

Intergroup dynamics in site-based distance courses: Inclusion, alienation, and the hierarchy of presence

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This paper, based on the results of a qualitative study of twenty-seven adults, examines group interactions in site-based postsecondary courses delivered through videoconferencing or audioconferencing. The nature of the social and educational environment in small sites impacted the learning experience. Age, gender, group cohesion and cultural identity were found to affect inclusion of class members. Presence of the instructor, of other learners in a site or of peers in the community was associated with enhanced learning. Intergroup relations were marked by the hierarchy of presence as differences between the large group in front of the instructor and distant sites divide the group into sections of unequal power.

The majority of recent writings on group interactions in the ODL field focus on online courses. The past fifteen years have seen a plethora of studies on group collaborative learning in web-based environments (Deaudelin & Nault, 2003). Empirical studies have demonstrated that group processes online can match those found in face-to-face classes (McDonald & Gibson, 1998) and that shared group identity can be identified (Job-Sluder & Barab, 2004). Others have shown that communities of learners can be developed in web-based courses if teaching strategies are put in place to promote group-based learning, if cognitive, social and teaching presence are ensured (Kling & Courtwright, 2004; Garrison & Anderson, 2003), and if efforts are made to reduce the transactional distance between learners and instructor by fostering interaction (Moore, 1993).

However, the nature of group interactions in synchronous courses offered over diverse geographic locations through conferencing technologies is less well known. 'Place-shifted' courses (Simonson et al., 2003) using videoconferencing or audioconferencing present an interesting configuration of dispersed sites where students gather in groups around monitors, cameras and microphones. In many contexts, as is the case of the adults involved in this study, sites are composed of very few learners. The dispersed multipoint classroom is thus composed of several small groups, with some locations having a single learner at home or in a site.

The relatively few studies concerning the social and educational environment in small sites paint a partial picture of this environment. Biner et al. (1997) found that learners in sites with fewer students were more satisfied and more likely to exceed prior performance than those in larger sites. The authors surmise that small sites may provide a socially non-intimidating environment conducive to positive feelings among students. Learning and critical thinking can occur across sites, through higher-order discussions (Burke, Lundin, & Daunt, 1997; Anderson & Garrison, 1995). Eye contact across sites in videoconferenced courses facilitates conceptual understanding and problem-solving (Joiner et al., 2002). Communities of learners can be created, but specific teaching strategies must be put in place for this to occur (Simonson et al., 2003; Anderson & Garrison, 1995). Students can interact, collaborate across sites and give evidence of higher-order thinking in audioconferenced courses when teaching is designed to promote social and cognitive interaction among learners (McLoughlin & Oliver, 1998). However, Swartz and Biggs (1999) noted that, because ordinary class behaviour was modified, talk and turn-taking in remote sites required special give and take by learners as well as strong teaching skills.

The study described in this paper was conducted in the context of the French-speaking minority of Ontario which, at approximately one-half million, makes up less than 5 per cent of this Canadian province's total population. The characteristics of this cultural group make it a linguistic minority according to Allardt's (1992) criteria: its members speak a language different from the mainstream, share a common history, hold distinct rights concerning education, and have complex forms of social organisation. Because of its geodemographic features, that is, small numbers of learners scattered across a large territory, this population has limited access to postsecondary education. Distance education is often the only means available for taking courses in one's language. Most of the postsecondary courses for French speakers are delivered synchronously, through compressed videoconferencing or audioconferencing (Faille & Umbriaco, 1999). In small towns, sites are often located in the French-language school or community centre. At the time of the study, no online courses were available and, even now, are offered by few institutions.

