



Building Intersubjectivity in Online Learning: Pupils' and University Students' Perception of Teachers' Social Presence in Technology-Mediated Teaching and Learning Processes

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Abstract

Jaan Valsiner has been pivotal in my research endeavor. His contributions to the educational field are enormous. He has invited researchers to focus on the individual and the context from an interdisciplinary perspective leading to inspiring ideas that can materialize in novel ways. As an advocate of interdisciplinarity, he has gathered researchers and practitioners together in the Kitchen research group. This weekly innovative global online meeting sees attendees sharing knowledge and experience, thus expanding research borders and adding a global perspective to the presenters' research. Kitchen Seminar is an academic activity born in a university kitchen and evolved into a symbolic online space where novel and experienced researchers can feel at home and free to discuss ideas. When asked to contribute to this issue, I aimed to write a pilot study in the Kitchen fashion, a paper that can trigger debate and discussion and be enriched by different perspectives. In this piece, I will attempt to explore how two subjects, a schoolgirl and a university student from Argentina, perceived their teachers' social presence during the switch to emergency remote learning and teaching during the 2020s global health crises from cultural psychology of semiotic mediation perspective. When the usual school practice was suspended, and the screen became a ubiquitous school, the relationship between students and teachers turned into a technology-mediated one. After a brief theoretical discussion, the analysis of the subjects' narratives can hopefully offer a glimpse of the ways intersubjectivity operated in remote teaching and learning during the period under analysis. I hope many researchers will provide insightful comments that will enrich this work following the Kitchen manners.

Keywords Online learning-teaching · Intersubjectivity · Affect

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Excerpt

Miltenburg and Singer refer to the therapist as a “more experienced social other.” Their empirical evidence proves the contrary – the therapists are actually the less experienced social others, since their access to the psychological world of the clients can never be as complete as that of the clients themselves. Therapists work under always limited access to the phenomena (determined by the clients’ goals, trust in the “social other,” and strategies of externalization). In this sense, there is no way in which therapists’ experience can surpass that of their clients. Just the contrary – what makes the therapist potentially helpful (for the client) is precisely his or her marked distancing from the client, united with the interpersonal construction of a field of intersubjective feeling between therapist and client. The latter makes it possible to utilize the former in suggesting new directions for psychological tool construction. Intersubjectivity creates the unifying background field for negotiation of different positions of the therapist (who know little of the client) and of the client (who knows more, yet may not reveal it), in their interaction... (Valsiner, 1999).

Introduction

When I first read this excerpt, I immediately replaced the word therapist with the word teacher in my mind. At that time, I was pursuing a master’s degree at Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales in Buenos Aires, Argentina, and taking my first steps in cultural psychology. Ph.D. Jaan Valsiner was invited to deliver a course, and I was asked to interpret his 3-day seminar consecutively on the spur of the moment. Consecutive interpretation meant that Jaan would say short chunks of text, and I would translate his words into Spanish. I thought I could not do it, but he gave me a reassurance gaze. The endeavor was challenging. It meant working with a scientist I just met the same day the course started during three long working-studying days, studying before and after the 8-h session and trying to understand an area of knowledge that I had never explored before. In my dual role as a translator and a postgraduate student, I needed to translate Jaan’s words while constructing my knowledge on the topic. As a master’s degree student, my own experience suggested that many of my classmates would also find it challenging to grasp the subject. My work should be faithful to Jaan’s words and easily understandable in Spanish. Jaan constructed an intersubjective field that enabled me to understand his lectures and the possibility of processing and externalizing it in a different language in only seconds.

Memories are social constructions that a subject built to make sense of the experience (Wagoner, 2012). Therefore, although details may vary, the recollection of this autobiographical event meant a starting point in my trajectory of experience in cultural psychology (Rosa, 2016; Rosa & Gonzalez, 2013). Since that moment, I have been reading and exploring how culture shapes human minds in different human phenomena. Reading Jaan’s work means exploring divergent ways always guided by his words “keep thinking.” As an educator and researcher, cultural psychology of semiotic mediation has furnished me with the tools to expand the research boundaries and delve into the educational phenomena.

