

# Identity Construction and Dialogue Genres – How Notions of Dialogue May Influence Social Presence in Networked Learning Environments

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## ABSTRACT

When analysing networked learning environments, researchers commonly try to explain the variation in activity, collaboration and learning outcomes by focusing on characteristics of the environment that primarily concern design and functionality. We want to draw attention to other aspects that affect networked learning, that concern how participants engage in dialogue and what consequences notions of dialogue may have on collaboration and learning. Building on theories of social presence and discourse analysis, we show how online identities are formed and explain how these influence the conditions for learning in networked-based environments. The paper is primarily intended for researchers in networked learning, but is also relevant for practitioners in the field, for example people involved in teaching or monitoring network-based courses, who want to know more about how group dynamics can be affected by what is going on in the dialogue between the participants.

## Keywords

Dialogue, discourse, identity, networked learning, collaboration, social presence

## INTRODUCTION

A central position in a socio-cultural view of learning is that learning is a social activity, which takes place through communication or interaction with others (Vygotsky, 1978). Learning is seen as a matter of participation in a social process of knowledge construction rather than an individual endeavour. Consequently, learning is not a separate or individual process, but is viewed as part of a greater activity, involving other participants that are targets for interaction, for example other learners, teachers or artefacts. When learning takes place in groups, learner interactions can stimulate deeper and more critical reflection by learners as the learning situation provides them with opportunities for exposure to multiple perspectives and interpretations (Koschmann, 1994). Collaboration can therefore provide clear educational rewards and support to learners (Oliver, 1997).

Vygotsky (1978) stresses the importance of the medium of language for knowledge sharing and communication of ideas and reflections. He claims that significant learning can be achieved through interactions supported by different kinds of discourse though he primarily focuses on spoken discourse. In this paper discourse is used in its most general sense and refers to verbal expressions in speech or writing. In order to apply Vygotsky's ideas to new forms of learning situations and environments, where spoken language is not used, we need to assume that the same concepts and ideas apply for other realisations of language such as in written discourse. The focus of the paper is to explore how different notions of dialogue can affect the learning conditions in networked learning environments, where the primary medium for communication is written discourse, rather than spoken language.

## MEDIATION OF LEARNING

Although it is natural to assume that there are differences between learning realised by spoken interactions and learning realised by written interactions, Asenio, Hodgson and Trehan (2000) found written language could be experienced as an equal form of communication for the expression of thoughts and feelings. They refer specifically to the work of Derrida (1967) where he challenges the traditional view of speech as superior to writing and where speech is supposed to be closer to thought, with writing merely a weak extension of speech.

On the contrary, Derrida stressed that written language does not follow spoken language, but that it is an entirely separate and unique medium which allows people to order and articulate their perceptions of the world in a different way from any other medium. In addition, Lipponen (2001), amongst others, points to other benefits that learning realised by written discourse may have. He believes that asynchronous communication allows time for reflection in a different way than learning that takes place through spoken language. By making thinking visible in writing participants are encouraged to reflect on their own and other's ideas and share their expertise. Garrison (1997) goes further, and claims that higher-order thinking is seldom possible without writing. Garrison (2003) argues that written forms of communication have special attributes to facilitate critical reflection which gives it advantages in supporting collaborative learning. He also says that writing should be viewed as a fundamental medium of expression with its own properties and powers (Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 2001). In line with such views, we intend in our paper to work from the assumption that written dialogue in networked learning environments has great potential to be one kind of language interaction that can realise learning.

Here, it is also interesting to note that another difference between learning realised by speech and learning realised through writing, is that written dialogue has been claimed to have the potential of being more democratic than other forms of interaction (Yates, 1997). Written dialogue in networked learning environments has also been connected to the concept of 'ideal discourse' (cf Habermas, 1981), which is described by Mezirow (1988) to be a form of communication that is open to other perspectives and points of view and that is also accepting of others as equal partners. Written dialogue, it has been claimed, has the potential to realise the concept of ideal discourse, in that it contains no visual cues to reflect status, or the requirement to interact in a turn taking manner. This contributes to making all participants equal and enables them to have discussions on the same terms. Hodgson (2002) examines these assumptions about networked learning dialogue and the view that online dialogue is a realisation of ideal discourse, questioning the claim that this form of communication is more democratic than face-to-face communication. Later, we will continue to discuss these claims, connecting networked learning dialogue to 'ideal discourse' and to the democracy aspect.

