

## **Discourse in the development of identities in an online teacher education programme**

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### **Abstract**

*This research aims to develop understanding into how learners use discourse devices to portray identities in virtual learning environments (VLEs) and how this can contribute to their learning. Learning occurs through meaningful interactions with others, and social presence is seen as crucial for effective learning in VLEs (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000). VLEs provide unique affordances and challenges in relation to the presentation of self, largely due to the lack of physical embodiment (Gee, 2003; Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2005). Discourse has a central role in the projection of identities (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010; Gee, 2000), meaning it is essential that learners develop discourse skills in order to interact effectively in VLEs. Focusing on an online teacher-education programme, this study adopts several discourse analysis approaches to explore discursive devices used by learners. The analysis of forum discussions and narrative interviews identified three main categories of identities: student, teacher and other. While the development of teacher identities is the ultimate goal of the programme, student identities showed to be central to learning, with the discourse they were built on creating a sense of community. Task instructions were found to be crucial in determining the*

*identities portrayed, providing useful insights for educators working within VLEs.*

**Keywords:** *identity, discourse, virtual learning*

## **El desarrollo de identidades a través del discurso en un programa virtual**

### **Resumen**

Esta investigación tiene como objetivo desarrollar la comprensión del uso de recursos del discurso para representar identidades en entornos virtuales de aprendizaje (EVA). Las interacciones significativas y la presencia social se consideran claves para el aprendizaje eficaz en entornos virtuales de aprendizaje (Garrison, Anderson y Archer, 2000). Los EVA proporcionan oportunidades y desafíos únicos relacionados a la presentación de uno mismo, debido principalmente a la falta de presencia física (Gee, 2003; Dall'Alba y Barnacle, 2005). El discurso tiene un papel central en la proyección de identidades (Burgess y Ivanič, 2010; Gee, 2000), lo que implica la necesidad de desarrollar habilidades del discurso para interactuar eficazmente en los EVA. Centrándose en un programa virtual de formación de docentes, este estudio adopta varios enfoques de análisis del discurso para explorar los recursos discursivos utilizados por los alumnos. El análisis de foros de discusión y entrevistas narrativas identifica tres categorías principales de identidades: estudiante, profesor y otra. Si bien el desarrollo de la identidad de maestro es la meta del programa, es el discurso de las identidades de los estudiantes que tiene un papel central en establecer una comunidad. Las instrucciones de tareas resultaron claves en determinar las identidades proyectadas, un hallazgo importante para los educadores que trabajan en los EVA.

**Palabras clave:** *identidad, discurso, virtual, aprendizaje*

## **Community and social presence in virtual learning environments**

Learning theories based upon the principles of social constructivism propose that for learning to take place, individuals must be involved in meaningful interactions with others. In the context of virtual learning environments (VLEs), meaningful interactions “should include responding, negotiating internally and socially, arguing against points, adding to evolving ideas, and offering alternative perspectives with one another” (Woo & Reeves, 2007, 19). As such, from this perspective, it is necessary for online learners to be actively involved in communities.

In order for communities to be effective in VLEs, it is widely recognised that a sense of social presence must be established (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2000; Goertzen & Kristjánsson, 2007; Lomicka & Lord, 2007). Garrison et al (2000) define social presence as “the ability of participants in a community of inquiry to project themselves socially and emotionally, as ‘real’ people” (94). In other words, for social presence to be established, participants have to be capable of effectively representing their identities.

VLEs provide unique affordances and challenges for identity work, primarily due to the absence of physical presence and embodiment (Gee, 2003; Dall’Alba & Barnacle, 2005). Bayne (2004) found that the loss of visual cues can cause some learners feel frustration or there may be a sense of the unknown in relation to who learners are interacting with: this can even lead to a perception of there being no interaction. Consequently, online communication can come to be seen as unreal (Bayne, 2004). However, Garrison, Anderson and Archer (2010) provide the reminder that in a short period of time the way in which people view online interaction has changed considerably, and it is probable that this sense of frustration has lessened as online communication has become an integral part of many people’s lives.

