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“Nice to get to know you”: Social presence in virtual exchange discourse

Virtual exchange comprises online collaborative activities in facilitated, educational contexts across borders. This paper offers a multimodal approach to the study of social presence in students’ asynchronous online discourse in the context of virtual exchange. It draws on the Community of Inquiry model of online learning (Garrison 2017) and interprets social presence as the dynamic discursive process of social interaction and self-presentation. The data consists of screenshots collected in a closed Facebook group during the first assignment of a Czech-Finnish virtual exchange project in 2017. The study aims to explore how the method of multimodal discourse analysis can be used to describe the three dimensions of social presence. The students’ self-introductory posts, reactions, and comments were examined in three modes of meaning-making: the linguistic, the visual, and the action mode. The study offers a model for the qualitative multimodal discourse analysis of social presence construction in asynchronous social media interaction.

Keywords: virtual exchange, social presence, Community of Inquiry, multimodal discourse analysis

Asiasanat: kansainvälinen virtuaalivaihto, sosiaalinen läsnäolo, tutkivan yhteisön malli (Col-malli), multimodaalinen diskurssianalyysi

1 Introduction

Technology makes it possible to liberate the classroom walls and engage students in tele-collaboration with their peers from abroad. Virtual exchange (VE) is a form of internationalization at home: under the guidance of their teachers, students work in intercultural virtual teams with the aid of digital tools and online platforms (European Commission 2017; O'Dowd 2018; Baroni et al. 2019). As pointed out by the Virtual Exchange Coalition (2019), in these projects "the deep impact of cross-cultural exchange is combined with the broad reach of new media technologies". Although VE is not a new venture in higher education, it has yet to become a widely established approach, notably in content teaching (O'Rourke 2016: xxvi).

This paper focuses on the multimodal discursive construction of social presence during the completion of a self-introductory task in a closed Facebook group of a VE project. The project was arranged in 2017 between Business and Public Administration students from the University of Pardubice, Czech Republic and English majors (language teacher trainees and language expert students) from the University of Jyväskylä, Finland. The main theme was the use of English in the two countries: the students had to collect data in their home cities, compare the results, create joint presentations and discuss their findings in English (L2) in a project-closing videoconference.

At the outset, the students were invited to join a closed Facebook group, which served as the main platform for personal introduction and initial socializing. The participants had to introduce themselves in a post by sharing information about themselves, their studies and/or hobbies and by adding an image that expressed their cultural identity. As part of this task, they were encouraged to react to and to comment on each other's personal introductions. The present study explores how the participants constructed their social presence by relying on the multimodal affordances of Facebook, during the completion of their personal introduction task.

Self-introductory posts are performance acts, which draw special attention to the act of expression (Georgakopoulou 2017: 190). In virtual exchange, personal introductions play a crucial role because they form the grounds for establishing social contacts in the group. A good atmosphere and strong group cohesion are central in these projects because the tasks require collaboration. It is in the first, self-introductory stage that the participants present themselves to the others and start socializing.

Social presence is interpreted by drawing on the Community of Inquiry model of online learning (Garrison et al. 2010; Garrison 2017), and is seen as the dynamic discursive process of social interaction and self-presentation, which promotes the creation of community feeling, the maintenance of positive relational dynamics, and the enhancement of learning.

2 Virtual Exchange

Virtual exchange is a form of internationalization in education, more specifically a means of internationalization at home (Wächter 2003; Garam 2012; Weimer et al. 2019), which does not require physical mobility. In VE projects, students from different countries collaborate online in a structured, facilitated way as part of educational programs (European Commission 2017; Helm 2018; O'Dowd 2018; Baroni et al. 2019; Virtual Exchange Coalition 2019). As pointed out by O'Dowd (2018), although there are other terms in use, such as 'telecollaboration', 'online intercultural exchange', 'e-tandem', or 'globally networked learning', most of them have been interpreted and applied in an inconsistent way. The term 'virtual exchange' seems to have gained ground as an official label in academic contexts; therefore, the present paper also uses it with reference to the teaching projects examined.

