



Shared Practices amongst Teachers in Online Training Courses

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This paper researches some aspects of shared practices and social interactions amongst language teachers who took part in a modular in-service teacher training programme taught online in 2010. It evaluates whether and how the sharing of teaching practices took place in one of the courses and it investigates the sociocollaborative quality of the learning, looking for indicators of social and teaching presence based on the model of the community of inquiry (Garrison *et al.*, 2000).

The main course activity used was the forum as a tool for asynchronous communication because discussion fora allow for reflection, feedback and extended comments, thus fostering peer collaboration (Lamy & Hampel, 2007: 40). The analysis explores patterns of participation, the tutor-learner interactions, the tutor behaviour and the interactions amongst the participants.

Throughout the course, many posts were found which reflect on teaching

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practice and demonstrate the sharing of teaching expertise. However, it appears that collaborative communication in an online course is difficult to achieve. Most discussions follow a simple cue (task) – response (by participant) – feedback (by tutor) structure and fail to develop further feedback levels.

1 Introduction

This paper researches some aspects of shared practices and social interactions amongst language teachers who took part in a modular in-service ICT teacher training programme taught online in 2010. The programme consisted of 6 courses which were organized in such a way that the participants and the tutors worked together toward shared goals that can be described as eliciting and exchanging the knowledge, expertise and practices of experienced language teachers. This learner-centered approach is best described with Meskill 1999 as «sociocollaborative learning».

The programme fit into the concept of Open Educational Practices (OEP) as defined by the Open Educational Quality Initiative (OPAL): «A collaborative practice in which resources are shared by making them openly available, and pedagogical practices are employed which rely on social interaction, knowledge creation, peer learning and shared learning practices» (OPAL, 2011a: p. 4). The connection between the principle of openness in education and our programme was the building of a group of course participants that formed a «community of inquiry» (Garrison *et al.*, 2000) in which social presence determine to a large degree the quality and success of an online course. According to the framework of Garrison *et. al.* 2000, an educational experience occurs through the interaction of three core elements, cognitive presence, social presence and teaching presence. Following Kehrwald's definition of social presence as «the means by which online participants inhabit virtual spaces and indicate not only their presence in the online environment but also their availability and willingness to engage in the communicative exchanges which constitute learning activity in these environments» (2008, p.94), the main focus of this study was on the exchanges within this community of inquiry. Many research studies have linked social presence to learner participation and satisfaction with online courses (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Lakin, 2005). Indicators for social presence consist of emotional expression, open communication and group cohesion (Garrison *et. al.*, 2000).

In addition to cognitive and social presence, the presence of a teacher (or tutor) is the third crucial component of the learning experience in the community of inquiry. Their task is to balance cognitive and social issues by instructional management, the building and facilitating of understanding and consensus and by guiding the discussions and providing feedback (Kehrwald, 2008). Hauck and Hampel (2005) emphasise the new role of the tutor in an online environ-

ment as facilitator and organiser of the communication who guides through the tasks, as the manager of time, as moderator and also as a participant in the learning process. Lamy and Goodfellow (1999) describe two major tutoring styles, the ‘social tutor’ and the ‘cognitive tutor’ (p. 467). Thomas (2002) calls for further research into the processes of coordinating online discussions and feedback provision by the tutor, because «the important role of a tutor [...] cannot be underestimated.» (p.363). Earlier studies link frequent and immediate tutor feedback with increased student activity (Tagg & Dickinson, 1995) and Fabro and Garrison (1998) maintain that the tutor needs to moderate the discussions in an encouraging manner if students are expected to engage in in-depth exploration of content.

In this paper we seek to investigate the quality of the communication and exchanges within the courses and relate it to aspects of social presence as well as teaching presence and tutoring styles.

2 Aims of the courses

The programme consisted of six online courses each lasting for six weeks with an approximate learning time of five hours per week. The programme was aiming at professional language teachers from Germany and the Czech Republic working either in secondary or tertiary education. Moodle¹ was chosen as the virtual classroom for the courses.