In any learning situation, there is a need to create conditions for socialising between learners in that particular situation. Without the social aspect of collaboration, successful learning is not likely to take place (Kreijns and Kirschner, 2001). When communication is mediated by any kind of technological medium, it is important to understand that the technology and its design may affect the interactions that take place in the collaborative process (Dillenbourg et al 1995). Ellis (1999) points out that although individuals create their own subjective meanings in exchanging and interpreting messages, the nature of the medium is equally influential. Since all communication in networked learning is mediated by technology and therefore potentially different in its characteristics than face-to-face communication, the conditions for learning are also potentially different than in face-to-face settings. Wegerif (1998) found that the social dimensions are important to the effectiveness of networked learning and argued that social factors and how participants relate to each other need to be taken into account in the design and development of networked learning environments. It is arguably crucial to establish a social context in which the learning can occur and where the learners can engage in both social interaction and task-oriented interaction.

Kreijns and Kirschner (2001) point to certain properties that can be built into networked learning environments, called social affordances, which they believe can increase the likelihood of social interaction taking place, and which potentially improve the conditions for learning in such environments. The realisation of social affordances is based on the concept of teleproximity, i.e. through mutual awareness of presence between the learners in the networked-based environment. The main idea is that learners in such environments must be aware of each other's identities and perceive these as authentic and reliable. In other words when a learner perceives the presence of other learners, these can be identified as distinct individuals with whom real conversations can be held. Hollan and Stornetta (1992) have similar ideas about teleproximity in electronic communication media. They talk about the importance of proximity in face to face communication and how to accomplish the feeling of teleproximity in environments that do not allow face to face interaction, i.e. how to create a feeling of being there, without the physical proximity.

## **SOCIAL PRESENCE THEORY**

The social presence theory of Gunawardena, (1995) relates closely to the concepts of teleproximity and social affordances, and says that collaborative learning takes place through social negotiation, in which the participants need to relate to each other, share a sense of community and work together towards a common goal. Gunawardena (1995) stresses the importance of recognising the difference in face to face collaboration and collaboration mediated by technology, since networked-based learning creates a new social climate which lacks a lot of the nonverbal cues that are present in the traditional classroom environment, for instance facial

expression, direction of gaze, posture and other features connected to an individual's physical presence. Gunawardena claims that these nonverbal cues are very important, as they carry out the integrational aspect of the communication process, for example keeping the conversation going by indicating turn-taking, acting as points of reference to the content of the messages and so on. In networked learning, the integrational aspect of the communication process, which would normally fall on the nonverbal cues, must be performed by another medium, namely the dialogue. In agreement, Lipponen (2002) stresses that it is the dialogue in networked learning environments that has to perform the social cues which are crucial for collaboration, which would normally be performed by facial expressions, gestures or intonation of speech in the face to face learning interaction. This also connects with the idea from Hollan and Stornetta (1992) that new media need new mechanisms, something to replace the nonverbal cues.

Gunawardena (1995), believes that successful collaborative learning will not work until positive affective relationships between participants have been established, which can only happen in the social interaction between learners. Gunawardena social presence theory claims it is necessary to have both intimacy and immediacy between learners. She believes that in networked learning environments, learners create social presence by projecting their identities and by building communities, which starts in the social exchanges between the participants. In such communities Gunawardena states, learners can develop feelings of trust and closeness and a sense of warmth and belonging, which will help them to engage in the learning activities.

## **NOTIONS OF DIALOGUE THAT AFFECT SOCIAL PRESENCE**

It is our contention that a closer examination of notions of dialogue will give greater insights into the way online identities are constructed in networked learning environments and affect the experience of social presence and also potentially influence the learning conditions in those environment. We will try to show how analysis of certain dialogue traits or characteristics can reveal how issues such as online identity construction affect the conditions and experience of intimacy, immediacy and teleproximity in networked learning.