My contribution to this journal issue is my search for an answer about how an embodied practice as intersubjectivity operates in fully online learning-teaching processes. Students

and instructors are never in the same room. Jaan's "keep thinking" led me to attempt to denaturalize the phenomenon from other angles. The short length of this article will only enable an outline that needs further consideration.

The Intersubjective Feeling Between Teachers and Students

Intersubjectivity can be seen as an innate embodied gift that some human beings have that helps them know themselves and others (Trevarthen, 2012; Bruner, 2008). Cultural learning has set human beings apart (Trevarthen, 2004). Bruner considers that some human beings are born with the innate gift of intersubjectivity (Bruner, 2008). A mutual awareness (Trevarthen, 2005) or a shared space (Bruner, 1998) guides the possibility of perceiving the Other. Marková (2003) states the existence of similar mechanisms for knowing oneself and knowing the Other. The mere existence of Other can trigger sympathy or antagonism, but their presence is always admitted (Trevarthen, 2005). The dyad I-Other implies that, although it can be asymmetrical (Marková, 2003), both participants in the dyad contribute to creating a unique shared experience. The studies with infants show that either the caregiver/parent or the baby can start or end interaction of sounds, words, gestures, and gazes (Trevarthen, 2005, 2004; Bruner, 1998). Since the early moments of life, subjects have been building their knowledge by interacting with significant others. Parents'/caregivers' interaction with children embodies reciprocity. There is a mutual interplay of gaze, attunement, regular timing, and turn-taking behavior (Trevarthen, 2004). The playful moment that parents or caregivers create for children lays the foundations on which all other learnings can occur.

For Trevarthen,

....these rules of relating apply for an infant learning at home with family, in preschool, in classroom instruction through primary and secondary school, and in the university. The same principles of intersubjectivity apply. Young children learn naturally in dynamic relationships of admiration and trust. Thus, the living emotions in the teacher's voice, language, and non-verbal behaviour may be as important as the timeless facts and routine exercises of thought and skill he or she may be wanting to transmit (Trevarthen, 2004).

It is interesting to see that this quote expands the borders of intersubjective processes. Intersubjectivity is not only crucial in primary and secondary school but also in higher education. In Bruner's words, the teaching-learning process relies on enacting a transactional self that recognizes the existence of the Other through a shared language. In an embodied relationship, a semiotically constructed meaning sphere is created. In their early years, infants need to go through a disambiguation process to understand Others' perspectives (Bruner, 1998). As the child grows, they are able to separate from the Other(s), and a dual process takes place; the child enters the culture, and culture enters the child (Bruner, 2008). Language enables the creation of categories, giving rise to new realities.

Through the shared language, gestures, and gazes, teachers and students create a shared embodied culture (Bruner, 1998) within the classroom walls. As it was stated earlier, intersubjectivity does not rely exclusively on language. A recent survey among university students revealed that students considered the interplay of gaze between the instructors and students as pivotal in generating an environment conducive to learning (Di Gesú, 2021). The interplay of gaze can be seen as a sign in an embodied dialogical experience (Beraldo

et al., 2017). It connects both the students and teachers with their innate capacity and early sharing of experience with Others with their present self. It helps them project into their future professional self.