The courses were taught in English, German or Czech, so that the participants could choose their courses according to their language skills. 10 professional experts in foreign language teaching and research formed the international team of tutors. The courses covered theoretical as well as practical fundamentals of technology-enhanced language teaching and focused primarily on social media tools. Each course topic, which lasted one to two weeks, presented a social media tool and the participants designed and discussed teaching scenarios in which these tools could be used. Tasks were designed to provide «ample opportunities for differing perspectives and opinions, for controversy, disagreement, resolution, and consensus building. They motivate active participation and interaction oftentimes by having no one single answer or process to employ in accomplishing them.» (Meskill, 1999, p.3)

The overall aim of the programme was not limited to acquiring technology skills but also pedagogical skills to broaden reflection on teaching practices. The tasks as the central artifacts within the courses were supposed to be solved through online collaboration of the participants. The collaborative course setting was meant to encourage the learners to interact by discussing and com-

¹ www.moodle.org

menting on each other's classroom experiences, to design possible teaching scenarios using the newly acquired skills and tools, to present them to the group for discussion, to share and comment on their evaluations of new tools and practices or critically evaluate them. The tutor set the tasks and facilitated and moderated the discussions in order to promote collaboration amongst peers and to encourage critical reflection and discourse.

3 Research Questions and Methodology

For the analysis, the asynchronous communication as manifest in the course fora was studied for indicators of social and teaching presence. Could the exchanges be categorised as «open communication, [...] reciprocal and respectful»? Was there «mutual awareness and recognition of each other's contributions» (Garrison *et al.*, 2000, p.100)? Another category for social presence refers to group cohesion and a sense of group commitment (*Ibidem*, p.101). The courses were searched for communication that fosters and sustains a sense of belonging to a group, that leads to participation and empathy within the members of the group rather than a series of individual monologues. Did the sociocollaborative learning work in such a way that participants shared their knowledge and experiences with their peers? Did discussions lead to scientific discourse that is characterised by a consistent way of reasoning with references to prior comments, building on former posts and adding new arguments (Schulmeister, 2006: 165)?

To analyse teaching presence, the role of the tutor was investigated. How did they support and encourage the sharing of knowledge and practice amongst the peers?

A quantitative and qualitative analysis was carried out. For the quantitative analysis data was extracted from the Moodle statistics, in particular from the activity reports that are available for every participant. In these activity reports, forum posts (the topic, date and time of every posting), course views etc. are logged. Patterns of participation and the exchanges amongst participants and between the tutors and the participants were examined based on the example course *Tools For Task-Based Activities: Part 1*.

For the qualitative analysis, mainly the Moodle fora were explored because they served as the medium for exchange and collaboration. For each task, the tutor had created a forum in which the participants posted their answers to course questions as well as their observations, tool evaluation reports and reflections. Here, they commented on each other's posts and the tutors gave their feedback. In Moodle, the relations between posts are clearly visualised by the nested form in which threads are displayed.

4 Data analysis and discussion of data

4.1 Quantitative Data

The Moodle statistics were first analysed regarding the number of active participants in the selected course *Tools For Task-Based Activities: Part 1*. For this category, people were counted who had posted at least one message in a forum of the relevant week or who had viewed a resource, i.e. clicked on it in that week. A “resource” can be a text page, a web page, a link to an external source, a file or directory. The individual Moodle activity reports clearly assign the number of views by this participant for each resource with a time stamp.

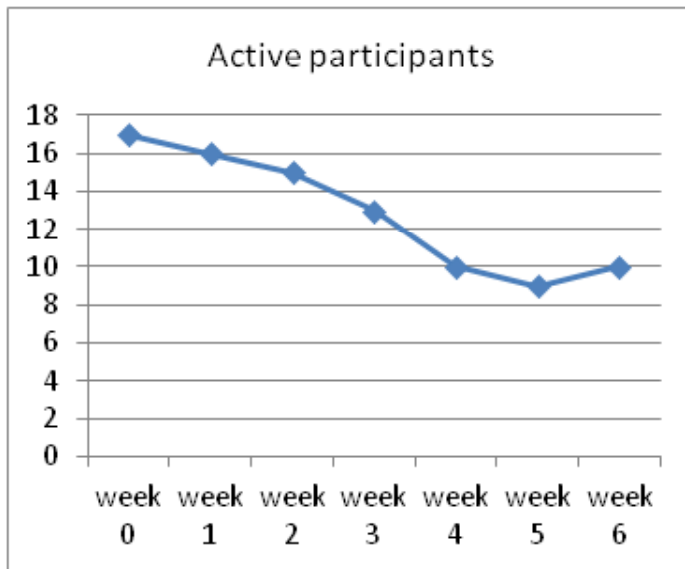


Fig. 1 - Active Participants in the course *Tools For Task-Based Activities: Part 1*

As can be seen in Figure 1, 17 participants started the course by posting at least one message in one of the general fora of week zero. Already in week one not all participants followed the course actively and there was a continuous decline until week five with only nine active learners left. In week 10, one person rejoined the course. If only the number of participants was considered it has to be acknowledged that just over half of the original number of people held out until the end.