In networked learning environments, the communication medium most frequently used is written dialogue, that is the exchange of written messages. The impressions that learners make on each other can therefore be seen as strongly affected by the characteristics of the exchanged messages, which relates to different aspects of dialogue. How individuals present and position themselves towards other participants has to do with how they express themselves in the dialogue with others. In turn, this impacts on the group dynamics, especially when it comes to the experience of social presence, i.e. people's perception of intimacy and immediacy. We would like to draw attention to the importance of exploring notions of dialogue, when looking into what influences the experience and creation of social space in networked learning. It is in dialogue with others that learners make impressions on each other that will affect the climate of the environment when it comes to feelings of teleproximity, intimacy, immediacy, trust etc. Equally relevant is the process by which people create their own social identity when engaging in dialogue in networked learning environments, and for this reason, we now focus on online identity construction.

There are different views on how participants acquire a sense of their own identity in networked learning environments, but most of them point to different notions of dialogue to answer the question. Consequently, we will now look more closely at both notions of dialogue and methods for discourse analysis. As there seems to be an agreement that online identity is something that is created in dialogue we feel that discourse analysis provides us with a tool to examine the nature of the dialogue created.

## **IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION**

Shotter claims that identity construction takes place within and through dialogue (Shotter, 1993) He believes that, through using certain kinds of language, people construct different social relationships, and in doing so they also construct a sense of their own identity

Spears and Lea (1992) argue that in networked learning environments social identity derives from people's presentation of identity as part of a group or in taking on a social role within the interaction. They also say that such environments, where there is no real visual feedback, can lead to a person actually being more self-aware than in face-to-face settings. This could be taken to mean that social identity online has the potential to be even stronger than social identity face to face. Yates (1997, 2001) sees online identity construction as something that takes place through discourse, and points out that all texts carry markers that can identify their authors in different ways. Similarly, Hodgson (2002) suggests that by analysing people's different ways of expression we can examine processes where social relationships are constructed and where people acquire a sense of their own identity. She further suggests that we need to look closely at the use of language in networked learning

environments in order to reveal how the process of identity construction through dialogue works. We need to identify what characteristics of dialogue are worthy of closer analysis when it comes to revealing the identity construction process. What characteristics in dialogue actually influence online identities? Methods of discourse analysis, such as Fairclough's (2003), offer a framework for discourse analysis that reveals interesting things about identity construction in dialogue. Fairclough in turn builds on Bakhtin's ideas on the subject; consequently, in the next section we explore further the ideas and theories of Fairclough and Bakhtin.

### **Characteristics of dialogue that construct identities**

Bakhtin (1984) introduces ideas about identity construction in dialogue. Although his views are about dialogue in general and not directly focused to online settings, we believe they may be still applicable and relevant in the networked learning context. Bakhtin suggests that life by its very nature is dialogic and says that living means engaging in dialogue. Furthermore, he argues that a person engaging in dialogue invests their entire self in discourse and that this discourse enters into the dialogic fabric of human life, into the world symposium. According to Bakhtin, one of the most interesting aspects of language is the dialogicality of each spoken utterance or written message. Dialogicality is, to Bakhtin, a concept that consists of two parts, one concerns the relation between the message and preceding messages and the other has to do with the addressivity of the message, i.e. the person to whom it is directed.

One of Bakhtin's most important points is that an inherent aspect of dialogue is that each spoken utterance or written message is related to other discourse, since it describes how dialogue depends on how people relate their individual messages to other people's messages, and that this is what gives them their own identity. This idea is also supported by Fairclough (2003), who writes about how people create their identity by positioning themselves to others, and in the way they relate their own contributions in dialogue to previous contributions.

Fairclough (2003) sees discourses as ways of representing aspects of the world. In agreement, Shotter (2000) says that what one individual perceives as real or true, might not count for everyone else in the world. Since the world can be described in many ways, from different perspectives, Fairclough points to the need of considering the relationship between discourses. Different discourses provide us with different descriptions of the world, which are associated with the author of the discourse and the relations that person has to the world. This also depends on the person's social identity and the social relationship that he or she has with other people.

