cunningham, 2015, p.34). The research question for this paper is, how and why do specific elements of communication create social presence in online groupwork contexts, and what relationship does social presence have to being able to learn

online, particularly at a deeper, metacognitive level? To answer this question, the paper explores the relationship between social presence and identity in online learning. In so doing, it seeks to provide further guidance for tutors and online learning designers to create learning environments that support students to achieve individual and social metacognition online. The paper draws on Goffman's (1959; 1972) accounts of the presentation of self and face-work to examine online interactions between learners through the thematic analysis of interviews with postgraduate online students and their tutors. The analytical framework provided by Goffman is able to highlight the role of less controllable behaviours and unintentional communication in promoting social presence to support learners' shifting identities online. This approach can therefore contribute to a clearer account of what is at stake in building social presence online and how best to achieve it.

Shifting Identity Online

As software becomes pervasive in everyday life while seeming to disappear into the cloud (Helmond, 2010), attention to the way software constructs learner identities in educational contexts is increasingly important. The social web has long been perceived as an arena where users can become "self-made people" (Reid, cited in Hine, 2000, p. 118). As a result, the shifting experience of identity has become a focus for research on learning and teaching online. Savin-Baden (2010), for example, suggested that online environments offer the potential for users to play with multiple identities. Yet, the design, norms, and practices of online learning environments are implicated in the production of the identities of learners. Theorists of social networking sites (for example, Van Doorn, 2009; Van House, 2011) have drawn on Butler (1999)'s concept of performativity to show that identities are discursively produced as a result of interactions with the online environment which both enables and constrains the performance of identity. Online learning is very much a part of this social web,

yet while research on social presence has explored the social dimensions of online learning (Lowenthal, 2009), implications for learner identities have received less attention. This paper argues that identity may be key to understanding why social presence has been considered so important to successful learning experiences.

Social Learning and Identity Online

Social presence and online learning

Social presence has been variously defined as a "sense of being with another" (Biocca, Harms, & Burgoon, 2003, p. 456), a "self-projection," or a "recognition of the potential for two-way communication" (Kehrwald, 2010, p. 40). Kehrwald (2010) argues that perspectives on social presence range from belief in "a complete lack of presence through notions of telepresence, co-presence and co-location, to views involving psychological engagement and finally to views involving complex behavioural engagement" (p. 40). Early conceptualisations of social presence in telecommunications saw it as the capacity of media to allow communicators to be salient and capable of interaction (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). The Community of Inquiry Framework (CoI), developed by Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2000), applied the concept of social presence to online learning contexts, arguing that it has a role in supporting learning online. The CoI framework proposed that knowledge is developed through an interaction between three presences: Teaching Presence, Cognitive Presence, and Social Presence. According to the CoI framework, social presence has three components: affective expression, open communication and group cohesion and is understood as,

> the ability of participants to identify with the group or course of study, communicate
> purposefully in a trusting environment, and develop personal and affective relationships
> progressively by way of projecting their individual personalities. (Garrison, 2012, p. 252)

Research suggests that establishing social presence in online learning contexts can have a positive effect on perceived learning (Lowenthal, 2009). In particular, Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2010) argued that, the role of social presence in establishing group cohesion online was central, since the capacity to create a shared sense of social identity with their peers was of utmost importance for online students.

However, the relationship between social presence and learning, particularly learning at the metacognitive level, should be unpacked further. Laurillard (2012) argued that an effective way of encouraging metacognition is for students to articulate their ideas and share them with their peers, for example by grading each others' work or revealing that others have different conceptualisations. Groupwork is, therefore, important to learning, and the growing range of digital technologies to support discussion and collaboration make it eminently feasible to achieve online. However, there are important socio-emotional dimensions to online groupwork (Vuopala, Hyvönen, & Järvelä, 2016), and for it to be successful, a level of social presence needs to be established to create an environment that is comfortable enough for all students to participate and feel confident that their individual contributions will be welcomed and respected.

