

# Social presence and impression management: Understanding networked learners' cultivation of learning networks.

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## Abstract

This theoretical paper focuses on the concept of impression management to explain how networked learners' presentations of self as part of the establishment, cultivation and use of productive social learning networks. The arguments in this paper connect social presence, which has long been considered an important element of online learning, with social capital, which has been used more recently to describe the way learners use social networks to support their learning. These arguments are situated at the intersection of social connectivity, goal-directed learning activity and learner experience. The broad area of interest is *how learners' goals and intentions affect their activity and behaviour in networked learning environments*. More specifically, we are concerned with how learners' goals related to study and learning affect their intentional activity toward forming and using the social connections that constitute learning networks. In this context, impression management is used to describe and explain how learners intentionally construct presentations of self as part of cultivating their social presence in networked learning and how that presentation of self leads to the establishment and development of connections (or ties) with others and the development of a network of productive connections which support learning. We argue that the constructions of self are not arbitrary; rather, they are seen as intentional efforts by learners to present themselves in ways which are not only socially acceptable, but maximise the extent to which they are views as attractive partners for social learning activity. Learners read the social environment and act intentionally in response to the social context to present themselves in ways that further their goals of productive networked learning activity. By expressing themselves in particular ways and forming impressions of others, individuals are able to establish, cultivate and use social connections and then build social networks constituted of those connections. Those social networks provide learners with the connections they need to generate social capital, that is, to find and use the value (or resources) through connections or relationships that constitute a network. The paper concludes with a the identification of several questions for educators to consider as part of informing their practice of networked learning and supporting goal-directed, technology-mediated social processes and the cultivation of productive learning networks.

## Keywords

social presence, social networks, social capital, impression management

## Introduction

Networked learning is predicated upon connections—between learners, between learners and teachers, between learners and resources and between learners and environments (Steeple, Jones and Goodyear, 2002). The formation and use of these connections is the subject of on going study in networked learning as part of efforts to understand how learners form, join, and use networks to support learning (see Steeples & Jones, 2002; Goodyear, Banks, Hodgson and McConnell, 2004; Dirckinck-Holmfeld, Jones and Lindstrom, 2009). The paper adds to the body of knowledge concerned with how learners in networked situations develop and use social connections in networked learning environments in order to achieve their learning-related goals.

This paper focuses on several intersecting aspects of networked learning. The first aspect is *social connection*, that is, the connection which the technology affords between one social actor and another. This connection creates the opportunity for interaction and, following that, social processes. Owing to the technology-mediated

nature of networked learning, these are technology-mediated social processes. The second aspect is *goal-directed learning activity*. Following a case articulated by Goodyear (2002), networked learning is conceived as an active process in which learners activities lead to experience and meaning is made from those experiences. The resulting meaning is integrated into existing knowledge structure and those changes in learners' knowledge structures represent *learning* (see also, Spector, 2002). A key aspect of learning activity is that it is goal directed; i.e., that is its purposeful, oriented toward particular ends that are related to the achievement of particular objects of that activity. We will return to the nature of these goals below. A third aspect is *the nature of learner experiences* that result from learning activity. While in some cases these experiences relate directly to subject specific ideas or concepts, in other cases, particularly for novice networked learners, the experiences of networked learning are heavily influenced by the technology that mediates learning activity. Thus, the sense-making associated with experiences of the network, the learning environment and other learners is related to 'learning to learn' on the network. Taken together, these three aspects of networked learning define a focus on *goal-directed social learning activity in technology-mediated learning contexts*.

## Background

Despite a growing body of knowledge in networked learning based on twenty years of experience with networked computing, several complexities make technology-mediated, goal-directed, social learning activity difficult to define, study and understand.

First, technology-mediation poses multiple difficulties for learners. Technology-mediated (i.e. 'online') communication is a learned skill. Although in the twenty-first century, learners come to networked learning environments with much more experience with technology-mediated communication than in previous generations, they often lack the particular skills required to engage in online communication associated with the types of learning activities that produce the cognitive, behavioural and affective changes associated with 'learning' in education, particularly higher education. These skills are similar to those that are performed in social-network sites, but necessarily different from them in that the purpose of communication goes beyond mere social interactions and includes an explicit focus on cognitive engagement through group work and discussion. Research to understand the differences between technology use in the everyday social practices and technology use to support learning informal education has not resulted in a definitive understanding of those differences.

