Constructing and Managing Transportable Identities on Social Networking Sites

Richard Pinner

Sophia University

Contact: rpinner@sophia.ac.jp

This article offers an evidence-based reflection of one teacher's experience of using social networking sites (such as Facebook) with students. It explores the position of student-teacher interactions online through the framework of transportable identities. The paper argues that teachers need to be aware of the issue of multiple selves when interacting with students online.

Introduction

Identity is a very complex issue, and language is of course one of the main mediums for how people present, express, develop and even conceptualise their own identities as social beings. People present different aspects of themselves according to different social situations, and are constantly reconstructing their identity to fit different discourse contexts (Lin, 2013; Zimmerman, 1998). In his famous treatise on identity in the sociology of language, Erving Goffman (1959) referred to these multiple, socio-contextually dependent presentations of self as 'performances' in his famous dramaturgical analogy. With the appearance of online social networking sites (SNS), the way people present themselves and interact socially is also influenced by online forms of expression. This article presents some of the issues which manifest themselves when language users turn to SNSs such as Facebook and Twitter. In the latter part of this paper, I will examine the role of language teachers and the issues that might surface when teachers and students interact over SNS. I will draw on both published research and the narrative of my personal experience to reflect on the place of these types of online interactions and the inevitable consequences they pose, focusing especially on teacher-student interactions and identity construction.

Identities in Talk

Zimmerman (1998) has identified three main categories of Identity in Talk. These are:

•Situated identities, which are explicitly conferred by the context of communication, such as doctor/patient identities in the context of a health clinic or teacher/student identities in the context of a classroom;
•Discourse identities, as participants orient themselves to particular discourse roles in the unfolding organization of the interaction (e.g. initiator, listener and questioner);
•Transportable identities, which are latent or implicit but can be invoked during the interaction, such as when a teacher alludes to her identity as a mother or as a keen gardener during a language lesson (see also Richards, 2006; Ushioda, 2011 for expansion).

When people interact in different social contexts, they might often invoke Transportable Identities as a way of showing that they are not merely the sum of their situational identity. Teachers are not merely teachers, nor students merely students; they each have various identities which can both complement and contradict our professional or situated identities. This means that, in order to facilitate learning, teachers and students often create a personal connection with each other, and with the learning process. Good teachers in any discipline encourage their students to engage with learning content through a process of personal meaning-making. When speakers use languages which they have learned as either foreign or second languages, however, it can be difficult to render a satisfactory presentation of the Self using a limited or less familiar linguistic repertoire (Csizér & Magid, 2014). This is particularly important in language learning and teaching, where learners may be constructing their identities using limited linguistic resources, whilst often simultaneously having to learn new discourse strategies and socio-cultural modes of behaviour. All of which is often happening in a language classroom, which can be an 'intrinsically face-threatening situation' (van Dam, 2002, p. 238). This is why Ushioda argues that 'the notion of engaging our students' identities is something many experienced language teachers have intuitively recognised as important' (2011, p. 17) which she further explains is nothing particularly surprising, but is actually what many good

teachers do instinctively. Despite this natural tendency, enabling students to create a valid and concrete self-image has become a major preoccupation in recent L2 motivational research literature (Dörnyei, MacIntyre, & Henry, 2015).

Goffman states that 'there is hardly a performance, in whatever area of life, which does not rely on the personal touch to exaggerate the uniqueness of the transactions between performer and audience' (1959, p. 50). Again, this is particularly important in not only language teaching and learning situations, but also in situations where participants use foreign or second languages in which they may have a limited linguistic repertoire. In modernised societies it is becoming increasingly common for people to make and maintain connections through online forums and social networking sites, such as Facebook. These can be a very effective way of connecting with students outside the classroom, engaging their 'real' lives and identities. It could also be an ethical minefield, a social 'can of worms' and a recipe for disaster.