It was the field of language learning and teaching, and more specifically the context of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), that gave rise to a number of VE projects between universities in the early 2000s (O'Dowd 2007). In 2012, a survey was conducted among over 300 university language teachers and university students in Europe (Guth et al. 2012; Helm 2015). The results revealed that a variety of practices were in use at the time of the data collection, mostly built on blended-learning solutions that integrated videoconferencing. Initially, research mostly focused on the impact of such educational projects on the students' foreign language skills and intercultural competencies. Lee and Markey (2014), for example, pointed out how Spanish-American online intercultural exchange developed the students' linguistic and intercultural competencies, based on the students' perceptions. Andreu (2016) and Fernández (2016) identified similar beneficial aspects of projects arranged between Catalan and Australian, and Argentine and Danish students, respectively. Student feedback on a Finnish-Czech collaboration found that the participants perceived the project as being beneficial for their skills in spoken English (Háhn & Podlášková 2016).

Some, though not extensive, research has been carried out on VE in content teaching (Jager et al. 2016; O'Dowd 2016; Sadler & Dooly 2016, O'Dowd & Lewis 2016). The studies report on the development of the participants' team-working, intercultural communication, leadership, and negotiating skills. Recently, initiatives such as UNICollaboration, Virtual Exchange Coalition, Erasmus+ Virtual Exchange, and EVOLVE have emerged to establish international and interdisciplinary networks for the educators, instructional designers and researchers in the field.

There is growing research interest in the study of discourse in virtual exchange. Drawing on the theoretical framework of situatedness, Helm (2018) analyzed the participants' identity constructions in both the asynchronous and the synchronous platforms of the Soliya Connect Program. The findings show evidence of re-positioning and the dynamic re- and co-construction of identities in discourse. Dooly and

Sadler (2020) used ethnographic discourse analysis to examine conceptual understanding and the transfer of new knowledge in virtual exchange.

3 Community of Inquiry and Social Presence

Virtual exchange projects, by their nature, are hosted in online learning environments, which can be described by the Community of Inquiry model (Col, as developed by Garrison et al. 2000). The present study draws on the Col framework in its approach to social presence (Rourke et al. 1999; Garrison et al. 2000; Akyol & Garrison 2008; Garrison 2009, Garrison et al. 2010; Garrison & Akyol 2015) because it serves as a dynamic and multidimensional model of online learning. It is built on the assumption that the online learning environment influences and shapes the educational experience (Garrison 2009). Originally established for asynchronous, text-based computer conferencing in higher education (see Garrison et al. 2000), the Col framework has been applied to the study of various online learning platforms since its creation (Clarke & Batholomew 2014; Kozan 2016; Chen et al. 2017; Feng et al. 2017; Kovanović et al. 2018; Turula 2018).

The Col model proposes that learning takes place when three presences (cognitive, social, and teaching) interact (Garrison et al. 2000). Cognitive presence refers to the ability of the participants to construct meaning through their communications and to manifest educational outcomes (Garrison et al. 2000: 89). Teaching presence means the design and the facilitation of the educational experience. Both cognitive and teaching presence are interrelated with social presence, which can function as a mediator between the two, by creating an affective and supporting environment for the learners (Garrison et al. 2010; Garrison & Akyol 2015).

The term social presence was introduced by Short et al. (1976: 65, cited in Lowenthal & Snelson 2017) as "the degree of salience of the other person in the interaction and the consequent salience of interpersonal relationships". Social presence was initially seen as a quality of the medium, and research focused on the affordances of the communication channel: to what extent the person can be seen as real in the given media. Later, as a result of reconceptualization, social presence was studied in terms of how the participants perceive themselves and others as being real in mediated communication, with data being collected mostly in the form of questionnaires (Gunawardena 1995; Gunawardena & Zittle 1997; Tu 2002; Rogers & Lea 2005). Some of the more recent approaches shifted the focus of study to the participants' social interactions in online environments, using content analysis and coding as the main methods (Kehrwald 2008; Whiteside 2015; Garrison 2017; Lowenthal & Snelson 2017; Whiteside 2017).