More interesting though is the question of *how* active the active participants were: Would the number of activities, namely posts, also drop over the weeks

in the same way as did the number of participants? Therefore, it was decided to count the total number of posts by active participants as well as the total number of posts by the tutors, as can be seen in Figure 2.

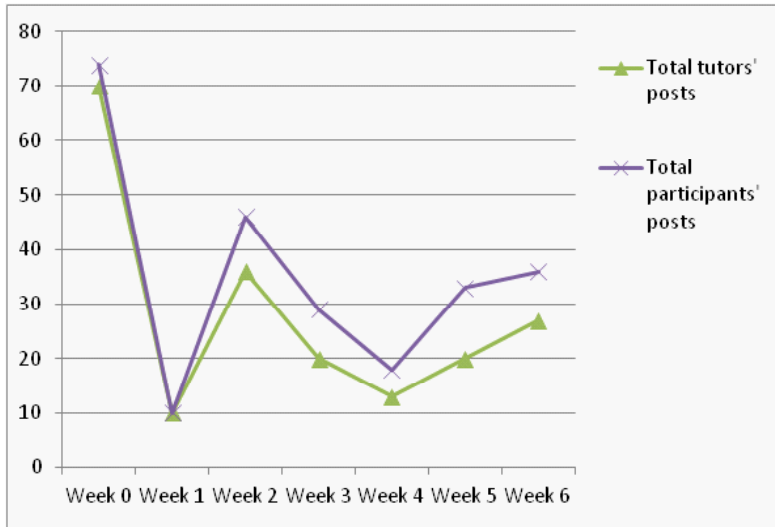


Fig. 2 - Number of posts by participants and tutors

The fora in week zero were used throughout the entire course, e.g. the “Technical Help Forum” or the “Café Forum” for social chit-chat whereas each other forum was created for one particular task only. Therefore, it is no surprise that most messages were posted in fora from week zero. For the 6 weeks of the course work there is no correlation between the progress of the course and the number of posts – the number of posts does not decline over time but varies from week to week.

The curve shows that course participants who maintained online presence were even more active towards the end of the course than at the beginning. While the level of participation does not correlate with the course progress, there is a strong correlation between the tutors’ posts and the participants’ posts: the more messages that were written by the tutor, the more that were posted by participants.

However, there are limitations in counting posts. Although it is true that most tasks asked for reflection in the format of a forum message (for example after a new tool was tried out) there were also a few tasks that led the participants outside the Moodle space, e.g. when asking them not only to create a blog but also to discuss posts of other blogs in the relevant blog comment spaces. These comments were not counted in the Moodle statistics and therefore were

not considered in this study although they could be valid evidence for active participation.

Despite the described limitations, it is striking to note that that the total number of all participants' posts only slightly exceeds that of the tutors' posts: In week one, it is exactly the same (10 posts by participants, 10 by tutor), in week two the ratio is 46 to 36, in week 3 it is 29 to 20, etc. This could be a sign of a strong tutor dependence, i.e. the quantity of the exchanges seems to go up the more the tutor contributes. However, also a reversed scenario is possible when looking at the numbers and curves alone: the more active the participants are the more active the tutor is. In any case, the numbers suggest that there is not much exchange and collaboration independently from the tutor, i.e. amongst the participants only. To get a better picture of the quality of collaboration, the exchanges themselves need to be examined.

4.2 Qualitative analysis

To evaluate the quality of the discussion, forum threads were selected with more than one feedback level because, for the building up of arguments and addressing of previous points, more than one or two replies in a thread are needed. The thread with the most nested forms has 5 levels of comments which represent the feedback levels and a total of 11 replies. It was started by the tutor and is called «Wow, we did it!». Although it appeared in the general forum “Course Ideas, Questions and Answers” it belongs to week 1. The structure of the thread can be seen in Figure 3.

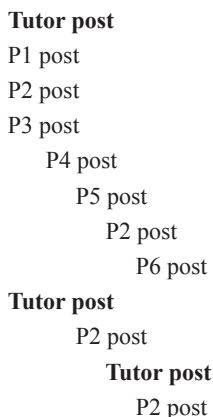


Fig. 3 - Thread Structure in general forum “Course Ideas, Questions and Answers”

In the first part of the thread, the participants referred to each other without intervention by the tutor. In total, only 25% of the messages were written by the tutor which suggests that the discussion developed independently from the tutor. It is worth looking at the content of the posts to evaluate the collaborative quality of the exchange. The tutor tried to initiate a controversial discussion on the use of Skype²:

Tutor post: «Can you see any possible ways to use Skype with Your students? How can it help you in your work? [...] Share your ideas with us, please. See you soon. T.»