Since learning often involves shifting perspective—or at least 'modulating' one's concepts in Laurillard's (2012) terms—students need to feel comfortable to expose half-formed or incorrect ideas without fear of undermining their identity in the group. Social presence can therefore be thought of as a characteristic of environments that enable students to feel secure in their performance of identity and to be able to trust the identities they encounter online. This way of understanding social presence emphasises its connection to learning as well as its role in affirming students' group and individual identities.

The emotional aspects of online learning are at the heart of Robinson's (2013) research, which explored social presence and collaborative groupwork, concluding that

groupwork can produce emotional states such as frustration, feeling constraints, difficulty, or lack of control due to the absence of a sense of immediacy. Robinson (2013) recommended that students working in groups "adopt a range of verbal immediacy behaviors so that their peers can get to know and trust them" (p. 306).

While studies such as Robinson (2013) confirm the vital role of social presence in learning in groups, there remains a gap between understanding that social presence is necessary for learning, and a full articulation and explanation of the characteristics of an online environment necessary for learning to take place. Biocca, et al. (2003) argued for an elaborated understanding of social presence to facilitate the operationalization of the concept and improve the online environment. Without this, it is difficult for online learning designers to understand why to incorporate opportunities for communication that promotes social presence, and therefore, when, where and in what form those opportunities should come.

Biocca et al. (2003) argue that Goffman's concept of co-presence was key to understanding the dynamics of social presence as it provided "the basis for a subtle, elaborated, and developed approach to social interaction" (p. 463). However, social interaction for Goffman was strongly linked to the performance of identity, and to return to Goffman's (1959; 1972) detailed exploration of face-to-face encounters may provide the missing detail to explain why social presence is so necessary for successful online learning, and what kinds of learning activities could promote it. The promise of such an approach would be to refine the process of designing for social presence to support social learning.

Performing identity online

The effectiveness by which online learners are able to communicate their identity has been shown to impact meaningful discussions and dialogic interactions, which in turn support a deep approach to learning (Ke, Chávez, Causarano, & Causarano, 2011). However, the online learning environment can inhibit learners' capacity to construct their identities for others

(Brooks & Pitts, 2016; Robinson, 2013), particularly the 'canonical' asynchronous discussion forum thread (Oztok, 2013, p. 25).

Goffman theorised the production of self in dramaturgical terms of an actor performing for an audience. Goffman's insights remain surprisingly effective in illuminating the complexities of online interaction despite being developed in a markedly different context (Brooks & Pitts, 2016). According to Goffman, the self is a product of the entire social scene in which it is performed – both the audience and the actor have a stake in the credibility of the performance. Identity is a result of social interaction, therefore. Online, however, the altered mode of communication presents challenges for both the performer and the audience. Goffman (1959, p. 13) argues that when someone encounters another, they "seek to acquire information" about that person or use what knowledge they already have. This information helps people to shape expectations of others and to understand what will be expected of them.

In an online learning environment, very little information about others is available, particularly the subtle communication cues that promote mutual trust. As a result, learners can neither know how to act themselves, nor what expectations they can have of each other. Goffman (1959) suggests that there are two sources of information at stake: *expressions given* and *expressions given off* (p. 16). While *expressions given* refer to intentional communication, *expressions given off* refer to largely non-verbal cues, which—because they are more difficult to manipulate—are considered by others a more reliable indicator of one's state of mind, whether or not this is really true. In an online—predominately textual—environment, opportunities for expressions given off are much reduced. However, students continue to attribute expressions given off to each other—taking offence, for example, at someone's response in a forum. In a face-to-face encounter, Goffman (1959) suggests that "others are likely to check up on the more controllable aspects of behaviour by means of the less controllable" (p. 19) in order to ascertain a sense of 'truth' behind another's apparent

response. This means that individuals may surreptitiously monitor others' behaviours, looking for 'tells' that contradict their expressed position, showing how they really feel—for example, a smirk that belies an explicit response. This source of information is largely closed to students online.