Fairclough (2003) discusses two characteristics of dialogue that are closely related to Bakhtin's concept of dialogicality that could also affect online identity construction; these are intertextuality and assumption. The former concept means that a contribution in discourse brings other voices into a text and therefore relates to other people's discourses, whereas the latter concept reduces the difference by assuming common ground and leaving out such explicit relations to other people's discourses. Using Bakhtin's terms, a discourse with a high degree of intertextuality, which is rich in references to other discourses and open to other voices, is more dialogical than a discourse that uses a lot of assumption. Such a discourse is closed to other voices and therefore dialogicality is diminished. Fairclough says that a message which includes connections to other people's ideas and reflections is likely to come across as open and approachable, whereas undialogised language may be perceived as authoritative and absolute. Fairclough suggests that people using such language are likely to project a confident identity that may take a position of authority in relation to others, while people using more dialogical language may come across as more open and welcoming.

Intertextuality and assumption are interesting aspects of dialogue, as they relate to how orientation to difference is fundamental in social interaction. Fairclough stresses that implicitness is a property of text which is of considerable social importance, since productive and meaningful interaction must build on active and continual negotiation of differences of meaning and that the use of assumptions therefore will influence the conditions for this negotiation negatively. There are other similarities between Fairclough's concepts of intertextuality and assumption and Bakhtin's dialogicality, since they also capture the addressivity of an utterance or a written message in discourse.

According to Bakhtin (1986), the addressivity of a message is how it positions itself in relation to 'the Other'. At this point, it is appropriate to further explain Bakhtin's understanding of different voices in dialogue. The first voice is the one represented by oneself, simply referred to as Self. The second voice is the one represented by one or several interlocutors in the dialogue and the third voice is represented by a superaddressee who stands above the particularity of dialogue as a kind of reference or authority – an absolute truth. The second and third voices are together referred to as 'the Other' in dialogue, i.e. all actual or imagined interlocutors that are separate from Self. Bakhtin describes addressivity of a message as a trait of being directed at someone, since all messages are constructed in anticipation of the Other's active responsive understanding. Fairclough's concepts of intertextuality and assumption relate closely to Bakhtin's addressivity since they reflect a person's perception

of reality. Basically they tell us what a person in the discourse experiences as the truth, through their use of or reference to either the second or third voice (intertextuality), or by omitting such references and taking the third voice as a given (assumption).

Fairclough (2003) shows how another characteristic of dialogue, namely choice of modality, can tell us more about how a person positions a contribution in discourse to the Other, either second or third voice, and how this relates to intertextuality and assumption. The modality of a spoken utterance or a written message is the relationship it sets up between the author and the author's representations, i.e. what the author commits to in terms of truth or necessity (Fairclough, 2003). Language can be modalized in several ways, for example by using modal verbs such as 'may', 'might' and 'seem'. Fairclough says that modalized sentences are often more open in their character than non-modalized ones. They leave room for other possibilities, for other interpretations or solutions, and are more open to the inclusion of other voices in a text (intertextuality). Non-modalized language, on the other hand, is often closed for interpretation and doesn't include other voices, but in its nature keeps other people and their interpretations at a distance (assumptions exist). Further Fairclough stresses how modality is connected to identity since modality choices are an important part in texturing identities in networked learning environments. Fairclough points out that what you commit yourself to in any kind of discourse, is closely related to your identity, i.e. to who you are, how you see yourself in relation to other people and how strongly you take this position towards others.

### **Dialogue genres and connection to identity**

Thus far, we have shown that several authors agree that identity construction in networked learning environments is something that takes place in dialogue between participants. We have also shown that by applying methods for discourse analysis, i.e. by looking at characteristics of dialogue, such as degree of dialogicality, use of intertextuality and assumption, and different modality choices, it is possible to reveal more about how the process of identity-construction occur within the dialogue. We argue, in agreement with Bakhtin and Fairclough, that it is by positioning oneself towards the rest of the world that a person acquires a sense of his or her own identity. Next, we will look at how, by constructing different identities online, individuals may affect the different genres of dialogue that can arise in networked learning environments. We then consider how these dialogue genres might influence the conditions for social presence in networked learning. Bakhtin (1990) suggests that productive dialogue presupposes that the people engaging in that dialogue speak from different viewpoints, and that they bring their different opinions and perspectives to the dialogue. This is in contrast to Vygotsky's notion of the ideal speech situation which is where the shared given is maximal and misunderstanding is minimized. In contrast, Bakhtin argues that disagreement can be more productive than full agreement and that the notion of a shared apperceptive mass should neither be the ground nor the goal of communication (Cheyne and Tarulli, 1999). According to Cheyne and Tarulli the main difference between Bakhtinian and Vygotskian notions of dialogue lies in the different views on the relationship between Self and Other. Bakhtin sees difference in dialogue as something productive and essential, while Vygotsky stresses the need for interlocutors to strive for congruence in communication.