The educational institutions provide a context for teaching and learning academic¹ knowledge. Through the years, the school as a system of activity has produced specific learning. The curricula set what should be learned, when it should be learned, how it should be learned, and how it should be assessed (Terigi, 2020). These are not minor details. Presence, simultaneity, and a grading system permeate the intersubjective process. Pupils/students can decide what to reveal or hide to their teachers or classmates and when to engage or disengage from learning situations (Valsiner, 2014). On a regular school day, pupils/students can voluntarily pay attention or decide that the school topic is not attractive. They can be afraid of participating or of asking questions because their classmates can bully them. They may not want to lose face in front of the teacher. Ardoino calls this process *negativity*, i.e. the students' capacity to counteract their teachers' strategies (Ardoino, 1997). For this author, the teaching and learning process entails an intersubjective practice in which a teacher can have objectives and apply didactics to help their students learn. Yet, teachers are not alone; their students also have feelings and goals. They can also decide what they do not want to learn (Valsiner, 2014). As the therapist in the excerpt, teachers can be blind not only to what their students know but also their motives and mental states.

For Valsiner, human beings are future-oriented meaning makers. He explains the role of affect when subjects encounter newness in their environments. This unique encounter is individual and takes place in irreversible time. The need to differentiate what one feels triggers an internal semiotic process that escalates from physiological arousal to an overwhelming feeling that cannot be articulated through language. Still, it enables the person to act following two broad generalized labels "I feel bad/I feel good" (Valsiner, 2014, 126). Affect and emotions influence our response to newness. In institutional learning and teaching processes, their weight needs to be address. In an informal talk with this researcher, Liza, a young adult² reminisced:

... I hated Accountancy in secondary school. But I feared I would have to sit for a final oral exam if I failed. So, I studied hard, got the highest marks. I was good at bookkeeping for my teacher. And even helped my classmates when they did not understand. But when the school year was over, I forgot everything. I don't even know how to write a single entry on a daybook.

This woman considered herself an outstanding student with excellent grades. She does not remember any negative feelings towards the course teacher. She participated in class and helped her classmates when they did not understand a topic. Yet, her sentiments towards the discipline led to ephemeral learning and blocked any deep, lasting learning. As De Luca Piccione explains in this volume, there was a semiotic mediation process in place that enabled this woman to succeed when, as an adolescent, she encountered an object she did not like to learn (De Luca Piccione, 2021). The possibility of thinking, feeling, and acting contributed to constructing a system of relationships that helped her pass the course while keeping her agency. Following Valsiner, an escalating process took place

¹ We will use academic knowledge to refer to the knowledge constructed in any level of the educational system.

² This woman was contacted for this paper. She gave her consent to use her narrative in this article.

when encountering an object she did not like. The “I don’t like this” gave rise to “I’m doing this because I have to” and created a demolishing sign, “I won’t do this in the future” that blocked any deep lasting learning (Valsiner, 2014).

Intersubjectivity in Online Learning Environments

2020s global sanitarian crisis faced individuals with an array of objects to deal with. New safety regulations, isolation, protective garment, curfews, and lockdown periods were new to this generation. The abrupt change in the environment triggered physiological arousal. Individuals experienced mixed feelings globally studied at the time of writing this article. Educational institutions tried to respond quickly to guarantee pedagogical continuity. This overarching idea encompasses the many ways schooling has been carried out. Unpreparedness marked the abrupt switchover of the whole schooling system. It forced teachers to engage in remote teaching and learning without prior knowledge of online learning pedagogies. Many teachers did not like teaching remotely, but they had to (Di Gesú, 2021). They needed to engage in a life-creativity development process (Zittoun & Laurent, 2015). They resorted to their socially constructed pedagogical knowledge and experience and their feelings towards the novelty in the environment to later apply that knowledge to solve the new educational problem. The challenge was to recreate the intersubjective field that pervades in a brick-and-mortar classroom.

As an embodied practice, intersubjectivity sees teachers/instructors in a dialogical space with the students (Beraldo et al., 2017). This embodied relationship can be conducive to learning depending on how teacher-students and student-student sharing the same space and time relate to one another.