Garrison et al (2000) state that the media itself is not the most important factor in determining social presence, and suggest that “participants could develop compensating strategies when the medium reduces or eliminates

visual cues" (Garrison et al, 2000, 95). This belief has been upheld by later research (e.g. Goertzen & Kristjánsson, 2007; Lomicka & Lord, 2007) which finds that expressions of affect and other interactive discourse devices compensate for the lack of physical presence in online communities. Nonetheless, research has shown that a minority of online learners are aware of the role of discourse in creating identities (Hughes & Scott, 2005).

### **The role of discourse in the projection of self**

The term discourse is often used synonymously with language (Ivanič, 1998), although the former typically has a more sociological focus. Discourse is strongly embedded in context and culture (Fairclough, 1995), and what is deemed as appropriate discourse will vary considerably according to the situation. According to Gee (2011a), discourses are "socially accepted associations among ways of using language, of thinking, valuing, acting and interacting, in the 'right' places and at the 'right' times with the 'right' objects" (34). Through adopting these socially accepted conventions of language, an individual can portray a certain identity and gain membership to a discourse community (Swales & Feak, 2000).

Gee (2000) provides a framework for analysing identities in which he describes four ways in which they can be viewed: Nature-identity, Institution-identity, Discourse-identity and Affinity-identity. Although these are frequently entwined, of particular interest to this study is Discourse-identity, a perspective through which identities are seen as "An individual trait recognized in the discourse/dialogue of/with 'rational' individuals" (Gee, 2000, 100). Both discourse and identity can change over time (Burgess & Ivanič, 2010), and several discourses can be discernible at any single moment as the writer or speaker draws on different facets of their identities (Gee, 2011a; Ivanič, 1998). An awareness of our own discourse and that of others is, therefore, primordial in the building and concretizing of identity and acceptance within specific communities.

## **Identity in teacher education programmes**

In teacher education, the ultimate goal is for the learner to be recognised as a teacher and a member of the teaching community (Moss & Pittaway, 2013; Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010; Timostsuk & Ugaste, 2010) just as all career-oriented educational programmes require the learner to develop an appropriate professional identity for their field. This is congruent with situated learning theories (Lave & Wenger, 1991), in which 'novice' learners are required to acquire the ways of thinking and doing of the community in order to be viewed as experts: in other words they have to adapt their identities in order to be accepted in the community. Identity work should, therefore, be a key feature of any such programme.

As has been discussed, VLEs can pose unique challenges in relation to the portrayal of identity and the development of a sense of belonging, partly because they rely primarily on discursive resources for communication. While previous research generally agrees that forum discussions lead to the establishment of a group identity, findings regarding the development of teacher identities are mixed. Irwin and Hramiak (2010) found that the development of an online community hindered learners from consolidating a teacher identity, while others found that more professional stances were adopted (Delahunty, 2012; Sutherland, Howard & Markauskaite, 2010). Moss and Pittaway (2013) highlight possible barriers to identity construction experienced by learners in online education, who frequently come from non-traditional backgrounds. Delahunty (2012) also gives recognition to the typically diverse backgrounds of students enrolled in online programmes and describes the presence of multiple identities in online discussions.

In view of the disparate findings reported in the literature, further research is considered necessary to gain a deeper understanding of how learners use discourse to portray identities in online programmes and how this can contribute to their learning.

## **Methodology**

### ***Context of the study***

This study was undertaken in the context of an online BA in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) at a state university in Mexico. The BA programme is conducted entirely online, through an institutional online learning platform and other web 2.0 tools, as considered appropriate by the course facilitator. The version of the platform in use at the time the data was collected featured primarily text content, personal and shared data storage, and a forum service. The forums showed the students' (and facilitators') names and photographs, if these had been uploaded to their individual profiles. The forums also allowed users to choose from a limited range of fonts and text sizes, as well as attach text, PowerPoint or image files to their posts, although these features were seldom used except when task instructions required attachments to be included.

The majority of courses in the BA, except for those which are part of the University's core curriculum for all undergraduate students, are conducted in English. For nearly all enrolled students this is a second language, although as an entry requirement all students are required to have a certified upper intermediate level (B2, according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), meaning that communicating effectively in the language should not be problematic. Nonetheless, this is an aspect which needs to be taken into account when considering identity portrayal through discourse, as subtleties of language may be overlooked or unknown.