In the Col framework, social presence is understood as "the ability of participants to identify with the learning community, communicate purposefully in a

trusting environment, and develop inter-personal relationships by way of projecting their individual personalities” Garrison (2009: 353). Garrison et al. (2000) proposed three categories of indicators for social presence within the Col framework (see also Garrison & Akyol 2015):

- 1) **AFFECTIVE INDICATORS** (expression of emotion): indicators reflecting the ability and confidence to express feelings related to the educational experience; indicator examples: paralanguage, emoticons, expressing personal values, humor, self-disclosure;
- 2) **INTERACTIVE INDICATORS** (open communication): indicators reflecting the ability to engage in reciprocal and respectful exchanges (e.g. mutual awareness in the form of attending to comments, or recognition in the form of expressing appreciation or compliment); indicator examples: approval, agreement/disagreement, acknowledgement, invitation, personal advice;
- 3) **COHESIVE INDICATORS** (group cohesion): the activities that construct and maintain group commitment and group identity in the form of contextualized and personalized dialogues; indicator examples: greetings, salutations, vocatives, group reference, social sharing, course reflection.

Although the indicators appear to be useful tools for analyzing social presence, there are methodological challenges in using strict, pre-set categories for quantitative coding. Garrison et al. (2010) draw attention to the difficulties of coding the discourse due to weak interrater reliability, the difficulty in identifying the unit of analysis and the indicator types. Whiteside (2015) is also critical of the social presence coding scheme, suggesting that its elements should be weighted and more consistent coding protocols to be developed.

The present study interprets social presence as a result of an active, dynamic process, which is constructed and co-constructed in discourse by the interacting participants (Remesal & Colomina 2013) and thus can be studied through observation (Siitonen & Olbertz-Siitonen 2013) and discourse analysis (Turula 2018). It sees dynamic social interaction as a sign, as well as a result, of social presence in a group. The three main indicators of social presence (affective, interactive, and cohesive) – as defined by Garrison et al. (2000) – will be approached from a multimodal point of view, building on the affordances of a closed Facebook group.

4 Discourse on Facebook as a learning environment

Previous research on social presence in Facebook as an online learning environment has pointed out the platform’s advantages in terms of socialization among learners (Kucuk & Sahin 2013; Gordon 2014; Chau & Lee 2017; Akcaoglu & Lee 2018). Kucuk and Sahin (2013), for example, studied pre-service teachers’ asynchronous discussions in a Facebook group. Their findings show that the sense of belonging to a

group (and thus group cohesion) may even become stronger in such an environment than in face-to-face groups (Kucuk & Sahin, 2013: 152). Chau and Lee (2017) report on the discursive construction of identities in an undergraduate Facebook group for a linguistics course, arguing that the group functioned perfectly as a social network-educational space. The authors point out the 'edusocial' value of Facebook, where participants draw on various linguistic resources and practices to construct their identities.

Georgalou (2017) grouped Facebook features into four types of affordances: participation, space, personal expression, and connection. Participation refers to creating a profile (with picture), a cover photo and other information about the self. Space means the online environment where the users enter: News Feed and Timeline. Personal expression includes posting and uploading photos, videos, and links. Connection comprises the ways of establishing contacts with others via commenting, liking, tagging, sending private messages, creating events etc. In closed Facebook groups, the members can only see each other's profiles if the information is set public. Posting and the various forms of connection are possible for all the group members, and the wall events appear in everyone's News Feed.

5 The Present Study

5.1 Pedagogical context

A virtual exchange project was arranged between Czech and Finnish students in the spring of 2017, as part of traditional, face-to-face and classroom-based courses. In Finland, the hosting course was the *Language in the Information Society* course, while in the Czech Republic the project was embedded into a *Business English* course. The teachers were Irena Podlášková, lecturer from the University of Pardubice, and the author of the present study from the University of Jyväskylä.

A total of 26 students participated. The students from Finland were English majors (n=9), studying at the University of Jyväskylä to become EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers or English language experts. The students from the Czech Republic (n=17), were majoring in Business or in Public Administration studies, enrolled in Business English courses at the University of Pardubice. Being English majors, the Finnish students were fluent in English (C1), while the Czech students had lower (B2) proficiency skills. The main theme of the virtual exchange was the comparison of the use of English in the two countries, across different domains of language use.

Before the project started, two Finnish-Czech Facebook groups were created: Group A (4 Finns and 8 Czechs) and Group B (5 Finns and 9 Czechs). Facebook ser-

ved as the asynchronous platform for the students' personal introductions, their establishing contact and sharing findings. Facebook had a central role especially at the start of the project since this was the environment where the students got to know each other and found collaborating partners for the main task, which was to be completed in international groups of 3-4. The teachers also had access to the Facebook groups and used them to post instructions and reminders for the students via a pseudo-profile *ParJyv*. The present study focuses on the students' self-introductions in Group A of the project.