The study adopted an interpretative approach to explore group learning, social relations and cultural identity in postsecondary distance courses. A theoretical framework was conceptualised by combining three models. Cranton's taxonomy of group learning (1996), based on Habermas' three domains of knowledge, distinguishes between *cooperative* learning, which provides access to instrumental knowledge through the exchange of information and expertise, *collaborative* learning, through which learners together construct an understanding of self and the social world, and *transformative* learning, in which critical examination of assumptions leads to emancipatory knowledge. Secondly, sociopsychological theory of small-group interactions provided characteristics of an 'optimal' group (Jaques, 1984; St-Arnaud, 1980), which served as criteria for analyzing social and affective relationships within site and class groups: pursuit of similar goals, small size, reciprocal influence, collective perception of group's existence, interdependence between members, sufficient time for development of internal structures, and desire to remain in the group and contribute to it. These two models were combined with Breton's (1994) typology of minority-language adults' identification to a sociocultural community: a *utilitarian* identification, in which the individual values the advantages of a second language over cultural dimensions, an identification based on *interdependence* and solidarity with the community, or a *symbolic* relation in which the individual identifies with the same values and heritage as the cultural group.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted by telephone with 27 adults enrolled in distance courses in four universities and community colleges. Participants were between 20 and 54 years old. The profile of participants is similar to the distribution of French-speaking learners in postsecondary distance courses in Ontario: approximately two-thirds were women (n=16); more were enrolled in community colleges (n=15) than in university (n=12); the majority were in courses delivered through compressed videoconferencing (n=19). The participants had varied experience with 163 distance courses, from limited (one course, n=7) to very great (between 7 and 20 courses, n=11). Their perceptions, based on one recent distance course, represented 17 different courses in 15 different graduate or undergraduate programs. Most courses were made up of five or six sites, and seven out of the 27 participants were alone, either at home or in a site.

The present paper focuses on the results related to the relationships between the various groups in distributed synchronous classrooms. Intergroup dynamics become evident in the degree of porosity of boundaries around each site. The groups in the study, including site groups and single-learner sites, were characterised by either watertight or porous boundaries, separating or including individuals and entire sites. The adult learners' perceptions of relations between groups within and across sites varied considerably. Examples of both inclusion and alienation were noted, and the power of presence emerged as a major theme.

Inclusive boundaries

Age, gender, cultural identity, personality and group cohesion affected inclusion of class members across sites. In these cases, the group's boundaries are porous and the dispersed class functions as a whole. Figure 1 illustrates the types of relationships established in the northern region.

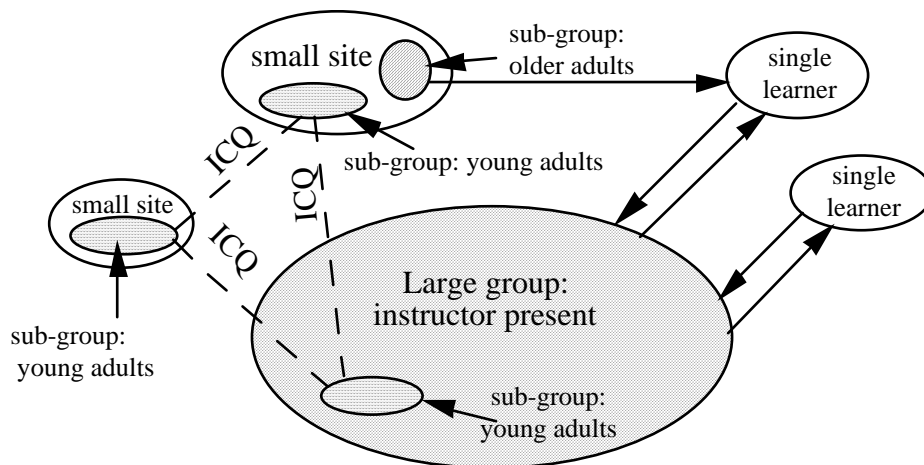


Figure 1 Inclusive relationships between sites

Subgroups of younger adults communicated during class time by Internet chat with same-age peers in other sites, using ICQ. They would often travel 20 to 60 miles to take the class in other sites, mostly for social purposes. Older adults in their forties and fifties connected for team-work or stayed in contact after class, through the telephone bridge, to help each other with homework.