Cheyne and Tarulli (1999) build on the Bakhtinian as well as the Vygotskian notion of dialogue and draw distinctions between genres of dialogue. The first genre is the most typical kind of dialogue that Vygotsky is referring to in his theory of the Zone of Proximal Development, namely a kind of dialogue where there is an asymmetry between the interlocutors, which is primarily based on differences in knowledge and power. Cheyne and Tarulli call this dialogue genre the Magistral dialogue and say that the asymmetry between the interlocutors arises from the third voice, from which knowledge and power flow. Cheyne and Tarulli argue that it is the relation to the third voice, i.e. what Bakhtin would call addressitivity, which decides what kind of dialogue arises. In the Magistral dialogue Cheyne and Tarulli argue that it is by drawing on the authoritative third voice that the first voice can achieve its own authority and maintain the asymmetry between the first and second voice.

Consequently, the Magistral dialogue presupposes that the interlocutors have asymmetries in knowledge and power, which manifests itself around a deficit or absence on the part of the second voice, which is responded to by the first voice, drawing on the third. In this kind of dialogue, it is the first voice that authoritatively formulates meaning in reaction to the perceived deficit in the second voice. The Magistral dialogue genre also presupposes that the first voice presumes to know where the dialogue is heading, i.e. to a consensus between the voices in the final stages of the dialogue, where the second voice comes together with the first in total agreement.

A second genre of dialogue is the Socratic dialogue, which is a more open-ended kind of dialogue, where the first voice isn't trying to steer the dialogue in a predetermined way. On the contrary, this kind of dialogue is

suspicious of consensus and is characterised by the second voice not being easily silenced by appeals of the first voice to the authority of the third voice. Instead, the second voice is allowed to question the first, and the first voice may in turn become confused and lose its path by this questioning. Most importantly, the relationships between the participants engaging in the Socratic dialogue are not set up asymmetrically, but are based on more equal identities agreeing only on what questions are relevant to answer, but not necessarily agreeing on what those answers are.

### **Implications for social presence and learning conditions**

In the Magistral dialogue, one person takes on the authoritative identity, and the other person is perceived to have less knowledge on a subject and therefore gets a weaker, less credible identity. This kind of dialogue is likely to influence the conditions for social presence in a negative way if, as according to social presence theory, the goal is to create fruitful learning conditions by providing the environment with a sound social climate and intimacy and immediacy between the participants. Arguably, the asymmetry between the identities in the Magistral dialogue actually diminishes the chances for intimacy and immediacy, as it clearly distances the interlocutors from each other and divides them into one authority figure and one weaker party. It is also doubtful whether the conditions for teleproximity can be met, so the participants can perceive each other as real and approachable, when the dialogue is based on this unequal relationship between the interlocutors. More likely, if one participant projects an identity of authority on the other participants, by for example using authoritative and absolute language, steering the discussion in a predetermined way, and by trying to get everyone else to come together in agreement, that person will likely be perceived by the others as trying to dominate the dialogue. This, in turn, might make the person taking on the first voice in the Magistral dialogue appear as unapproachable and distanced from the rest of the participants.

In the Socratic dialogue, participants take on more equal identities. This comes from the fact that the first voice is not constantly drawing on the third voice and also from the second voice being allowed to question the first, which may lead to the first voice actually changing its stance. This kind of dialogue arises when the interlocutors use a way of expression that is not presuming that they know more about a certain matter or positioning themselves above anyone else. We suggest that dialogue which is based on identities that are more open and inviting to other's views and opinions gives rise to this kind of Socratic dialogue, where the aim is not to strive for consensus or to reach a predetermined conclusion about what is the absolute truth. Consequently, since the interlocutors are not distanced from each other as in the Magistral dialogue genre, but are actually invited to question each other on equal terms, we believe that conditions for social presence are more likely to be influenced in a positive way. The interlocutors in this kind of dialogue are also more likely to perceive their learning environment to be based on intimacy, immediacy and trust and, consequently, to be in a better position to disagree and, in a Bakhtinian sense, as well as from a learning perspective, to experience difference as something productive and essential.