5.2 Research question and data

The aim of the present study was to explore how the participants constructed their social presence via their multimodal discourse practices during the completion of the first task. The research question was the following: Relying on the multimodal affordances of Facebook, how did the students construct their social presence in the first, self-introductory task of the virtual exchange?

To answer the research question, the Facebook wall thread in Group A was more closely studied. The group had 12 student members in total (4 Finns and 8 Czechs). Screenshots were taken of the students' self-introductory posts, including the reactions and the comments added to the posts. Table 1 shows the data for the present study: 11 self-introductory student posts, 67 comments and 11 reactions during the completion of the first task, for which the deadline was 15 March 2017. The data was collected with the informed consent of the participants.

TABLE 1. Data for the study: Posts, comments, and reactions during Task 1.

	Self-introductory posts		Comments to self-introductory posts				Reactions to self-introductory posts		
	Poster	Date	By poster	By teacher	By peer	Total	By peer	By teacher	Total
1	Finn	26.02.	3	1	2	6	0	1	1
2	Czech	27.02.	2	0	2	4	0	1	1
3	Czech	28.02.	3	0	1	4	0	1	1
4	Finn	10.03.	5	2	2	9	0	1	1
5	Finn	10.03.	3	1	5	9	0	1	1
6	Finn	12.03.	4	1	5	10	0	1	1
7	Czech	14.03.	5	1	2	8	0	1	1
8	Czech	15.03.	1	0	0	1	0	1	1
9	Czech	15.03.	8	1	5	14	0	1	1
10	Czech	15.03.	2	0	0	2	0	0	0
11	Czech	16.03.	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
Total			36	7	24	67	1	10	11

Following a qualitative approach, the method of multimodal discourse analysis (Kress 2010; Jewitt 2016) was combined with the Community of Inquiry model of social presence. A similar, multimodal approach was suggested and developed by Satar (2015) for the study of social presence in synchronous, video-mediated interactions. By combining social semiotics, interactional sociolinguistics and multimodal interaction analysis, Satar (2015) proposed that both non-verbal and verbal meaning-making practices be analyzed as indicators of social presence. Her model does not strictly build on the Col dimensions of social presence as it includes seven components: sustaining interaction, building intimacy, establishing intersubjectivity, apprehension and relaxation, multimodality, beliefs about online communication and foreign language. Some of the components are described with multimodal indicators, for example, the component “building intimacy” has indicators such as smiles, self-disclosure, off-task talk or complimenting. While Satar’s (2015) analytical framework was developed for social presence research on synchronous interactions, the present paper proposes a model for the multimodal analysis of asynchronous online data and builds on the three dimensions of social presence as defined by the Col framework (see Garrison et al. 2010). The proposed model is presented below (Table 2).

TABLE 2. Multimodal analysis of social presence in a closed Facebook group.

	Linguistic mode	Visual mode	Action mode
Affective dimension	verbal expression of emotions; verbal expression of personal values; verbal humour; verbal self-disclosure use of paralinguistic	visual expression of emotions; visual expression of personal values; visual humour; self-disclosure in image/video; use of emoticons/gifs/reaction icons	reacting
Interactive dimension	verbal expression of appreciation, compliment, approval, agreement/disagreement, acknowledgement, invitation, personal advice, thanks, apologies; asking questions or otherwise inviting response; requesting/inviting action	visual expression of appreciation, compliment, approval, agreement/disagreement, acknowledgement, invitation, personal advice, thanks, apologies; asking questions or otherwise inviting response or requesting/inviting action with the help of visuals	reacting commenting tagging
Cohesive dimension	verbal expression of greetings, salutations; use of inclusive pronouns and terms to refer to the group; verbal reference to the project or task; phatics, vocatives; social sharing	visual expression of greetings, salutations; making reference visually to the group and/or to the project/task, visual expression of social sharing	posting reacting commenting tagging

Building on the Community of Inquiry model (Garrison et al. 2000; Luzón 2011; Garrison & Akyol 2015; Whiteside 2015) and Satar’s (2015) multimodal approach, the

above model proposes the study of social presence across three modes: the linguistic, the visual, and the action mode. Under each mode, realization options were considered and added regarding the social presence indicators. The proposed model thus integrates multimodality, like Satar's (2015) framework, and, as a novel element, uses the multimodal approach to describe the three dimensions of social presence (see Garrison et al. 2000; Garrison & Akyol 2015). In addition, it offers a systematic way of analysis by structuring the indicators around three modes of meaning-making. The three modes and the multimodal realizations of the Col social presence indicators were developed and proposed by the author of the present study for the analysis of discourse in closed Facebook groups.