Sentz defines a pedagogy of online learning as a set of prescribed methods, strategies, and practices for teaching academic subjects in an online (or blended) environment. Students are in a physical location separate from the faculty member and/or other students (Sentz, 2020). Any teaching-learning process occurring in a school setting needs various tools, strategies, practices, and methodologies. However, the idea that “the site has been substituted for extension which itself had replaced emplacement” (Foucault, 1967) demands the creation of other extensions that transcend temporal and spatial borders in education (Marsico et al., 2015). The inherent heterotopia of online environments calls for reflections beyond the analysis of strategies and tools to understand intersubjectivity in this environment. (Di Gesú, 2021; Ramos et al., 2021).

Although the school has always entered a home in different ways (Pontecorvo, 2013), it penetrates it in diverse and novel ways in technology-mediated education during the health crises. Parents and caregivers adopted different strategies to prevent their children from falling behind during school closures (Benvegnú & Segal, 2020). The pandemic has led to school closures. This is not new as the history of pandemics reveals (Deaton, 2020; Pineau & Ayuso, 2020; Rosenberg, 1991). Still, the unexpectedness of phenomena has triggered the emergence of a semiotic process in which subjects make meaning of the experience by naming it differently. So, what is perceived as disruption in the educational sphere could be called “corona teaching” (UNESCO, 2020), “imposed switchover” (Demantowsky & Lauer, 2020), “emergency remote teaching and learning” (Hodges et al., 2020) or “home-schooling conducted by the school” (Terigi, 2020). Individuals have coined these linguistic choices to make sense of the teaching activity in irremediable time. After the initial perception of the newness and without the emotions it triggers, subjects can identify the object and

name it. The different words and definitions account for their perception, their prior knowledge-experience, and ideology. At the third level, the same subjects can generalize and define the newly created concept, setting semantic borders that can be extended or shrunk following the community of practice perception. Gamsakhurdia refers to Valsiner's elaboration of the four levels of semiotic mediation that represent the dynamics of higher education (Gamsakhurdia & Javakhishvili, 2021). However, as Valsiner puts forward, they can demolish their socially constructed knowledge if they perceive it is no longer of use.

The Case Studies

Valsiner argues the possibility of generalizing from a single case. In our endeavor to understand the event when unfolding, we decided to carry out this pilot study. Intending to see how intersubjectivity operates in online learning environments, we randomly selected two subjects, a schoolgirl and a university student, to see how they perceived their teacher/instructor's social presence in a technology-mediated educational environment during 2020. We will call them Ana and Juan to preserve their identities. Ana's parent gave their consent to interview the girl in person and use her photo. Juan sent his narrative by email and consented to include it in this work.

Ana



This photo was taken in June 2020 during the lockdown in Buenos Aires, Argentina. At the time of the interview, Ana³ was 10 years old. She attends a state school in Buenos Aires city. She was in the fifth grade in the Argentinian elementary school system. She used the computer she received from Plan Sarmiento, a governmental program to furnish state school pupils with laptops. She had a cellphone to video chat with her friends; she created a YouTube Kids channel to post her drawings and homemade videos. At that time, she engaged in video calls with her friends to discuss their drawings and took part in “art challenges” that she documented in a school notebook.

³ Ana is not her real name. This story and the photo are reproduced with her parents' consent.

In the photo, she is attending a Maths class from her dining room. Some minutes before the start of the lesson, she followed a ritual. She stopped playing, combed her hair, organized the dining table, prepared the material that her teacher had asked, turned on the computer, put her headphones on, and logged in. She experienced some issues with connectivity and asked for help. The joyful girl that was playing around the house became a quiet pupil attending the lesson. The researcher sat a bit far from her to observe the whole situation. At the beginning of the class, we could see that many parents were helping the kids log in to then leave them on their own. Her teacher had improvised a board on what seemed to be a kitchen wall, used a marker to write. She started the lesson by talking about the children's feelings in lockdown and then explained the lesson topic, fractions. Some kids took turns to talk, muting and unmuting their microphones. Ana did not utter a word during the videoconference; she followed her teacher's indications, i.e., folding pieces of papers and showing them to their teacher and nodding from time to time. The lesson lasted 40 min.