### ***Participants***

Ten student-teachers were invited to participate, those being all of the enrolled students who began their studies in either 2010 or 2011 and were expected to be working on their BA dissertations at the time the research data was to be collected. The sample was limited to those students with 2010 and 2011 matriculations so that they could be tracked with some continuity in the forum

discussions. From the ten student-teachers contacted, eight responded and agreed to participate.

The selected participants were initially contacted via email, inviting them to take part in the research and informing them of what this would involve. They were informed that were they to accept, all data collected would be made anonymous and they could choose to withdraw from the study at any time. All eight student-teachers who agreed to participate completed a participant consent form which they scanned and returned to the researcher by email.

### ***Data Collection***

Due to the complexities of social phenomena, in social research “no single method is likely to afford a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation” (Torrance, 2012, 113). In relation to the study of identities, Kanno and Stuart (2012) explain that the thoughts and behaviours of participants need to be analysed in conjunction, allowing for a more complete understanding to be reached. Addressing these assertions, this study featured two stages of data collection: the first involved the compilation of textual data from the participants’ contributions to forum discussions at different stages of the BA, while the second was comprised of individual narrative interviews conducted online with the participants.

Forum data was collected from three courses, from the first, third and fourth semesters of the BA. The data was formatted in preparation for analysis, removing contributions from students who were not participating in the study. After formatting, the forum data provided a corpus of 40,575 words from a total of 28 discussions. All data was analysed during the first step of analysis, while in subsequent steps excerpts were chosen according to their relevance to the study.

Following the analysis of the forum data, four participants took part in narrative interviews, conducted via Skype and, in one case, Google Hangouts, due to geographical spread of participants and in-keeping with the online nature of the BA. Unlike semi-structured interviews, which are commonly used

in qualitative research and have been used in many studies into student-teacher identities (Izadinia, 2013), narrative interviews allow participants to share their experiences in their own words with minimal intervention from the interviewer. In narrative interviews, stories are told using lexicons which are specific to certain social groups, meaning that they feature discursal markers of identity (Bauer, 1996).

### ***Data Analysis***

A number of approaches to discourse analysis were used to analyse the data collected in this study, each effectively providing a different layer. Gee (2011b) suggests that to analyse identities in texts, it is necessary to

...ask what socially recognizable identity or identities the speaker is trying to enact or get others to recognize. Ask also how the speaker's language treats other people's identities, what sorts of identities the speaker recognizes for others in relationship to his or her own. Ask, too, how the speaker is positioning others, what identities the speaker is "inviting" them to take u (110).

The analysis in this study, which was divided into four steps (see Table 1), drew upon these questions as a general guide.

Steps 1 to 3 of the analysis procedure focused on the discourses present in the forum data. During the first step, the texts from the forum discussions were read and annotated, with a view of establishing initial identity categories. The second step focused on positioning, that is the creation of identity positions, both of the writer or speaker and others (in this case including peers, facilitators and the participants' own students), within texts (Gee, 2011a). This was carried out through an analysis of pronouns and other identifiers referring to self or others, also known as person deixis (Hidalgo-Downing & Núñez-Perucha, 2013). Pronominal choices, whether intentional or not, have an effect on how a reader perceives the writer and are therefore central to the construction of identity. The third step drew on appraisal theory, a branch of Systemic Functional Linguistics. Appraisal theory "is concerned with how



writers/speakers construe for themselves particular authorial identities or personae, with how they align or disalign themselves with actual or potential respondents, and with how they construct for their texts an intended or ideal audience” (Martin & White, 2005, 1).