Women created what one participant called 'spaces of complicity' across distances. Some female students in a larger site insisted that a face-to-face session be created in order to physically meet two women in remote sites and include them in the class group. There were two reported cases of dyads made up of women who lived far away from each other, each alone in her site, who worked as learning partners and kept in touch long after the course was finished. Older men also created links across sites, but these relationships were viewed in pragmatic terms. Most of the men considered others as colleagues who helped with assignments whereas the women and two men of African origin expressed the relationship in terms of affection, connection and friendship. A young woman related how her female peers became a group of friends which created its own learning spaces. The climate of confidence and intimacy established inside and outside the class increased their self-esteem, success and retention rates. Female study participants expressed sympathy and sometimes empathy for remote learners who 'are to be admired for their efforts and success despite the obstacles and disadvantages of being far from the prof'. Many groups thus exhibited the majority of the characteristics of well-functioning small groups (Jaques, 1984).

At times, the common cultural background of the minority-language adults facilitated relationships across locations. Almost half the study participants (n=13) manifested a symbolic identification with the cultural community according to Breton's typology (1994), compared to an instrumental identification. Participation in the distance course increased this sense of identity in a third of the adults (n=9), who stated that it helped them feel they belonged to a larger community of French speakers. These connections contributed to breaking the isolation felt by minority-language adults dispersed in a 'sea of English' and favoured openness to others' views. Collaborative learning (Cranton, 1996) was associated with new perspectives acquired during discussions across sites. Identification to a common cultural community thus facilitated learning and social relationships despite age differences, racial origins, and large distances.

The characteristics of the seven learners in the study who were alone seemed to influence whether or not they were accepted by their peers as group members. Personality, humour, and familiarity were associated with inclusion. A learner in a small community was 'adopted' by class members 'because she was open and friendly and laughed a lot'. Three participants identified their sense of humour as an important quality while others felt they were recognised and accepted after taking several courses with the same group.

The presence or absence of the instructor in a site is a situation peculiar to distance courses delivered through conferencing technologies. Although the size of sites varies, in this study as in other contexts the largest group is usually found in the site in which the instructor is present.

The inclusiveness of this group's boundaries seems to depend on its degree of solidarity, on whether its members see the entire class as an entity. Some cohesive groups in the instructor-led site served as a strong base, described by a participant as the 'mother-atom' around which isolated learners orbit as 'satellites'. One example in an audioconferenced course illustrates the inclusive actions of a learner in the larger site. So that remote learners could understand, this person made a running commentary of the instructor's gestures and drawings on the board, thereby compensating for the instructor's alienating behaviour. Thus, study results provide evidence that some large groups with permeable boundaries welcome remote learners.

Alienation of distance learners

The results provided more examples of exclusion of remote learners than of inclusion. Barriers to the participation of learners in remote sites were raised by both instructors and peers. Participants spoke of instructors who never asked them questions, ignored them during discussion activities, or remembered them a few minutes before class was over. In one extreme case, just a few minutes after class began, the instructor turned off the microphones in order to exclude learners who were not in the same site and stated he would 'deal with them' individually 'after the class'. Thus, even though the study did not explore instructor-learner interactions, the results pointed to the instructor's responsibility in reducing pedagogical distance (Moore, 1993).

Most often, it is the learners in the instructor-led site who exhibit alienating behaviours. In synchronous distance courses, where audio tends to create more problems than video (Simonson et al., 2003), sound is used to exclude learners from both the social and the cognitive environment. Since push-to-talk microphones are the norm in the classrooms involved in this study, students shut out others simply by not pressing the microphone button when interacting in class or during breaks. Remote learners felt left out when they could hear everyone in class laughing about a comment that was inaudible to them. Often, they were not addressed by others during discussions and their answers were not taken up by learners in the larger site. Most considered it almost impossible to do teamwork at a distance since no time was allotted on the multipoint bridge for communication between sites outside class hours. Some isolated learners (n=3) stated that they often felt alone, marginalised and alienated. These barriers to communication reflect the intensity of the exclusion felt by some learners as well as the reduced opportunities for collaborative learning or negotiation of meaning.