The linguistic mode refers to the use of verbal (linguistic) resources, while the visual mode comprises the visual forms of meaning-making. The third, action mode is based on the idea that the mere act of 'doing' can be interpreted as a mode of meaning-making in a Facebook group. This mode involves the acts of posting, reacting, commenting, and tagging in the group. Although such actions are realized linguistically and/or visually (e.g. a post may include text, emoticons and images), the very fact that they have taken place can carry meaning. Facebook sends notifications to all group members when a member makes a post. The author of the post is notified of the reactions and comments that their post receives. If someone is tagged, the person gets a notification, and the tagged name becomes visible to all the members.

Actions can integrate the expression of more than one social presence dimension. The simple act of reacting to a post, for example, may signal a feeling (e.g. liking or love), interaction (the person read the post and reacted to it), and group cohesion (the person is present and active in the group). At the time of the virtual exchange that served as data for the present paper, Facebook offered six reaction icons (Figure 1) that users could choose from when reacting to a post or to a comment.

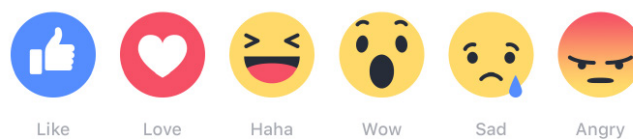


FIGURE 1. Facebook reactions.

Image source: <https://about.fb.com/news/2016/02/reactions-now-available-globally/>

Five of the icons clearly indicate feelings, but their interpretation should always be context-dependent. For example, the Like button may also express acknowledgment, thanks or approval.


As the process of meaning-making is complex and multi-layered, the three modes (linguistic, visual and action) can intertwine, resulting in blurred boundaries and overlaps between them. They can also serve as resources to express more than one dimension of social presence, as will be shown in the analysis that follows.

6 Findings

6.1 Affective dimension of social presence


The affective dimension, according to the Col model (Garrison et al. 2000; Garrison & Akyol 2015), emerges from the participants' ability and confidence to express feelings related to the educational experience. In the Col model, the main indicators include words and phrases expressing emotions, personal values, humor, and self-disclosure. The use of emoticons and paralinguistic is also listed under this dimension.

In the present study, the students had to introduce themselves in a post by including information on their studies, potential career plans, and hobbies. They were also asked to add and describe an image that illustrates their relationship to their culture. Figure 2 shows an example of a student self-introduction.





26 February 2017


Hey all! My name is [redacted] and this is my fifth year studying English at the university of [redacted]. I also study communications and in the future I hope to build a career in the field of development cooperation. In addition to my studies, I also work in a fast food restaurant, and as a translator for my student union. In my free time I dance a lot, mostly dancehall, which is a Jamaican street dance I totally love. I perform in a group called [redacted]. I enjoy travelling and I am constantly missing Uganda, where I spent three months volunteering couple of years back. Now I try to travel back annually to meet my friends and goddaughter. Fun fact; I love bunnies and I have the cutest house rabbit ever, his name is Pupu. 😊 Nice to get to know all of you!

 ParJyv ParJyv


6 comments Seen by 2

 Like

 Comment



This is me and my friend on our way to Finnish Lapland. We were at the arctic circle. I've lived in Finland all my life but this was the first time I actually traveled to Lapland! I do like it when it's cold and lots of snow during winter - that is how it's supposed to be! However, the darkness is too much and I miss the sunlight during the loooooong winter.



Like · Reply · 3y

FIGURE 2. A Finnish student's self-introduction.