## **DISCUSSION**

We suggest that by using different styles of language in collaborative dialogue in networked learning environments, individuals reveal their perceptions of the world and how they see themselves fitting in that world. Depending on the degree of dialogicality in their messages, as well as other characteristics of dialogue that we have described in this paper, we argue that people acquire a sense of their own and others online identity through the way they express themselves in writing. Depending on what kinds of identities come together in the networked learning environment, different genres of dialogue may arise, which in turn may influence the conditions for teleproximity in that environment, and also the conditions for social presence, i.e. perceptions of intimacy and immediacy between the participants.

We argue that the Magistral dialogue genre, where the identities of the interlocutors are polarized, one taking the role of authority and constantly drawing on the absolute truth of the third voice, is not the most fruitful kind of dialogue in networked learning, if learning is intended to take place by collaborative learning activities between equal learners in a social context. We believe that when people use a low degree of dialogicality in their language, by for example using assumptions about what is correct or seen as common knowledge or by using an assertive language style with a low degree of modality, they may be perceived as trying to take on an authoritative and absolute identity in relation to their peers. This in turn is likely to weaken the conditions for intimacy and immediacy between participants in the networked environment. Therefore, our argument is that the Magistral dialogue genre potentially has negative effects on the conditions for social both presence and for collaborative networked learning.

On the other hand, we believe that participants who use a high degree of intertextuality and modality in their language are open and inviting of other voices. This may encourage other participants to question their views and positions, which potentially will give rise to the Socratic kind of dialogue, where the dialogue patterns between the interlocutors are based on equal roles and not constantly anchored in the absolute authority of the third voice. Further, we believe that this kind of dialogue is likely to be more rewarding in networked collaborative learning, since the conditions for socialisation in this type of dialogue are much more productive than in a situation where the participants are more distanced from each other by taking positions of authority towards each other.

At this point, we would like to return to the claim that networked learning dialogue is potentially more democratic than other forms of dialogue and more able to realise the concept of 'ideal discourse'. In our view, it is not possible to generally state that this is the case, but we consider this claim to be an idealistic ambition in practice. We agree that the characteristics of written dialogue in theory might have the potential of realising 'ideal discourse' and being a democratic form of communication, but in reality there are, as we have shown, other factors that will influence what kind of dialogue actually takes place and that in turn will influence aspects of power and control over the dialogue. We believe that it is depending on how the language is used in dialogue that gives the interlocutors their online identities and that this also sets up the conditions for what kind of dialogue will arise. These different kinds of dialogue can then be more or less democratic in the way they are related to what is considered to be common knowledge or truth and how open they are to differences of opinion. We see the Socratic dialogue as having greater potential of becoming democratic than the Magistral dialogue, where one interlocutor is steering the dialogue towards a predetermined goal.

## CONCLUSIONS

To conclude, we would like to stress the importance of discourse analysis as a tool/method for looking closer at dialogue patterns when researching networked learning environments and trying to explain the possible failures or successes of such environments. It is clearly important to provide a networked learning environment with a social context in order for it to be a productive learning environment and as we have shown, the best way to do this is to regard the medium's own characteristics. Therefore, researchers need to put the dialogue in focus, as it clearly performs very important social tasks in the collaborative learning activities in networked learning environments. We believe it is by engaging in dialogue with others that participants construct their own identity, by positioning themselves towards others and also to the third voice and that this in turn will give rise to different genres of dialogue. Depending on people's different identities and the kind of dialogue that arises conditions for social presence is affected in terms of feelings of intimacy and immediacy between participants. Therefore, we believe that it is by using discourse analysis to further reveal aspects of identity construction that we can understand how different kinds of dialogue are related to people's identities in online discussion. Also, we believe that this can explain the existence or lack of social presence in networked learning environments, which we believe to be a potentially crucial factor in explaining why certain environments are perceived to be more successful than others. Furthermore, we argue that it is in the Socratic dialogue genre, where people are more equal and allowed to question each other's positions and identities, that successful conditions for social presence and teleproximity may become a reality.

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