Learners in the same site as the instructor felt other learners were in a distance course but did not see themselves in this way (n=5). Many (=7) viewed remote learners negatively: they 'are not interested', 'do not participate', 'are inattentive', 'do not answer', 'lack respect for others', 'are afraid to reveal their personal life', 'do not learn as rapidly', 'slow down the course' or 'waste everyone's time' when they ask questions, and 'have another way of thinking' because they are in a different town. The words used to describe remote learners were vague or incorrect or, most often, indicated that they were considered 'them', 'the other', that is, alien. Only one person used the neutral term 'distance learners'. Table 1 lists the expressions used by learners in the same site as the instructor to describe their classmates in other sites.

Sometimes the boundaries are established by the remote learners themselves. Figure 2 presents the two sides to intergroup relations in a videoconferenced course.

In the larger urban site, about half the adults feel that because videoconferencing allows all class members to see the instructor and each other, remote learners have equal status and there is reciprocity between the sites. This welcoming openness is not perceived as such by the three women in the town 60 miles away. They perceive an impenetrable wall between their site and the larger one. It is difficult to determine if the remote learners have not themselves erected this wall by not creating links to other learners outside their circle. The cohesiveness of their small group in relation to learning (a learner in the larger site notes that 'one person's answer reflected the thought of all three'), to friendship ('they come in together, laughing, and seem to have a good time together') and to sociocultural connections (they grew up in the same small town) thus appears to effect a schism, dividing the class into two groups whose members do not communicate.

Table 1 Terms used by learners at the instructor-led site to describe remote learners

Vague or incorrect terms	Outside, peripheral	At the other extremity	The other
- 'other colleges' 'other campuses' 'the other university' (when they are actually in the same class) 'the girls in Chatham' (does not know their name, in a cohort of 11, and combines the names of two cities, Chatham and Welland)	- 'outside' 'who come from elsewhere' 'outside students' 'those over there'	- 'at the other end' 'on the other side' 'from the other side'	- 'us, here with the instructor' vs. 'the others, in teleconference' 'us, the gang' vs. 'them' 'it's two independent groups' 'they're not in the group' - 'they're like in a class that's apart from ours'