P1 replied first, answering the tutor's questions:

Re: Wow, we did it! by P1:
«Dear T. it was a funny experiment to join a Skype conference! [...] I think, that's just the bad thing about using Skype for teaching: sometimes it's not reliable enough. The absolutely good thing is the reality of the synchrional communication!:) [...] Can everybody use it? I'm curious about the next meeting with Skype. See/hear you later!:) L.»

P1 not only replied to the questions but also tried to elicit more comments from other participants («Can everybody use it?») She also gave positive feedback to the tutor («I'm curious about the next meeting with skype»). Next was the reply by P2:

Re: Wow, we did it! by P2
«Dear L., dear all, everything you (L.) were explainig - never better said. Looking forward to next activities. T.»

No more arguments, just a supportive statement. It served to keep the conversation going and to encourage others to participate in the discussion. The next comment by P3 did not build on P1 or P2 but in a similar way as P1 replied to the questions of the tutor:

Re: Wow, we did it! By P3
«Dear all, thank you T. for another Skype-meeting today. I very much appreciate Skype for meeting up people from different countries to work together „synchronously“ on a special task. I think, in most cases this works well, [...] But T. managed very well – and I like the way he guided us by „giving“ us the microphone. [...] I can imagine using Skype for consultation in blended-learning courses. It's

² www.skype.com

great, that you can build up a group and have both, writing short messages and speaking at the same time, [...] Looking forward to our next meeting, K.»

P3 shared her experiences («I very much appreciate skype for meeting up people») and well justified her idea how to use Skype («It's great, that you can build up a group»). She also complimented the tutor and even gave her reasons for this, thus demonstrating that the discussion is held by equals, i.e. experienced language teachers. By explicitly referring to posts by someone else she shows respect for the contributions of others and thus helps to sustain the sense of group commitment.

Re: Wow, we did it! By P4

«Hello, although I couldn't stay with you for very long it still gave me some thoughts about using skype in my classes. My students always say that they don't get to practice speaking enough and this could be a good way to do just that. The drawbacks have already been mentioned. I feel like you need to watch out that you are the right amount of people to get decent quality and there must be somebody in charge of the conversation.[...] Best regards, A.»

P4 referred mainly to the tutor's questions and reflected on the use of skype. She referred to P3 («The drawbacks have already been mentioned») thus contributing to the discourse and she pushed the argument further by delivering another angle («and there must be somebody in charge of the conversation»). Through her comment, the thread developed further into a collaborative discussion. P5 in the next comment referred directly to her predecessor asking her advice («I would really appreciate suggestions on how to use skype to teach.») That she did not turn to the tutor but to another participant supports the sharing character of the discussion. P2 replied to P5 and at the same time built on arguments made by P4:

Re: Wow, we did it! by P5

«Dear A., dear all, I have been using Skype [...] but I have never used it with my students. To be honest, I don't have a really good idea how to best use it in teaching/ learning. [...] I see my students once a week in the classroom. I would really appreciate suggestions on how to use Skype to teach. Best E.

Re: Wow, we did it! by P2

«Dear E., dear all, I think A. gave us a good idea suggesting to use skype as a kind of virtual classroom for conversation lessons. You could practice monologues, dialogues and even discussions [...]; you can talk over corrections in a written work T».

Finally, P6 placed her post as a reply to P2 but interestingly enough, gave it a new name. It did not directly refer to the previous post but related more to the question of P5. The comment fit well into the discourse:

CMC in my work by P6

«Personally, I cannot imagine using Skype or any conference for conversation lessons with my students. But I can imagine using asynchrone tools - forum or blog, where they can write messages for me and their schoolmates.»

This discussion presents a high level of collaborative communication and social presence. The participants recognised each other's posts and built on them in a respectful way. The group built cohesion and showed empathy. The tutor stayed away for this part of the discussion which lasted three days. Thus, he gave the group the chance to expand his trigger question into a discourse and a higher-order learning experience.