**Table 1.** Steps of data analysis

<b>Steps within analysis process</b>	<b>Type of analysis</b>	<b>Initial checklists or frameworks for analysis</b>
Step 1	Reading and annotating (Dey, 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What socially recognizable identities are being enacted?</li> <li>• How are the identities of others treated in relation to the writer’s?</li> <li>• What identities does the writer attribute to others? (based on Gee, 2011b)</li> </ul>
Step 2	Deixis (Hidalgo Downing & Núñez Perucha, 2013)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Distance from deictic centre</li> <li>• Inclusivity vs. exclusivity</li> </ul>
Step 3	Appraisal of self and teaching-related issues (White, 2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Attitude</li> <li>• Engagement</li> <li>• Graduation</li> </ul>
Step 4	Creating categories (Dey, 1993)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General teacher</li> <li>• Novice teacher</li> <li>• Experienced teacher</li> <li>• Professional teacher</li> <li>• Member of a teaching community</li> <li>• General student</li> <li>• Student of the BA</li> <li>• ‘Good’ student</li> <li>• Member of a student community</li> <li>• Person</li> </ul> <p>(Categories developed in Step 1)</p>

Having analysed the texts from the forum discussions at both macro and micro levels, the fourth and final step of the analysis sought to incorporate the interview data in order to define a final set of categories and establish the findings.

## **Findings**

Through the layering of different discourse analysis approaches, it was possible to develop a detailed understanding of how the participants used language to express identities and how these developed over the course of their studies. Furthermore, the use of discourse devices to create a sense of community within the group of learners was made evident. From the data analysis, a total of fourteen sub-categories were developed, grouped within three main categories: Teacher, Student and Other. All names used in the findings reported below are pseudonyms.

### ***Student identities***

As would be expected in any learning environment, there was a strong presence of student identities. Participants frequently referred to themselves in relation to specific course tasks, or the BA programme as a whole, thereby positioning themselves as active students:

- Here **I answer the questions** in this first comment. (Magda, S1, F1)
- I am constantly wondering on why **I** decided to **study this bachelor's degree** when I worry so much about evaluations. (Alejandra, S3, F1)

As well as portraying themselves as students of the BA, this was an identity frequently ascribed to others:

- My experiences in these forums are going to be different than **my classmates**. (Alejandra, S1, F1)
- Hello **emates** (Fernando, S3, F6)

- As **my e-mates** mentioned, our voice is one of our most valuable tools in our every day work (Manuel, S4, F5)

A further aspect of discourse which served to strengthen the student identity in the forum participations was the distinction between the participants and the facilitator (often referred to as "Teacher", as is common in TEFL contexts in Mexico):

- **Your comments** and my classmates´ help us to learn a lot. (Karen, S1, F17)
- Yes **teacher!**... thank you. (Magda, S1, F17)
- Hello [**teacher's name**] and peers, (Carolina, S4, F5)

### ***Community building***

Discourse related to student identities served to create unity and a bond in the group: it was through this means that a sense of community was developed. A clear indicator of this is the use of **we** to refer to the student cohort, and the sense of belonging tended to be enhanced in forums at the beginning and end of semesters:

- Hi **everybody**, It feels **really good** to be back. It is **always nice** to read **all your** posts. (Daniel, S3, F1)
- It was **nice** sharing experiences with **all of you**. Wish **you all** the best! (Alejandra, S4, F5)

The sense of community was enhanced through positive appreciation of the contributions by other members of the group:

- You are **right**, the level we are teaching or on what the curriculum is focused is **very important**. (Karen, S1, F1)
- I **totally agree** with you! It is **so true** that we are **always** adapting the materials that we have because our groups are different (Alejandra, S1, F15)

The feeling of contributions being valued by others in the group was recognised during some of the interviews:

*I think in general, what was important was the way that they [peers] would make comments on what I commented on the foros [forums] and that they actually, that I was being taken into account. (Laura)*

*Without realizing I was changing this attitude ... of being silent and not participating plus I was contributing. The little or more I knew or found was being taken into account (or that's what I think). (Manuel)*

These comments suggest that the positive appreciation of discussion posts served to encourage participation, and would seem to reflect Lomicka and Lord's (2007) observation that agreement is a frequent indicator of strong social presence and group cohesion.