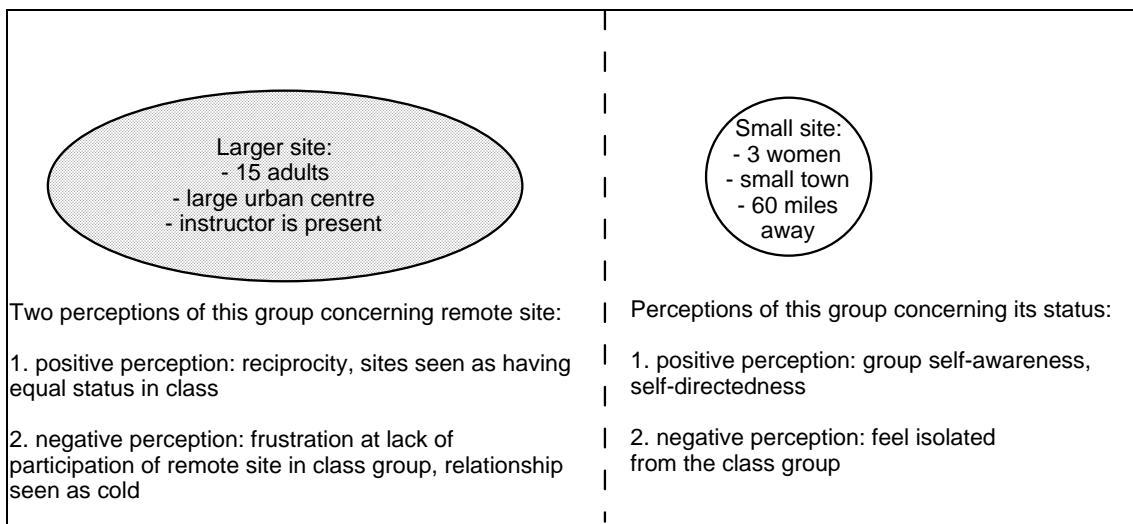


Figure 2 Contrasting perceptions of intergroup relations in two sites

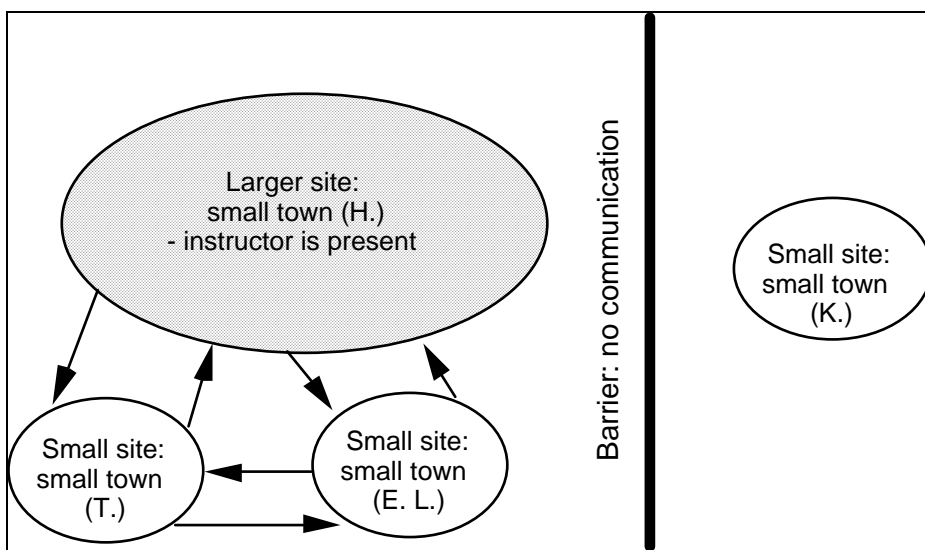


Figure 3 Exclusion of a site for sociocultural reasons

Differences in cultural identification also created barriers which lead to the exclusion of learners in certain towns. Figure 3 charts the relationships between sites in a multipoint course.

The statements of several study participants (n=5) revealed the systematic exclusion of one particular site (K.). The reasons provided were that inhabitants of that town had a 'different mentality' or 'attitude' towards their identity as members of the larger cultural community. They were perceived as being less committed to the French culture and language as others. Geographic distance has nothing to do with this alienation of a specific site.

The hierarchy of presence

Generally, study results indicated that presence, in its many forms, is associated with a stronger learning experience. When asked who contributed most to their learning in the distance courses, participants overwhelmingly noted the instructor and the people who were physically closest to them. Depending on the site configuration and the learner's situation, however, presence took on different meanings. Learners in larger sites turned to their classmates within the same location for help with understanding, for a stimulating learning environment, for comfortable social relations which fostered the exchange of ideas and, in some cases, for a strong community to which they identified. Learners in the smaller remote sites did the same; physical presence in the site not only motivated adults to engage in learning but it also broke the isolation of distance learners. Single learners, on the other hand, created their own learning group: as adults with existing professional relations, they found people in the community who could help, support or motivate them.

Presence could be achieved in various ways. For a few learners (n=3), seeing others through videoconferencing or receiving the instructor's visit to the community was sufficient to establish presence. For most participants, presence means contiguity. Some insisted that program administrators organise face-to-face meetings. Lone learners (n=3) chose to attend summer institutes. Institutional presence (Simonson et al., 2003) also played a role. Single learners who took courses in a campus-based site rather than at home had more opportunity to establish social networks, even though they were alone in a room for their particular distance course.

When the focus moves from the individual learner to intergroup dynamics, it becomes clear that asymmetrical relations between sites limited participation and created unequal learning situations. The instructor's presence in the larger site coloured the learners' perception of other class members as well as their behaviour towards them. Learners in the instructor-based site often exerted their power by ignoring 'outsiders'. For the 14 study participants in the same site as the instructor, the 'prof is here with us'; he or she is 'our prof'. These words underline both the proximity of the instructor and the perception by these learners that they alone constitute the class group, the 'we'. In contrast, learners in remote sites described the instructor as 'far', 'at the other end', 'not there', 'absent', 'elsewhere', 'distant', or 'outside'.