In the above post, it is interesting to note how linguistic and visual resources act as affective indicators of social presence. The student expresses affective openness with the use of verbs (*totally love, enjoy, love, do love, miss*) when writing about her hobbies and home country. She discloses personal information about her studies, career goals, hobbies, family, and pet. The phrase *fun fact* functions as a meta-discursive lead-in, introducing and thus labelling the information that follows, i.e. the name of her pet, as humorous. The smiley towards the end of her post both confirms and conveys positive emotions as a visual resource and also links nicely to the cohesion-builder closing phrase *Nice to get to know you!*.

The image that the student chose is a personal photo, full shot, showing the student with her friend in front of a map in Lapland, which is a form of visual self-disclosure and expression of personal values. Both of them are smiling and looking into the camera. When describing the image, the student uses paralinguistic in the word *loooooong* to refer to the length of the winter in Finland and uses informal syntax *I do like it when it's cold* to express her emotions with regard to winter temperatures. Paralinguistic and non-standard spelling can be seen as linguistic means of social-emotional presence creation in the affective dimension.

Figure 3 shows further examples of affections expressed in a multimodal way. In the first example, the meaning of the clause *i really love it* is made complete with the emoticons ❤️😊 and the visual referent of the emotion (image of the city). In the second example, the humor of the message is constructed as a combination of written text, emoticons 😊😏 and an image (personal photo, close shot, smile).



FIGURE 3. Extracts from students' self-introductions.

There was a variety of emoticons that the students used to enrich their verbal messages. Eight out of the eleven participants added some sort of an emoticon to their self-introductory post and many of them used this resource in the comments added to the posts (see Table 3).

TABLE 3. Emoticons in self-introductory posts and in the comments added.

Number of posts with emoticons	Types of emoticons used in the posts	Types of emoticons used in comments added to the posts
8 (72%)	😊 😊 😊 😊 ❤️	😊 ❤️ 🌲 😊 😊 🏆 🤖 💎 🧑

Although the use of emoticons was popular, there were only a few examples when the students used the reaction buttons. It was the teachers who reacted with a Like

to most of the self-introductory posts, as a form of acknowledging the completion of the task.

6.2 Interactive dimension of social presence

The interactive dimension is constructed through the participants' engagement in reciprocal and respectful exchanges in the online learning environment. In the Col model (Garrison et al. 2000; Garrison & Akyol 2015), it includes indicators of appreciation, compliment, approval, agreement/disagreement, acknowledgement, invitation, personal advice, thanks, and apologies. In addition, the participants' questions and requests for action are also seen as interactive indicators.

Facebook groups allow for a multimodal expression of the rhetorical functions specified under the interaction dimension of social presence in the Col model. Appreciation, for example, can be expressed not only in words, but also with the use of emoticons, emojis, images or gifs. The acts of reacting, commenting or tagging are important social interaction indicators because they make it possible for the group members to engage in reciprocal exchanges, expressing multiple rhetorical functions. Reacting to someone's post or comment can integrate acknowledgement, approval, agreement, liking or even thanks. Tagging specifically includes the tagged persons in the discourse and notifies them of this.

Commenting is an obvious means of reciprocal social interaction on Facebook: it refers to a reply made by the original poster or by someone else (West & Trester 2013). In the data studied, the students were actively commenting on each other's self-introductory posts: there were 60 comments made to the 11 posts. In many cases, the originators of the self-introductions provided additional information about themselves, replied to questions or provided additional resources (e.g. hyperlinks to materials) in the form of comments made under their own self-introductory posts. This resulted in reciprocal dialogues between the author of the post and the other students.

In Figure 4, for example, two students are interacting. The multimodal dialogue develops in the form of comment exchanges under a self-introductory post.

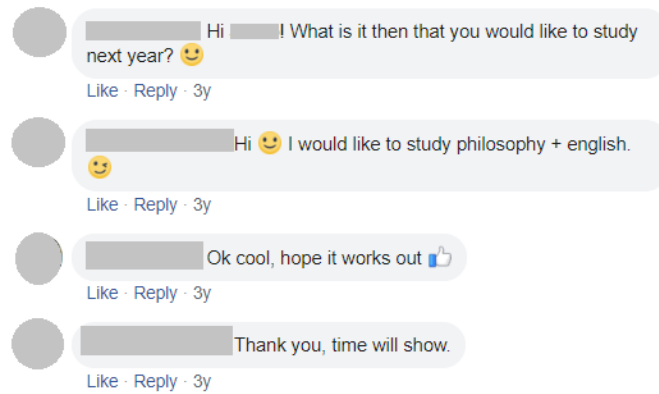


FIGURE 4. Students' social interaction.