### ***Teacher identities***

While the student identities were present in forum discussions at all stages of the BA, and had an important role in social presence, the most prominent identities found in the data were those of teachers. In some ways surprisingly, and in contrast with Irwin and Hramiak's (2010) findings, the participants in this study identified as teachers from the beginning of their studies. Teacher identities were often invoked in first-person deictics, and self-labelling was used to strengthen them:

- **And as [a] teacher** it provides **me** [with] a general idea of the what to do next. (Karen, S1, F17)
- **As a teacher I** always tell my students to maintain a positive attitude (Alejandra, S3, F1)

Teacher identities were also articulated through demonstrations of ownership relating to the profession:

- the main purpose of **my class** is to motivate **my students** (Alejandra, S1, F1)
- All students from **my school** must take a diagnostic test (Karen, S1, F17)
- even when **my groups** have a small amount of students, it still keeps me very busy (Magda, S3, F6)

Reflecting findings by Delahunty (2012), these expressions indicate a strong sense of belonging within the teaching profession.

In addition to the individual teacher identities presented in the forums, there were also many examples of teachers being referred to collectively. One collective teacher identity that featured in forums, particularly in early semesters, was that of a group of teaching colleagues. This identity locates the participants as a member of a teaching community in a very specific work context:

- **we** had to prepare the exams, for this, **we** had to choose the material for the four skills (Magda, S1, F1)
- **We** use achievement tests at the end of a course to see how well they have learnt (Daniel, S1, F17)

This association with work colleagues in the earlier stages of the BA can be interpreted as a reflection of the participants' understanding of teaching at this point, which was based primarily on their own lived experiences.

While the previously described collective teacher identity was exclusive, in that it distanced the individual participant from their peers in the online BA, an inclusive collective teacher identity was also observed in discussions in the later semesters of the programme:

- **we** should develop **our** students ability to remember what they learnt forever! (Magda, S3, F1)
- **Us teachers** need a voice which projects well and appropriately in all these circumstances (Fernando, S4, F5)

This move towards portraying teachers as an inclusive collective suggest a sense of belonging to a wider teaching community, beyond that of the participants' immediate workplace: in other words, they may have established a more complete professional identity.

### ***Other identities***

Although not the focus of this study, there were some Nature and Affiliation identities (Gee, 2000) present within the forum data, most notably those of parent and film/television viewer. While the expression of these identities may not contribute directly to the development of teacher identities, they may have a positive role in learning. In Delahunty's (2012) study, the traveller identity played an important role in creating cohesion among her participants. It should also be remembered that these identities are not mutually exclusive from student and teacher identities. Rather, they are among the participants' multiple identities and are able to contribute perspectives which could be useful to their development as teachers.

### ***Task instructions***

As has been illustrated, the participants in this study portrayed multiple identities in the forum discussions. It was not uncommon to find several identities within a single post, or even a single sentence. However, it was clear that the discussion topics set within the course materials largely determined which identities were predominant in any single forum. A clear example of this was found in a discussion in which the student-teachers were asked to reflect on their experiences and feelings when taking tests or exams, invoking student identities, specifically that of a test-taker:

- Since **I** discover that **I**´m a kinesthetic learner, preparing for a test it´s easier. (Carolina)
- **We** naturally tend to feel this way or the other when taking a test, I think that's part of **our** nature (Daniel)

Alternative instructions for the activity, such as discussing how the participants thought their students feel when taking tests, would have led to alternative identities being portrayed.

## **Conclusions**

The findings from this study help to shed light on discourse devices which contribute towards identity portrayal in text-based VLEs. The aim of the programme featured in this study is to develop professional identities as teachers, an aspect which was, to some extent, revealed through the discourse analysis. Nonetheless, the findings also illustrate the importance of the portrayal of other identities, particularly student identities, in creating a sense of social presence, an aspect deemed as necessary for effective learning to occur in VLEs. Furthermore, although identities are conveyed through the discourse choices of the participants, the findings illustrate the impact of learning task instructions on the identities invoked.

Taking these findings into account, educators working in VLEs should have an awareness of the roles of different identities in the learning process, allowing opportunities for multiple identities to be projected by learners. Developing task instructions which encourage appropriate identities to be developed is, therefore, paramount. Furthermore, there may be a need to draw learners' attention to the role of discourse in the creation of online identities and social presence.

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