The application of Cranton's (1996) typology of learning in groups emphasizes the implications of these unequal situations. Most learning for adults in remote sites was instrumental, whereas instances of collaborative and even transformative learning occurred in the larger instructor-led sites. The only exception was that of a very cohesive multicultural group in a cohort-based program. Partial results seem to indicate that small-group work contributed to cohesion and deeper learning. Since remote learners were excluded from groupwork, they were denied access to enhanced learning opportunities.

Thus in the synchronous courses studied, the greater the presence, the stronger the learning experience, or the closer you are physically, the more influence that person has on your learning.

Discussion

In distance courses, the issue of presence is rather like the elephant in the bed, taking up a great deal of space but seldom acknowledged. Presence constitutes the standard of the ideal learning situation for every participant in this study. While the results illustrate how synchronous site-based courses can reproduce many social and educational characteristics of face-to-face classes, the study, like Swartz and Biggs' (1999) research, raises the question of the relative

importance of physical presence. It also confirms Simonson et al.'s (2003) argument that synchronous distance courses require a reconsideration of classroom dynamics.

Physical presence primarily serves a pragmatic function. The importance given to same-site learners may be partially attributed to difficulties with audio quality in both videoconferenced and audioconferenced delivery. Many participants complained of 'imperfect microphones' and of the noise created by sidetalk or by younger adults chatting on their laptops. Their most common reason for preferring physical presence was to ask their peers to repeat words they had not understood. Another noted advantage was receiving explanations without having to interrupt the instructor. This reluctance to interrupt was strongly associated with concerns about time, as participants were acutely aware of the limited time allotted on the bridge.

In group-based distance courses, planning for interactivity is essential in order to reduce the transactional distance between learners and instructors (Moore, 1993) and to foster collaborative, interdependent learning relationships among class members. It is a common pitfall of instructors to focus on only one site during the complex process of managing the class and operating technology. Instructors must plan activities that build a supportive social environment for all learners (Simonson et al., 2003). However, it is challenging for instructors to overcome the difficulties encountered when watertight groups with rigid boundaries repel the remote learner both on a psychological and a social level. This social and psychological distance pushes individuals and sites even further toward the periphery, consigning them to a marginal position. The centrality of the social and emotional dimensions of group learning was an important result of our study. Instructors must strive to become aware of the peripheral status and unequal power of certain sites. As previous studies had noted, it is essential that they develop strategies to overcome the frustration and alienation of some learners, and give them an equal voice in the larger group (Simonson et al., 2003).

Intergroup relations between sites are peculiar to synchronous oral distance courses, and the examination of boundaries between sites can contribute to an understanding of group dynamics in both ODL and adult education. As the results of this study bear out, site-based courses hold an ambiguous position between the advantages of presence and the ramifications of separation by space experienced by a part of the distance class. The physical and interpersonal distance between sites amplifies differences in status and creates additional obstacles to participation than are found in either face-to-face or online courses. These differences in status underline an aspect of group dynamics that is seldom alluded to in adult education. Since the 1970s, adult educators have presented groups as having natural and positive tendencies towards self-direction (Foley, 1992). They are thus seldom seen as having the kind of negative impact felt by the learners in remote site-groups in this study.

However, the results also beg the question of whether or not boundaries can ever be totally broken down. There will perhaps always be an 'us' and a 'them' in intergroup relations. Cohesive groups with a strong self-identity or group ethos necessarily set up boundaries. It is true that instructors should aim at reducing making the entire class group cohesive. Nevertheless, strong attachment to a local community, anchored in social relations in the local site, may also mean that other communities are excluded from the circle. A further question for exploration would be: should all boundaries between groups be broken down? The binary inclusion/exclusion opposition may need to be replaced by attention to a learner's attachment to a particular group and the dispersed classroom's capacity to foster and maintain social and learning relationships.

Conclusion

The consensus around distance education's capacity to provide access has almost become a cliché of the ODL field. Synchronous distance courses delivered through conferencing technologies can facilitate access to postsecondary programs for minority-language learners and break down barriers to education. Inclusive intersite relations create links between dispersed learners which enhance learning. However, many boundaries remain, especially those around the group in which the instructor is present. Dealing with the issues associated

with the separation of the instructor and some of the students may redefine the hierarchy of presence and open breaches in site boundaries.

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