However, in the selected course, such exchanges amongst participants with deep feedback levels and the gradual building up of arguments with references to previous posts are rare. More often, forum threads do not have many feedback levels. A typical example is a thread in the forum 2.1 «Beginning with Blogs». The tutor started a discussion with his post «Blogs useful for teaching your language». 10 replies were posted within this thread. The question raised by the tutor seemed to ask for reflection and could well have provoked a substantial discussion. All posts were sent within 2 days. The relation between tutors' and participants' (P) posts is shown in figure 4:

Tutor post
Tutor post
P1 post
Tutor post
P2 post
Tutor post
P3 post
Tutor post
P4 post
Tutor post
P4 post

Fig. 4: Thread Structure in Forum 2.1

Although there are three feedback levels which could show a high level of

reflection, more than half of the posts were written by the tutor. It looks as if feedback provision was only the tutor's concern and the participants in the best of cases commented on the tutor's feedback (P4 post). In most cases, they worked on the task set by the tutor, i.e. replied to the tutor's input. No participant commented on posts from other learners and there was no feedback amongst participants and independently from the tutor.

In this forum there were posts that indicated social presence, for example:

P1: «Once again: thanks for looking for the links to the blogs.» (appreciative towards the tutor)

P2: «I like the German blog you recommended. It is aimed at students of German language,[...] The blog is about facts about language and at the same time about studying in Germany at all. Interesting for me: the author is very much aware of her audience while writing – so the language is not too complicated.» (insightful, reflective, relevant and constructive comment, referring to previous post)

P3: «Do you have any experience with www.readthewords.com? It looks great for preparing listening tasks.» (posting of example, encouraging more comments)

However, the participants did not further investigate nor did they address previous points despite the very active tutor who posted many supportive and motivating comments to each of the participants. The degree of teaching presence was large however the group cohesion and commitment to the learning community seemed low.

An example of the most common discussion structure is shown in table 1 from the Forum 6.6 “Reflecting on Online Polls”:

TABLE 1
Outline of Forum 6.6

Discussion	Started by	Replies
Reflecting	P7	1 (by tutor)
Reflecting	P6	1 (by tutor)
Reflecting	P5	1 (by tutor)
Reflecting	P4	1 (by tutor)
Online polls	P3	2 (1 by tutor, 1 by P1)
Results	P2	0
Before reflecting, one question	P1	2 (1 by tutor, 1 by P1)

The tutor asked for reflection and 7 participants responded. However, they

all preferred to start a new thread without reference to other posts. The replies were almost entirely given by the tutor and were usually sent on the same day. When there were two replies, in one case the second one was from the participant who started the thread. Only once did a peer give feedback in a thread she didn't start herself.

The typical pattern of a discussion seemed to be: one post by a participant – one feedback by tutor – end of thread. This pattern can be observed in many discussion fora in the selected course. There even seems to be a connection between the promptness of the feedback provision by the tutor and the sudden death of a discussion: a tutor who always responds very quickly with extensive feedback puts the peers in a passive role with regards to the group. They might not see a further need for more comments. Perhaps they do not dare to offer their own thoughts (thinking “What more/ better than the tutor can I say?”), perhaps the tutor covered the points the colleague had in mind already and faster. Involuntarily, the tutor's behaviour could be counter-productive, inhibiting the creation of a collaborative atmosphere amongst participants.

Although the tutor provided a lot of constructive and explanatory feedback, acknowledged every contribution, tried to focus and direct the discussion, thus demonstrating teaching presence throughout the entire course this type of discussion did not develop into an open communication (open communication being an indicator of social presence). It seems that despite a high level of teaching presence the social presence and level of collaborative communication was low.

Conclusions

The teacher training courses were designed following the pedagogic principles of a task based and learner-centered approach. The aim was to create a community of professional teachers who would acquire new knowledge and skills in a collaborative way, by sharing their experiences and practices. The tutor's main role was to moderate the discussions and provide the “cues” by setting reflective tasks. After analysing the course statistics, it can be stated that the active participants stayed active over the entire course period, i.e. contributed to the discussion fora. There are many posts which reflect on teaching practice and share teaching expertise spread evenly across the entire course. Indicators of social presence could be detected even if only occasionally. The teaching presence was overwhelmingly high through the entire course.

However, whether the course can be characterized as an educational experience of a community of inquiry as defined by Garrison *et al.* (2000), needs to be investigated further by a deeper analysis of the structure, feedback behaviour and content of the discussions. It appears that collaboration in an online course

which leads to scientific discourse is very difficult to achieve. Most discussions follow a cue (task) – response (by participant) – feedback (by tutor) structure without other participants joining the discussion and therefore only beginnings of a scientific discourse can be traced. The tutor seems to be extremely important: S/he must find the right balance between motivating and encouraging the participants on the one hand and retreating into the background on the other hand to give the collaboration amongst participants a chance to develop.

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