Reduced communication also affects online students' capacity to manage others' impressions of them, and students therefore lose capacity to perform their identities online, which may be decidedly different from their sophisticated use of communication offline. This explains how immediacy in online communication can build trust among learners. Goffman (1959) suggests interpersonal communication involves an "infinite cycle of concealment, discovery, false revelation, and rediscovery" (p. 20), where individuals are routinely suspicious of each other's' behaviours and rely on their observations of unguarded moments to judge the truth of the situation. It is no surprise, therefore, that the inability to do this online and to present oneself as one would wish would cause insecurity and anxiety. In Goffman's (1972) terms, this would affect students' capacity to maintain 'face,' the image they have of themselves in which they have attached their feelings. Goffman (1972) argued that individuals perform "face-work" in order to neutralise incidents that could threaten face, for example, displaying poise to avoid showing embarrassment. Online students often have to communicate ideas in writing, as opposed to using what Goffman (1972) describes as the more fleeting and nuanced "deniable communication" (p. 30) that is possible in spoken discussion.

Without the capacity for subtle hints and suggestions, the self-exposure inherent in written communication makes online learning an ongoing threat to face. Students must grapple with new concepts and new ways of working very visibly in discussion forums, often without the capacity to edit their posts once submitted. The risk involved in performing identity in writing requires students to engage in excessive virtual face-work, for example,

carefully drafting submissions offline to maintain face. Goffman (1959) pointed to the importance of a "backstage area" where the impression given by an individual's public presentation of self "is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course" (p. 115). As a corollary to the challenges of performing identity online, the online learning environment provides constant access to a backstage area—no-one can see you when you do not post. Virtual face-work, rehearsed backstage, is therefore, part and parcel of learning online.

Without face-work in "encounters of both an immediate and mediated kind" social interactions would be a "hazardous thing for feelings and faces" (Goffman, 1972, p. 31). In online groupwork, the lack of information available prevents students from easily agreeing on a "definition of the situation" (Goffman, 1959, p. 24) to guide how to proceed with the task. The role of the tutor (and other students) may be critical, therefore, in promoting "protective practices" or "tact" (Goffman, 1959, p. 25) to smooth over problematic behaviours that serve as disruptions to a shared understanding of group identity and purpose online. Otherwise, online groupwork can lead to anxiety and excessive impression management, creating a volatile, affective environment (Kennedy & Gray, 2016). However, online practices that promote embodied communication, where non-verbal information can more effectively be given off—'tacit knowledge' in Oztok's (2013) terms—might achieve the kind of social presence that creates mutual trust among participants and supports social learning.

Methodology

This research began as a part of a larger study that explored the factors surrounding individual and social metacognitive learning on a postgraduate online education program. A case study approach (Gray, 2014) was adopted for this study because our focus was on the ways that collective entities—online student groups—learn together. A qualitative case study therefore allowed multiple sources of data to be collected to examine the complex processes

that are unlikely to be adequately captured through either a quantitative instrument or a single data source (Yin, 2008).

Participants

The participants were 4 tutors and 10 students in a postgraduate online program. Four participants were located in North America, three in Africa, two in the Middle East, two in East Asia and three in Europe. The students were all education professionals preparing for the thesis stage of their program following a series of taught modules over a period of 18 months. The tutors were all experienced online educators.

Data collection

Three rounds of semi-structured interviews were conducted online within two months via Skype: focus group interviews with 2-3 students, followed by individual interviews with students, and individual interviews with tutors. Focus group interviews were chosen to help student participants recall their social learning experiences, while individual interviews allowed them to explore the issues in more depth. Individual interviews with tutors were conducted because a different perspective could be provided by tutors, who did not have direct experience of learning, but were skilled in observing the process of learning and had an overview of interactions in online forums and access to the students' written outputs. A total of 18 semi-structured interviews were conducted: 4 focus group interviews with students, 10 individual interviews with students, and 4 individual interviews with tutors. Ethical approval was obtained prior to data collection, and the interviewer had no relationship of authority with the participants. Pseudonyms replace names in the discussion.