The student who initiated the interaction greets the other student by name and inquires about the person's study plans, ending the conversation encounter with a smiley. The emoticon serves here as a means to convey the missing non-verbal cues and to increase informality. The peer's reply starts with the same greeting term *Hi* and the same emoticon, creating a reciprocal and aligned form of response. The inquirer responds to the information received with approval/acknowledgement *Ok cool*, which is also expressed with the thumbs up emoticon. The dialogue ends with the expression of thanks and hope, as a form of acknowledgement of the response.

Figure 5 shows an example for the multimodal expression of personal advice. The student is recommending a typical Czech dish to the group members. The food is described both with linguistic and visual means. The phrase *bon appetite* as an indirect request for action (eating) introduces humor in this context.



FIGURE 5. Student recommendation.

In the dialogues related to the self-introductory posts, some of the students expressed agreement with their peers on points related to studies, career plans or hobbies. Agreeing often included an expression of empathy by relating to/sharing the other student's views and feelings. Here are some examples of such comments: *I agree with you 100% there, we tend to feel that way about our homes, don't we. 😊*; *I know the feeling with struggling to find the thing that motivates you, and makes you feel like "this is what I want to do". I have struggled with that a lot, and I still do, after studying maaaany years. Also sharing the struggle with the picture 😊*; *Okay, well that's handy not having to travel too much. Studying is enough work 😊*.

6.3 Cohesive dimension of social presence

The cohesive dimension of social presence comprises the activities that construct and maintain group commitment and group identity in the form of contextualized and personalized dialogues, such as greetings, salutations, vocatives, group reference (e.g. inclusive pronouns), social sharing, or course reflection (see Garrison et al. 2000; Garrison & Akyol 2015).

Taking a multimodal approach, visual and platform-specific action resources can also be included as indicators of cohesion. The mere act of posting a self-introduction in a Facebook group, for example, is a means of social sharing and cohesion building. After the group members have been invited to the Facebook group and received the assignment, it is important that they complete the task before the deadline. Task completion signals the very first step of one's commitment towards the group. In the situation when a member is not completing the task or does it

after the deadline, the others might interpret the delay as the lack of the person's commitment to the group. In the data studied, 11 out of the 12 students posted a self-introduction, and 10 of them completed the task before the deadline.

In addition to the act of posting, both reacting and commenting may also be seen as indicators of group cohesion. Reactions and comments added to a self-introductory post in a closed Facebook group can indicate the level of activity and attention of the participants. An indicator of the group's functioning if there is some 'action' going on. If there are no reactions or comments to the posts, group communication may lose its dynamics, which can result in a lack of commitment from the members.

Greetings and salutations are important cohesive indicators of social presence as they are a rhetorical means of addressing the community. Each student post included a greeting, and most had a message expressing joy over getting to know the group members and/or looking forward to the videoconference, in some cases with emoticons added (see Table 4).

TABLE 4. Greetings and group addressing terms in the Facebook group.

Post	Greetings	Positive messages to the group
1	Hey all!	Nice to get to know all of you!
2	Hi there! 😊	Have a nice time, guys! 😊
3	Hello, I'm glad to meet you all.	I hope, we will enjoy our videoconference.
4	Hey all!	It's lovely to meet all of you, I'm really excited for this project! 😊
5	Hi!	-
6	Hello everyone!	It's a pleasure to get to know you, I'm really looking forward to our video conference! 😊
7	Hi there!	See you at the conference.
8	Hello!	Thanks for your time and see you at the conference!
9	Hey everyone,	It was a pleasure to talk to Swedish guys and I expect that you guys will be even better. Nice to meet you all!
10	Hey guys,	-
11	Hello	That would be all from me so have a nice day and see you soon.

