Chapter II
The Emergence of Social Presence in Learning Communities

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ABSTRACT

The discussions presented herein emerged from two empirical studies in progress: “Online Learning Communities in the Realm of Complexity” and “The Complexity of Learning Environments” in the Graduate Program in Applied Linguistics at Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais, Brazil. One of the major pillars of both studies centers around Complexity Theory. Initially arising from the natural sciences, Complexity Theory has been gaining ground in the comprehension of human and social sciences. This chapter presents some ideas regarding the role of social presence in both blended and online learning environments, in line with the Community of Inquiry Framework (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2000). Moreover, the authors hope to contribute to a better understanding of patterns that emerge from social interactions as well as of the ideas embedded in learning communities as complex systems.

INTRODUCTION

The Community of Inquiry, as reported by Garrison et al. (2000) and Rourke, Anderson, Garrison, and Archer (2004), who provide a detailed report of social presence, sets the stage for this chapter to discuss the emergence of social presence in blended and online learning communities in asynchronous medium.

A great number of studies dedicated to the investigation of social presence, in the terms of the Community of Inquiry, focused mainly
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on quantitative methodology to interpret social expressions in a qualitative manner (Heckman & Annabi, 2002; Rourke & Anderson, 2002; Rourke et al., 2004). Considering these discussions, our chapter presents a complementary contribution that aims to analyze, in the light of complexity, the content of some messages exchanged in blended and online learning communities. By qualitatively analyzing the manifestation of social presence in this setting, we attempt to show possible patterns that may arise.

COMPLEXITY AND APPLIED LINGUISTICS: TRANSDISCIPLINARY DIALOOGS

At first glance, complexity is a phenomenon that encompasses a great quantity of interactions and interference among its agents. For Morin (1990), complexity effectively includes the interweaving of events, actions, interactions, retroactions, determinations, and random events that constitute our world, full of phenomena.

Complexity has its place in science due to research that has attempted to explain questions which challenge all conventional categories (Waldrop, 1992). Davis and Sumara (2006, p. ix) argue that “complexity thinking has captured the attention of many researchers whose studies reach across traditional boundaries.” Examples of phenomena under investigation in the education arena include:

- How do social collectives work? The assumption that the actions and potentialities of social groups are sums of individual capacities has been challenged as it is becoming more evident that collectives can exceed the summed capacity of their members. What might this mean for classrooms, school boards, communities, and so on?
- What is the role of emergent technologies in shaping personalities and possibilities?

Children are able to integrate the latest technologies into their existences. What might this mean for formal education, in terms of the pragmatic activity and with regard to common understandings of the purposes of schooling?

In this direction, Complexity Theory in its transdisciplinary nature can assist in better understanding the events that take place in blended and online learning environments.

A complex system is dynamic, non-linear, open, and presents emergent properties. Moreover, this type of system is capable of adapting, which leads to self-organization, and ultimately to the emergence of new patterns and behaviors (Holland, 1997). An adaptive complex system is made up of agents who interact dynamically and adapt with one another as well as with the environment, as they seek mutual accommodation to optimize the benefits that will ensure their survival.

An ever-increasing number of articles over the past years have sought to analyze the second language acquisition process, as well as the language learning classroom in general, in the light of chaos and complexity theories (Cameron, 1999, 2004; Larsen-Freeman, 1997, 2000, 2002, 2006; Paiva, 2002, 2005a, 2006a, 2006b; Parreiras, 2005).

Although other works had already reflected on the implications of chaos and complexity on teaching and language learning (Bowers, 1990; Connor-Linton, 1995; Lewis, 1993; Van Lier, 1996), it was Larsen-Freeman (1997) who brought these theories to the forefront of Applied Linguistics.

In her article, Larsen-Freeman (1997) draws attention to the many similarities between complex systems found in nature and second language acquisition. One of the implications of this perspective, she writes, is that it discourages reductionist explanations of teaching events and language learning. In discussing issues relative to inter-language, individual differences, and the effects of instruction, Larsen-Freeman (1997)