Second, and further to the points above, technology-mediated social activity is not well understood. In particular, the experiences of networked learners (as social actors) is an object of continuing study, including their experiences of a) the presentation of an constructed self in technology mediated environments and b) their interaction with and impressions of other social actors through a number of different media. Despite 40 years since the genesis of the concept, there is not a single, shared definition of social presence, which describes the abilities of social actors in technology-mediated environments to project themselves into the medium as salient social actors (Rourke, Anderson, Garrison and Archer, 2001; Biocca, Harms and Burgoon, 2003; Kehrwald, 2008). Further, the development of relationships between social actors in mediated environments is an area of on going study in multiple disciplines, including psychology, sociology, anthropology and education. The concept of social capital, which describes how social actors find and create value in social networks, has been applied to technology-mediated social networks, but few conclusive understandings have emerged (Oztok, Zingaro, Makos, Brett, & Hewitt, 2015). Thus, technology mediated social activity, particularly in the context of education, remains an important area for further study in networked learning.

Third, the nature of goal-directed learning activity is only partially understood. In this paper we operate from the premise that learning is goal directed. We take the definition of 'goal-directed' from Dickinson and Balleine (1994): "By characterising action as being 'directed' at a goal, we mean that performance is mediated by knowledge of the contingency between the action and the goal or outcome, whether this knowledge is conceived of as an expectation or belief" (p. 1). While we acknowledge that learning may be not always be goal-directed (e.g., incidental learning), the argument presented below centres on formal education, particularly higher education, in which networked learning is often encountered. In this context, learning is more likely to be goal-directed.

The questions that guide this paper lie at the intersection of technology-mediation, social learning and goal-directed learning. The broad area of interest is how learners' goals and intentions affect their activity and behaviour in networked learning environments. More specifically in this paper, we are concerned with how

learners' goals related to study and learning affect their intentional activity toward forming and using the social connections that constitute learning networks.

## Approach

The approach to responding to the questions above is literature review which synthesises key ideas about networked learning, social presence and technology-mediated social processes, social capital, and goal-directed learning to provide a partial explanation of how learners present (or express) their identities in networked learning environments, develop impressions about other learners based on their perceptions of others' presentations of self, select partners for interaction and develop connections with as part of their efforts to cultivate productive learning networks.

## Focus on social presence and self-representation

Although researchers agree on that social presence is a critical construct for individuals in an online learning environment (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997; Garrison, Anderson and Archer, 1999), the definition of social presence theory lacks clarity (Biocca, Harms and Burgoon, 2003). Different opinions are articulated by the different disciplines when social presence is studied. Indeed, the notion of presence is as diverse as the number of disciplines it informs, in fields as diverse as psychology, communication, education, cognitive science, computer science, engineering, philosophy, and the arts. Social presence theory and the ideas about the nature, role and function of social presence have evolved as both mediating technologies and technology-mediated practices evolved and challenged existing concepts of social presence. This evolution occurred in three distinct phases over time: 1) a research era that conceptualized social presence as a property of a medium, where the focus is on the capacity of media to convey nonverbal information; 2) a research era that conceptualizes social presence as the behaviours and attitudes of the individuals, where the focus is less on the media and more on people; and 3) research era that conceptualizes social presence as a facilitating element, where the focus is on the interactive learning activities and the development of online learning communities (Oztok, 2013). Here, we continue this tradition and conceptualize social presence as an enactment of self.

Creating and presenting an online-self is the beginning of the process of writing social presence in networked learning environments. Indeed, the presentation of self in everyday life is more than simply introducing oneself – it is a “theatrical performance”, balanced between the dynamics of what one expresses and how one impresses (Goffman, 1959). In order to make a good impression, people look around, observe how others are behaving, and enact their performances accordingly. This is what Goffman (1959) calls “impression management” to explain how people alter their behaviour in order to be perceived as intended.

While Goffman developed his notion in face-to-face contexts, impression management in digitally-mediated environments is no exception. Tightly connected to the context in which impression management takes place, people create better selves in digitally-mediated environments and manage their impressions (Giese, 1998; Turkle, 2011). Indeed, the notion of better selves is context dependant, based on what is at stake in a given situation.