After the lesson, when the researcher asked about it, Ana said in colloquial Argentinian Spanish:

A: La seño nos habló de que teníamos que salir a caminar con papá o mamá. Que no nos quedemos en casa. Que el ejercicio nos iba a hacer bien. Yo no sé porque los chicos no se conectan, José tiene la computadora y tiene internet, pero no se conectó. Y Dana estaba mandando whats app pero no se conectó. Yo no hablo por que no me gusta hablarle a la pantalla. (The teacher told us to go for a walk with mum or dad. She said we shouldn't stay home. Exercise will be good for us. I don't know why the kids didn't connect, José has a computer and has internet, but he didn't log in. Dana was texting but she didn't log in. I don't speak in these lessons because I don't like to talk to a screen⁴).

R: ¿Y qué vieron ? (And what did you learn?)

... (she thinks a bit). Ahh lo de las fracciones, era fácil. (Ahh fractions, it was easy)

Her narrative showed her feelings about the whole situation. She commented on her dislike of talking to the screen. She was upset because she knew that some of her classmates could log in, but they did not. Her use of *la seño*—an affective name pupils use to call their teachers in Argentina—shows that she could create an affective bond with her. Ana perceived that she cared for them, encouraging them to go walking with their parents and exercise more. In her first narrative of the lesson, she only mentioned the lesson topic—i.e., fractions, when the interviewer asked her. Intersubjectivity was built, although it led to learnings that went beyond the content given (Bruner, 2006).

When the school year was over, I interviewed her again.

- *Ana: Me fue bien. Pudimos aprender cosas nuevas, lo nuevo del planeta, La seño nos mandaba videos y aprendíamos mejor.* (I did it well, We could learn new things, the new about the planet. The teacher sent us videos and we could learn better)
- *Researcher: ¿Y pudiste aprender* (And could you learn?)
- *Sí pero no igual que en la clase presencial. No me gustaban las clases por zoom* (Yes, but I didn't learn the same as in a face-to-face class. I didn't like the zoom classes).
- *¿Qué es lo que no te gustó de las clases por zoom?* (What didn't you like about the zoom classes?)

⁴ The author translated manually the excerpt in Spanish for this work.

- *No podía ver el cuerpo de la seño, las manos, los gestos. Ella hablaba y a mí no me gusta hablar por zoom. Eso de apagar el micrófono y encenderlo. En la clase presencial, levanto la mano y hablo.* (I couldn't see the teachers' body, her hands, gestures. She talked and I didn't like to speak on zoom. To turn on the mic and turn it down. In the face-to-face class, I raise my hand and talk.)

When she starts talking about school, she perceived her teacher's social presence as the organizer of the whole educational activity, selecting and sending them tools to help them learn. In one moment of the interview, she said she has learned, but then, she says it was not the same. In her narrative, she is constructing and demolishing signs in her attempt to make sense of the experience. She was also able to identify her feelings about remote teaching. She could say what she did not like. Seeing her teachers' body and gestures and the spontaneous dialogical practice in a brick-and-mortar classroom were conducive to learning better, although she could not define what better was. She needed to raise her hands to engage in a conversation with her teacher. Muting and unmuting were not the same. Although some of her classmates could participate in class, she decided not to. Surprisingly, her answers were similar to those given by undergrads in another study done by this researcher (Di Gesú, 2021).

Juan

Juan is in his late twenties. He was a part-time university undergrad at a free-tuition state university. In 2020, he attended English for Specific Purposes IV, his last academic course in Industrial Engineering. It was the first time during his university studies that he attended an online course. He had to learn the disciplinary content, how to study online, and the intricacies of Moodle platform. He studied and participated in the synchronous meetings and completed the activities on Moodle. He passed the course with good grades. At the end of the first semester of 2020, the instructor asked her students to write a short narrative about their experience. Juan wrote:

I felt uncertainty when campus closed. IPE IV was my last course. And, for a moment, I thought I was about to lose the year and extend my studies for a year more. When I told my parents that I had to study online, they said it was good to give it a try. I felt that the synchronous meetings were satisfactory, I could work on them, understand and learn. The only problem I had was the day without internet. I didn't feel that Laura (the instructors' name) was not in front of me, because, Laura delivered the synchronous lessons very well. She gave us room to participate and ask questions. As the company I am working for is closed for the lockdown, I had time to study and do the assignments. I would repeat the experience because I could follow the classes, I could learn, and I saved an hour -commute every Saturday morning. I found it comfortable to study from home. What to improve? I would like more self-correction exercises to do on my own.