In addition to greetings, a further cohesive indicator of social presence in the linguistic mode is the use of the first-person plural, with reference to the group. There was, however, no such example found in the data, which is natural since group identity was only emerging at the very beginning of the project. When the first-person plural was used, it was mostly with inclusive reference to the person's own group

of friends, family or country/culture: *With my boyfriend **we** dance ballroom and latin dance; In **our** country, there are many traditions; as Finns drink a LOT of coffee, the coffee makers are dear to (some of) **us**; in **our** town, every summer there is like a funfair.* In one example, the pronoun *we* was used with generic meaning, to express agreement and empathy: *I agree with you 100% there, **we** tend to feel that way about our homes, don't we.* 😊

The Col model sees vocatives (addressing or referring to the participants by name) as expressions of group cohesion because they are manifest attempts of establishing closer contacts within a group (Rourke et al. 1999). On Facebook, a tag can also be interpreted as a visible vocative: the person who is tagged gets notified about being tagged and the name gets visibly marked in the text. There were some examples in the data when the students used vocatives (including tags, see them underlined) in their posts and comments: *Hi! I'm X, and like Y and Z, I study in; Hi B! Thank you for asking; Hi C! Nice to meet you! 😊; I'm originally from ... (the same town where D works), which is a town known for multiple cultural events, such as music and wine festivals.*

7 Conclusion

The present study focused on a virtual exchange project arranged between Czech and Finnish universities in 2017. The construction of social presence via multimodal discourse was examined in its development during the completion of the first, self-introductory task in a closed Facebook group. Considering the affordances of the social media platform, a model was proposed for the multimodal analysis of social presence in asynchronous discourse, building on the social presence indicators and dimensions of the Col framework (see Garrison et al. 2000; Garrison & Akyol 2015). The three social presence dimensions of the Col model (affective, interactive, and cohesive) were described across three modes of meaning-making: the linguistic, the visual, and the action mode. The modes and the multimodal interpretation of the Col social presence indicators (in the context of asynchronous discourse) were proposed by the author of the present study.

In virtual exchange, the participants engage in a complex set of synchronous and asynchronous discourse practices to perform tasks in groups. At the start of the project, they have to introduce themselves, establish contacts and build trust for the successful teamwork. Since they do not have the opportunity to meet face-to-face, online self-introductions function as icebreakers and form the basis of group socialization.

A good social-emotional atmosphere can reduce fears, decrease stress and enhance collaboration among students from different countries and/or cultures. The participants should feel comfortable to express their emotions and ideas in an

intercultural learning environment. Several researchers, such as Swan (2002), Swan and Shih (2005), Remesal and Colomina (2013), and Garrison and Akyol (2015) have also confirmed that social-emotional presence can play an important role in the success of online learning and can influence the satisfaction of learners. As a result of the participants' behaviors, an affective environment, a climate of trust may emerge that facilitates the learning and the collaboration process (Remesal & Colomina 2013; Garrison & Akyol 2015).

In the present study, self-introduction was the first task that the students had to complete in the online learning environment, following the teachers' instructions and relying on the affordances of a Facebook group. Although the social media platform was familiar to all of the participants, creating a self-introduction in a closed, transnational learning space was a new task to most of them. The posts and the comments they made showed evidence of their efforts to create a positive, supportive atmosphere right from the outset.

The very act of posting a self-introduction was interpreted as a cohesive indicator of social presence because this act realized the first step towards group formation. Most of the students completed the task on time and also engaged in reacting to and commenting on the posts made by their peers. Their multimodal social presence construction reflected dynamic, discursive processes of social interaction and self-presentation. They enriched their posts and comments with various socio-emotional cues, such as emoticons, self-disclosure, humor or paralanguage. With regard to the Col model of social presence, multimodal resources were identified as indicators in all the three dimensions. The proposed multimodal approach worked well as a tool, but it had to allow for overlaps and blurred boundaries between and across the modes of meaning-making and the social presence dimensions.

Whiteside (2017) suggests that social presence is like a set of skills, essential literacy that can and should be practiced and learnt. She claims that "social presence embodies a critical, essential literacy for cultivating emotions and relationships that enhance the overall learning experience" (Whiteside 2017: 133). By describing the various means of creating a good and trustful atmosphere online, social presence research can help educators design tasks for virtual teams. The ability to create social presence in online group interaction is part of digital literacy and also a means to enhance learning (Remesal & Colomina 2013). As transnational, virtual teamwork is gaining ground in the 21st century, the creation of positive relational dynamics in online group discourse is an essential skill for all students to learn.

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