In networked-environments, the act of typing one's self into online existence is not a random performance nor does the process of creating online self occur in a void. Mediated or face-to-face, the ways in which people represent themselves and engage with each other is a socially situated process. That is, according to Goffman (1983), “our daily life is spent in the immediate presence of others” (p. 2) and the process of impression management is enacted “once individuals – for whatever reason – come into one another's immediate presence” (p. 3). The same is true for networked learning (or online education), perhaps even more so, where people always act in the presence of others and, in the case of many online communications tools, their actions leave a persistent record of their presentations of self. Thus, in order to look ‘good’, that is, to be attractive and to be identifiable as a desirable partner for interaction, one has to consider the context and represent himself or herself in a manner that attracts people. Yet, what it means to look good in the context of online education is an open-ended question.

In this paper, we argue that the definition of ‘good’ is dependant upon personal learning goals. Personal learning goals are the motivation behind the impression management and thus the motivation behind individuals' presentations of self. Despite the fact that creating an online-self and writing a social presence is an open-ended task in terms of creativity, the process of creating an online self is not arbitrary. This process is driven by subjective agency in which individuals make choices about how to present themselves. The particular

case in point here is that individuals simply want to be identified as a ‘good student’, or more specifically, a good student to work with-- desirable, attractive to potential collaborators, the preferred interactive partner in a given situation. However, what it means to be a good student, and the qualities that convey the image of a good student, have different meanings for different individuals. This impression management around the idea of what it means to be a good student, ultimately has an impact on the development and utilization of social ties within a networked learning environment.

Much online learning research posits that a sense of social presence is important for individuals to form social ties and develop relationships within a networked environment (Riva, 2002; Murphy, 2004; Kehrwald, 2010). However, we know relatively little about how social presence impinges on the nature of ties within a networked environment. Since social capital theory suggests that different relationships within networks of people hold different values, we argue that social capital theory can provide lenses to explore the implications of social presence on the nature of network ties.

## Social capital

Social capital has been employed by many sociologists to study connections within and between social networks. While the definition of social capital remains open to debate, Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman and Robert Putnam offered conceptualizations that are frequently cited in the relevant research. Bourdieu (1986) defined social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition” (p. 249). For Coleman (1988), social capital is an attribute of a given community and is inherent in the structure of relations between and among actors. As we have argued elsewhere (Oztok et al., 2015), Coleman's interpretation of social capital theory can offer a means to study the structures of social relations among community members by allowing systematic investigations into the ways that relationships and connections are diffused in communities. Three conditions for diffusion are described: “(a) level of trust, as evidenced by [social] obligations and expectations, (b) information channels, and (c) norms and sanctions that promote the common good over self-interest” (Dika & Singh, 2002, p. 33). Putnam (2001) describes social capital as a “function of network qualities, norms of reciprocity and trust” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 60). Both Bourdieu's and Coleman's definitions emphasize the benefit gained by the individual within the community whereas Putnam's definition focuses on how the community can benefit from social capital through the development of interaction among its members. Our previous work (Oztok et al., 2013; Oztok et al., 2015) discussed that these accounts emphasize the benefits attained by participating in a community as a dynamic that exists as a result of the community itself and the individuals that comprise it. Thus, the central tenet for social capital is that different relationships within and between social networks hold different values.

According to Putnam (2001), two types of social capital are most prominent: bridging and bonding. Bridging social capital refers to the relationships with people from other communities, cultures, or socio-economic backgrounds. Typically, bridging social capital provides “a basis for collective action” (Pigg & Crank, 2004, p. 68) by allowing individuals to “share their histories and experiences, as well as establish their common values and prosocial goals” (Tseng & Kuo, 2010, pp. 1044–1045). Indeed, similar claims – though not explicitly referring to bridging social capital – can be found in social presence research (Garrison, 2006; Rovai, 2002). For instance, research suggests that social presence in online learning environments “[has] to do with getting to know each other [and] committing to social relationships... [because] if group members are initially not acquainted with each other and the group has zero-history (which is often the case in distance education institutions), then group forming, developing a group structure, and group dynamics are essential to cultivating a learning community” (Kreijns, Kirschner, & Jochems, 2003, p. 342). We have already argued that bridging social capital can help to explain the relationship between diverse social interactions and social presence as they relate to online learning environments (Oztok et al., 2015).