Data Analysis

The data was thematically analyzed following the 6-step approach of Braun and Clarke (2006). Initially, interviews with students and tutors were analysed separately. Following a process of familiarization with data, initial codes were generated and themes began to

emerge. These themes were reviewed and merged into new themes as the main themes became salient. However, as the data from tutors and students were brought together, a meta-theme of identity emerged across the two data sets. The meta-theme of identity and social presence is the focus of the discussion in this paper.

Limitations

The results of this research pertain to the case study under examination: postgraduate online education students. The participants' disciplinary background and level of study meant that they were highly reflective about their own learning, which is not necessarily typical of all students. However, the results can offer insights which may otherwise be difficult to elicit. These findings can contribute to explanation building (Yin, 2009) of the factors that contribute to successful online learning environments.

Results

During group and individual interviews, participants related incidents where they experienced metacognition both individually and as shared experiences during groupwork. In the course of this, however, the theme of identity and social presence emerged in descriptions of the learning self and in reflections on the way social interaction online was effective or not in supporting metacognitive learning. In terms of descriptions of self, the students repeatedly made reference to their own sense of identity in terms of how they saw themselves as learners and their strengths or limitations. The students also referred to changes in identity that occurred as a result of studying online, for example, how their understanding of themselves or their topic transformed. Students reflected on the way social interaction and communication online affected their capacity to learn at a deeper level. The tutors described the change and transformation within students based on their experience of observing students' interactions in forums and tutorials, and in reflections in the learning logs they kept

during the program. Tutors also described positive and negative social interactions within their groups and the impact of these on learning. Because of their overarching perspective, tutors were more able to provide contextual explanations for unsatisfactory online interactions, and more confident in identifying productive social learning encounters. The next section makes connections between these results and Goffman's work on the performance of self and the literature on social presence.

Discussion

Performing and Transforming Learning Identities Online

Whilst reflecting on social learning online, student participants in the study regularly identified themselves as particular kinds of learners in relation to others. In contrast to more critical members of the group, Lilly described herself as having an "agreeing" nature:

> when I read something I absorb rather than making critique on it.

Another participant, Bella, reflected on her identity as a learner within a group as being "useful because I can tie lots of different thoughts together" but "rubbish in a straight line":

> I am awful, so I need to see all the different points and bring them to one… so it's really useful if somebody who thinks linearly works with me then we can normally find a way to get things done.

Adam saw himself as adept with learning technology, which, despite his fairly negative experience of online social interactions, gave him an identity in the group by helping those less confident. These students had therefore, a clear image of themselves as learners, a learning "face" in Goffman's (1972) terms, in which they invested feelings and wanted to perform.

For professional educators, becoming a student again could be seen as a potentially hazardous circumstance. The participants existed between multiple identities and failure as a student posed a real risk to their professional face. For example, Lisa described her mixed feelings at being a student online while an expert at work, and how that made her incapable of sharing her "ignorance" and "insecurity" with the whole class, preferring to converse with only one or two others. Social interactions that helped students to understand more about themselves as learners could be seen as protective practices (Goffman, 1959) supporting students' learning face:

> And he said, … you've got some strengths that are different from most people, so what you need to do is just write them down and do your thesis based on your strengths. (Bella)

The students' attachment to their learning faces fed into their search for others in the program with whom they identified. Lily looked out for other students who shared similar thoughts and ideas. Lisa actively looked for 'study pals' and when her study pal decided to quit the program she looked for another. However, Adam found his lack of common interests with others on the program a barrier to developing friendships.