Juan was attending the last course in his academic program after being six years at the university. It was his first online learning experience. His initial negative emotion at the disruption of the environment was later changed when his significant others encouraged him. Like Ana, he was new to online learning and could forge a bond with the course instructor. He appreciated her efforts to keep the pedagogical continuity. Juan perceived that he could

understand the disciplinary contents and was able to learn because the instructor fostered a dialogical practice during the synchronous meetings. He mentioned connectivity issues as disruptive events. Overall, positive emotion permeates his narrative after the initial feeling of fear. When he encountered the experience, he created a meaning system, a SWIB, a sign without borders (Valsiner, 2014) that allowed learning and orientation to future learnings. Asking for more exercises to complete independently, he seemed to reconcile his own learning style with the new proposal.

Summing up

As an umbrella concept that encompasses kindergarten to university, schooling has always relied on social presence and socially construed rituals. The way teachers/instructors and pupils/students interact in a classroom is culturally laden. There is no unique universal classroom seating arrangement, neither are the ways their interactions take place. School teachers and some faculty members alike had resisted the inclusion of technology to teach. Ana's teacher needed the board on the wall to teach and improvised one on what it seemed to be her kitchen walls; Juan attended an online course when he was about to graduate and due to an unprecedented change in the environment. Before COVID-19, adding technology was seen as a way to add fun (Larrieu & Di Gesú, 2021), or extra practice (Narodowski & Campatella, 2020).

Although Ana and Juan can be at the end of the spectrum in the educational system and different life stages, they could construct a sign hierarchy that allows them to learn under specific circumstances as Liza did with Accountancy. Liza and Ana could pass their course although they did not like how they did it. Juan liked the experience because he could see a pragmatic value, graduating and saving commuting time. Neither Juan nor Ana could see the value of online teaching as promoting learning autonomy. Ana could develop her drawing skills by video chatting with her friends. She posted her homemade videos but needed the traditional classroom to feel she could learn academic content.

Ana's teacher and Juan's instructor created the intersubjectivity field that enables learning. Ana needed the dialogue she had at school. According to Juan, his instructor fostered a technology-mediated dialogue. Both Ana and Juan hid somehow their mental states; they passed their courses but did not reveal their motives and objectives.

Looking at Juan's, Ana's, and Liza's performances from outside, we can see that they could expand their boundaries and go beyond the information given (Bruner, 2006). They could forge an affective bond with their teachers/instructors and see them as organizers of their learning. Ana appreciated that her teacher cared about her well-being. Juan enjoyed that the instructor fostered a pedagogical dialogue. They could feel their teacher's/instructor's social presence, although they were not physically together in the same room. A technology-mediated bubble of learning was built in their homes (Di Gesú & Gonzalez, 2021). For a while, they could suspend their family life and enact the "I as student" position (Hermans, 2001). Further research is needed to understand how this works for different subjects.

With this short article, I wanted to show my gratitude to Jaan Valsiner. He has always encouraged me to seek answers integrating empirical evidence with interdisciplinary theoretical views to explain human phenomena. As an educator, Jaan has always taught by example, tracing paths for those who would like to tread them. My heartfelt gratitude to Jaan's teaching and work encourages me to keep thinking and learning in novel ways.

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Declarations

Consent Ana's parent, Juan, and Liza have provided their written consent. Their names are fictitious.

Conflict of Interest The author declares no competing interests.

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