Bonding social capital refers to the strong ties of attachment between relatively homogeneous individuals. In this sense, individuals with similar interests or backgrounds develop higher levels of bonding social capital (Lesser & Prusak, 2000), which leads them to establish and maintain peer relationships (Tseng & Kuo, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005). These stronger relationships, then, provide important environmental conditions for knowledge exchange (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006) by allowing information to flow throughout the existing social contacts (Fetter et al., 2010). Bonding social capital, therefore, improves the acquisition of knowledge and fosters learning in a community (Daniel, Schwier, & McCalla, 2003; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2007). Similar to the case for bonding social capital, social presence research indirectly offers support for the fruitfulness of studying bonding social capital to inform community-level understanding. For example, the literature argues

that senses of affinity, belonging, and closeness are required for individuals to both appreciate the benefits of collaboration and learn from peers' ideas, critiques, and suggestions (Garrison, 2006). As argued by Oztok et al (2015) bonding social capital may help explain the relationship between strong social interactions and social presence.

## Discussion

The analysis of literature suggests that when novice learners learn how to enact their social presence with respect to their goals, the networked environment can become a playground for what Goffman calls impression management. The mediated environment provides the participants with opportunities for presenting the best aspects of themselves. Therefore, in order to highlight their best-selves, people negotiate their representations and try to impress the others in the mediated environment. For example, in many networked learning courses it is expected that participants will introduce themselves to the group as a way of signalling their presence and involvement in the course. Experienced networked learners know that the initial introduction provides an opportunity to present oneself in particular ways: to make personal disclosures about prior learning and experience, to communicate a willingness for further interaction with a warm and inviting tone, to establish personal interests which provide the basis for establishing connections with likeminded others and to signal the state of relational connections which identify links with other participants, through the use of phatics and references to the group. Such demonstrations of presence continue through out a networked learning course and provide on-going opportunities for individuals to manage they ways that others' see them through the demonstrations of presence that they make.

Literature suggests that learners explore those who are around them, observe others, and create their online-selves while they explicitly express themselves, and in return are impressed by others. These expressions (or demonstrations) and impressions (or interpretations) are well established features of learners' experiences of mediated communication in social presence research. Consequently, behind social engagements and interactions in networked environments, there is a dialectic understanding stemming from the impressions given to, or taken by, others. The process of impression management, then, not only embodies people but also situates and contextualizes them in relation to those around them.

One of the results of impression management is the development of relationships between individual social actors and the development of social ties that provide the basis for the development of social networks. We argue that impression management is very strongly related to and associated with learners' motivations, which may have an impact on the nature of the ties.

Because learners want to exploit the potentials of the network, they can aim for weaker but more diverse relations, seeking to build more expansive networks in orders to maximise their changes to learn from a more diverse group of others on the network. The focus in this case is on the development of bridging social capital to support the development of connections that extend beyond the individuals' immediate social network.

In this case, learners can be more concerned with establishing a wider social network rather than cultivating close friendships. Such behaviour is in fact in line with networked learning theories: learning stems from students reaching shared understandings with those of differing opinions by exposing themselves to ideas disparate from their own. Furthermore, as we have argued elsewhere (Oztok, 2013), this maybe a coping mechanism for students in networked environments. The very nature of online learning communities can be problematic for community-building as individuals in an online learning environment come together not because they know who others are or because they share similar interests, but because they have simply enrolled in the same course. Thus, they may not be inclined to develop strong, lasting ties with others, but may prefer to develop (relatively) weak ties that exist for the duration of the course and support the achievement of immediate learning goals, but do not persist.

By contrast, learners can also aim for stronger but fewer relations (bonding social capital) once they identify certain individuals they want to work with. In this regard, there can be a relation between types of social capital and learners' motivation. The focus here is on the development of bonding social capital which implies a relatively strong bond, one which is robust and can withstand a relatively high number of intense interactions which are geared toward focused production. In this case, learners can collaborate and learn more efficiently. As we have argued elsewhere (Oztok, 2013), strong ties can make the resources online learning community more readily available and accessible to others. In this regard, bonding social capital leads to stronger ties and

closer interpersonal relationships, which in return allows a greater level of knowledge sharing, both in quantity and quality.