> if I had interact with people who had the same interests, and the same goals and mind… maybe I would be more engaged with the conversations…

Bella expressed frustration with the way learners were allocated to groups, indicating a desire to have her learning face recognised:

> I'm not entirely sure who decides who we're working with, and how much they know about the people they're putting together.

Nevertheless, students' identities did not always remain stable as they progressed throughout the program, with many experiencing transformation as learners. This instability highlights

the importance of interactions with trusted others to provide feedback during such periods of transition.

Transformations

Some of the students found that they changed their perspective on themselves as they progressed through the program. For example, Lisa's change of thesis topic indicated a transformation for her:

> I would never have imagined that I would be doing my thesis on […]. If you'd ask me that two or three years ago… I would be… What!! Are you crazy?!.

Some of the students reflected on social support for a changing understanding of themselves as learners. Lisa described how small group participation could challenge beliefs and transform approaches to learning:

> sometimes we hang on to ways of doing things because we've done that thing before and it feels comfortable and... occasionally it would take a team to say... NO we won't do it this way let's do it in another way.

Franc expressed surprise that he valued a "visually appealing" concept map produced by a group member, even though he had previously disliked concept mapping, reconsidering his own approach in the light of his classmate's "minimalist approach".

Among the tutors, both Rose and Mary discussed how students experienced change during their learning process, seeing this change in their reflective logs:

> when they go back and they start thinking about who they are, and what that has changed about them, they realized the depth of their learning, they're not the same person anymore, they don't think about things the same way (Rose)

> I can observe these slow changes, more or less, in all the students. (Mary)

Rose identified a number of students who asked constantly to be in the same group and were always "talking to each other in the main thread" (i.e. in the whole class discussion forum). Rose argued that the group members "have recognized learners that they feel connection to and they feel confident in them" to both support their development as learners:

> they've always pushed each other's boundaries… and they did it consistently from
> module to module. (Rose)

While transformations can occur in all learning situations, support from others is not straightforward online. Social presence can be understood as the product of online interactions that ease such tensions around multiple and shifting identities. Participants' reflections on the success of online social interactions can, therefore, help identify the characteristics of online social presence and will be discussed next.

Trustworthy Social Interaction

In Goffman's terms, behaviour that appears less controllable, and therefore less easily subject to artifice or manipulation—expressions given off—can appear especially trustworthy sources of information. Vague definitions of social presence (Biocca et al. 2003) can be given more substance if we apply this insight to help explain why certain communication tools and techniques—"richer media" (Cheung, Chiu, & Lee 2011, p. 1338)—are effective in producing it.

Participants like Bella were articulate in describing experiences that produced a sense of "immediacy" (Robinson, 2013) online:

> those real sparks happened only in the one-to-one atmosphere, it was there and present
> but you could say it wasn't vividly colored or as intense in the large cohort as it was…
> on the one-to-one… (Bella)

However, participants were equally vocal in lamenting the absence of such "sparks", for example, in the feedback from tutors, where the lack of face-to-face interaction led to

feelings of isolation. Sandra was, therefore, highly appreciative of a tutor who posted her introduction to the module as a video:

> it was more a face-to-face thing… you were more involved, it's not just pen and paper… she could get to us, she could talk to us on the video. (Sandra)

The capacity of video (perhaps in combination with one-to-one interactions) to ease communication was affirmed by the tutor, Justin, who suggested that it was possible to achieve social presence in individual tutorials (conducted via Skype) because of the immediacy of communication:

> we have a synchronous relation, because we can ask questions and we can have answers on time, and … it's a real conversation…

The immediacy of the response in audio-visual, synchronous communication reduces the possibility of manipulation (controllable behaviour in Goffman's terms) which could help to explain what is meant by 'real' communication in this account. The absence of face-to-face communication was felt by students such as Meg who described feelings of loneliness and dissatisfaction with the level of engagement from others. Meg considered that videoconferencing should therefore be a requirement for small groupwork "even if we don't have it as an entire group" despite different time zones:

> … I'd get up at 3 O'clock in the morning to have a conference call with someone. I mean we don't have to do it every time…

The importance of additional information that produces less guarded communication is similarly indicated in Lisa's account of changing her perception of a "picky" tutor when shared details about his family with her,

> …and it was like… wow! Suddenly he turned into a person. (Lisa)

In the program, students were required to write in academic style with references in the whole class discussion forum, and Sandra expressed her pleasure at being able to reliquish these formalities in small groupwork:

> the only time we really interacted was when we were like put in our groups… … it wasn't that structured… so you could write … more comfortably… than when we were interacting in the discussion forum … in the big group.

The freedom of informal communication in the small groups could furnish students with the additional information required to help participants shape expectations of themselves and others and define their situation. By contrast, when too little information was forthcoming, a sense of deep dissatisfaction occurred. For example, Lisa described her disappointment when she experienced poor participation from peers in the forums, giving an example of a classmate who sent a response to her own detailed post, saying only, "I agree!"

A similar absence of information was felt by Adam, who complained that "there was no real flow" without face-to-face interaction with peers:

> we never even talked to each other… we didn't know how each other… how we looked, or how we sounded like….

Adam complained that he rarely received responses from others to his posts. For Adam, interaction with peers in the forums was "just to get the assignment done". Adam had taken a break from the program, which could partly explain his lack of identity with his group since he joined a different cohort on his return to study. He frequently described feeling "frustration", "isolation" and "detached from the program". However, Adam talked positively about the time when he used to Skype with his first cohort, and described his experience during that time as "great …more enjoyable" adding that it helped to know that others are going through the same situation. Adam appeared to have invested in the face he presented to

his original cohort, a face that was lost later since he no longer shared a "definition of the situation" (Goffman 1959, p. 24) with his new group.

Backstage

While the lack of immediate social interaction "certainly didn't help" (Franc), many students appreciated having easy access to a backstage area to rehearse their performance of self. Jane, for example, preferred online learning contexts to face-to-face learning, because she had time and space to present a more considered learning face:

> sometimes it's kind of hard to just think in depth and be reflective at the moment… …I feel like I can convey a more intelligent response in writing than… than face-to-face-interaction

This was important to student participants who felt the need to manage multiple, and sometimes competing, professional and learning identities:

> … you don't want to share too many specific details about your organization … because… if the information was released … sometimes it wouldn't be good for you professionally maybe. (Jane)

Lisa similarly concealed "sensitive issues" to protect her organisation. Lisa also believed it to be more professional to hide her negative feelings from others, leading to "a love-hate relationship with the learning teams":

> … I guess I felt that… at this level we should… share … our struggles …but also maintain a kind of professionalism … to get the work done.

Some students described their peers as "reserved" (Franc) at the beginning of the program, suggesting a desire to remain backstage and not reveal themselves to others:

> many learners… [were] not open about what it was that they … do (Meg)

The tutor Alice suggested this desire to dwell backstage may be related to feelings of belongingness:

> they just feel that they don't belong to the group so they feel like their family life is… is a private life, they don't want to bring it into the learning space.

So, while easy access to backstage can be a valued part of the online experience, helping students manage their identities, students saw real learning benefits accrue from revealing the self:

> if it's a face and a person and you know that face and you know a little bit more about them... I think it'll be less likely to let them down in the team work… it'll be less likely to leave them hanging... not answered. (Lisa)

The next section further explores this relationship between social interaction and support for learning identities online.

Support for Learning Identities Online

Social interaction online can be a major source of support for students as they manage their multiple and transitioning identities. Zak, like Adam earlier, spoke positively of the role of social interaction in supporting his learning and his attitude to learning; "knowing that people are in the same boat as us actually helps us to move on". Meg talked about the way "one individual being placed in a group makes a difference to the entire group…" and can bring about transformation in others. This was echoed by Lisa, who was exposed to a different perspective through a friendship on the program:

> because she was in a different field than me…she was bringing quite different perspectives.