Both approaches can produce benefits for learners. In the former approach, the development of a more extensive network of (relatively) weak ties to others gives the learner access to a wider body of resources and exposure to a potentially more diverse set of influences. This approach might be appropriate for learners seeking access to broaden their understanding through access to new ideas as in the case of (example). In the latter approach, the development of fewer, but stronger ties gives the learner access to a group of ‘close’ connections that may be appropriate for higher intensity interactions involving a higher frequency of interaction and a higher degree of psychological involvement. The relative strength of the ties between social actors provides a more ‘durable’ connection which can withstand the rigors of frequent, complex or emotionally challenging interactive exchanges

Notably, learners may well employ both of these approaches within a single networked learning situation. We argue that they do so strategically, based on the nature of their learning goals and the fit between those goals and the benefits provided by the two approaches identified above.

## Conclusion

The central idea in this paper is that impression management is a useful conceptual tool to understand how learners actively and intentionally construct a presentation of themselves as part of demonstrating their social presence in networked learning environments. The paper further argues that a *network* is constructed when learners engage with their peers in line with their aims and goals. A learning network, in this sense, is not a given entity but socially constructed as learners occupy the space and enact as social actors. Overall, this paper discusses how the impression management leads to the formation of weak or strong ties, which constitutes the network. There is a direct relationship between the goals and the nature of ties within a network.

Impression management suggests that the presentation of self in networked learning environments is a form of goal-directed activity in which the goal is to develop a productive social network that supports learning. The establishment of a social network is predicated on establishing connections with other learners (as social actors) in the networked learning environment. This paper emphasises the view that the establishment, development and use of these learner-learner connections is an intentional activity in which two or more social actors mutually agree to work together through a series of on-going transactions. This agreement is based on a combination of *expressions of self* in which an individual constructs an identity in the networked learning environment, and *impressions of a known ‘other’* that is chosen as an interactive partner. Then, once a connection between two actors is established, that connection forms a ‘tie’ between them which may be relatively weak or strong, depending on the nature of their on-going interaction. Social networks are constituted of the ties between participants within the network. Strong ties facilitate intense activity and may support particular kinds of networked learning activity which requires robust connections between the involve parties. Weak ties may seem less useful, but they may have an important role to facilitate the development of more extensive social networks that afford learners access to a much wider set of resources to support their learning.

## Implications for networked learning practice and areas for further work

The importance of social presence in networked learning is well established. However, these ideas build upon what we know about why it is important and what role it play in the a) the development of social networks and b) the cultivation of social capital. Visible demonstrations of social presence are the means by which learners express their identities and develop impressions of other learners. Moreover, the relational social presence cues contained in communicative exchanges between learners provide important information about the state of the tie between them. Thus, learners are able to read and respond to those cues (through intentional action) as part of a dynamic social process in which the ties are used to facilitate transactions between learners which, in turn, affect the state of the tie between them. Social presence and interaction (or transaction) are mutually supportive processes, but a key point is that these processes are intentional. Social presence is a form of subjective agency (Kehrwald, 2010) in which learners intentionally present themselves in particular ways. This is important for our understanding of social presence since the current definitions and conceptualisations fall short of explaining the trajectories of developing social presence. Several important practical questions follow this point:

- How do educators influence the cultivation of social presence and, thus, the development of social networks in networked learning? Is explicit teaching around technology-mediated social processes supportive of the cultivation of networks and thus, more supportive of networked learning?
- How do the designs of learning tasks and learning environments support the specific demonstrations of social presence, and thus, the development of social networks? Is it necessary to include tasks which require particular kinds of expressions of self/demonstrations of social presence which promote the development of productive networks? How does the structuring of interactions between learners (choice of media, tools, parameters for interaction) support the establishment and development of social ties?
- As part of learning to learn in networked environments, how do learners learn to present themselves as 'desirable' interactive partners? How do they learn develop impressions of others through the reading of social presence cues?
- How do we understand the nature of learning goals and their influence on learner behaviour? Can the 'goals' which affect goal-directed learning come from the course, i.e, as part of the learning design (emanating from the teacher or teaching team)? OR is it better if the goals are learner defined? What is the significance of goal setting as a precursor to goal-directed learning activity/particular behaviour? Does the goal setting need to be explicit? What are the advantages if it is?

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