However, encountering alternative perspectives can be challenging for learners, leading to what the tutor, Justin described as "social cognitive conflict". Zak emphasised the importance of trustworthy social interaction with peers in such situations:

> I'm more comfortable in discussing ideas with my peers when I develop friendships with them … sometimes I get apprehensive about asking questions with someone whom I'm not close to, so when you have friendships with a lot of peers, it's so much easier for you to ask questions… or to be critical.

However, the absence of this kind of supportive social interaction led to feelings of isolation, communicated as deep dissatisfaction with the low participation from others in small groups:

> I felt like I was just crying out into the wilderness and not even getting an echo back!.
> (Lisa)

The benefits to learning that arise from information-rich social interactions were described by Adam in relation to his positive experiences with his first cohort. While Adam maintained he could not remember the content of most modules,

> the… course that I said there was something positive about, I remember exactly what it was [about]… even after it, the Skype would be on constantly for me… we talk… we made friends

Conclusions

Groupwork has a vital role to play in helping online students achieve deeper learning outcomes. During the interviews, most student participants expressed the need to have more social interaction, relating it to emotional support as well as learning. However, when students are geographically separate from each other, and meet only online, it can be challenging to achieve the level of trust required to make the most of the opportunities groupwork offers. By focusing on the relationship between the performance of identity in and the construction of social presence in online groupwork, this study adds a new and critical

dimension to a growing body of literature exploring ways to support productive social interaction for learning online (for example, Ayoko, Konrad, & Boyle, 2012; Crosta, Manokore, & Gray, 2016; Vuopala et al., 2016).

Goffman's (1959, 1972) insights into the complexity of social interaction help explain why certain practices can produce a feeling of social presence online. Through social interaction in groupwork, learners receive feedback that they can use to shore up their shifting sense of identity. Social presence can be understood, therefore, as the effect of social interaction that leads to trustworthy communication. The communication will be experienced as trustworthy if it promotes opportunities for "expressions given off" or moments of (seemingly) less controllable, spontaneous behaviour.

Calls for immediacy in online communication are calls for communication practices that provide less guarded communication that builds trust by leaking unintended information. This is important because online learning environments reduce opportunities for less controllable behaviours and provide an ever-present backstage area offline to rehearse communication. The lack of fixity experienced by learners, juggling multiple professional and personal roles while experiencing transformation of self in the course of learning, can produce insecurity and cause learners to retreat to the backstage to protect conflicting identities. However, the safe space of the backstage needs to be abandoned if online students are to experience social presence – or meaningful social interaction to support learners through the self-reflection and transformation involved in deep (metacognitive) learning.

Implications for practice

An understanding of social presence as a support for identity online can guide online learning designers and tutors by pointing to the incorporation of learning experiences that provide for less controllable behaviours and unintentional communication. This might include requiring students to switch on their camera in videoconferences (at least for short periods) to establish

trust. Audio-visual communication within a course could allow students not simply to see the tutor but also each other, for example, in video introductions. Where cohort sizes are too big for each student to appear on camera, video of representative students in discussion could support identification with the wider group. In this, the issue is less about technology than its capacity to reveal learners to each other in ways that disassemble their rehearsed performances of self. The most important consideration is the provision of opportunities for spontaneous and unintentional – trustworthy – communication. This in turn will build social presence to support the social production of identity required for effective learning online.

Notes on Contributors

Rowaida Jaber is an Educational Assessor at the Ministry of Education, Jordan and a Doctoral candidate in Higher Education on the University of Liverpool online EdD programme.

Eileen Kennedy is a Senior Research Associate with the Centre for Global Higher Education at UCL Institute of Education and a Doctoral Thesis Supervisor at University of Liverpool-Laureate Online Education.

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