Teacher-student interactions

Below are two screenshots taken from my own Facebook page (see Figure 1 and Figure 2). They both show the same person, but two very different aspects of myself, from different times in my life, and as different social groups encountered me.

| Figure 1: The author as a student after a night out (2001) | Figure 2: The author as a teacher in his current role (2014) |

I show these images to highlight the fact that in SNS, a user will most likely be interacting with multiple social groups and friend circles. These social groups will all be able to see the many different 'personas' or faces that users present in different social contexts to different groups of people, as they perform very different (and even contradictory) aspects of their Self. In other words, students can see their teachers in situations very different from those in which they would normally encounter them, and vice-versa. Agger (2012) refers to this phenomenon as oversharing, borrowing the term from Emily Gould; an extremely frank blogger who used to work at celebrity gossip site Gawker.com. Several of my former students have posted revealing photos of themselves online, a type of voyeurism which is in itself a very interesting social phenomena made that much easier by SNS. However, whereas voyeurism has traditionally been something which remains within a certain subcultural in-group (Humphreys, 1997), when a person posts revealing photos on very public SNSs, a much wider audience is reached and people are exposed to private images without even having to seek for them. The same is true for seeing people in contexts outside of those in which we ordinarily encounter them, one simply logs on to see a side of other individuals previously never invoked in ordinary interactions within face-to-face social context.

The relationship between a foreign language student and teacher is particularly interesting from this perspective because not only are teacher-student roles heavily influenced (if not entirely constructed) by situational identity, but also here there is the additional struggle for the negotiation of meaning and the construction of identity in the second language, in addition to the power distribution between the learner and the teacher. Furthermore, there are many different types of language learner, with many people continuing to study foreign languages into adulthood at private institutions.

Some language teachers encourage their students to befriend them on social networking sites, while others are understandably wary. SNS can be a very effective way of connecting with students outside the classroom, and engaging with their 'real' lives and identities. It can also create opportunities for authentic and motivating communication, not just between classmates but also creating a web of connections with other learners and speakers around the globe. However, it also opens up the interactions to all of the issues of identity negotiation and presentation of self discussed previously. When I accept students as friends on Facebook, I do so knowing that this is uncharted territory, and as such I have taken pains to learn about online security and how to keep track of my so-called Digital Shadow. I have also tried to become aware of oversharing, and to develop a heightened awareness of the 'audience' in my 'performances'. To manage my online identities, I use lists on Facebook to organise who can see my posts. My students are in a 'restricted' list, who can only see whatever information about me I choose to make entirely public. People who are my 'friends' can

see everything, although there is also a list for 'acquaintances' who might be excluded from more private posts. Many of these functions are relatively new to Facebook, which has become more complex as it continues to play an ever greater role in social interactions. In this way, Facebook's structure has altered over the years to reflect the onion-like structure of our own social interactions. This in itself is a fascinating subject, and one that warrants deeper inquiry.

Reflection

Using Facebook has often brought me closer to people with whom I might otherwise have very little contact. People from my past for example, or even acquaintances with whom I perhaps discovered I have something in common and therefore become closer with through our online interactions. Since I created a Facebook account almost ten years ago, the site has changed and way people use it has altered beyond recognition. Although he notes the key role Facebook played in the 2011 Egyptian revolution, Agger criticises Facebook and other SNS for being inane, made up mainly of 'everyday trivia' and featuring so many posts along the lines of 'I had enchiladas for dinner' (2012, p. 20). But now with so many corporations and information services having recognised the power of SNS, my Facebook feed is composed mainly of posts from magazines and news services, such as the BBC and other information providers, each catering to certain niches (humour, satire, local community and so on). Far from being inane, this is a personalised, customised and highly eclectic thread of different points of view on different events, often ones unfurling in real-time. Furthermore, friends share the posts that they are interested in, meaning that only a small percentage (at least of my feed) is composed of personal comments from individuals. However, I do still quite regularly see embarrassing photos of 'friends', or other even more base examples of oversharing. But this is all part of the SNS experience, it empowers people who have things to say, regardless of how 'trivial' other people may feel it be.

My initial impetus for creating a Facebook account was as a language teacher, because of my previous role as the social program coordinator for the school I worked at in London. Because of this, the majority of my 'friends' on Facebook are students. I have discussed this thorny issue with colleagues, and even given presentations about it, to find out what other practitioners are doing in terms of using SNS with their classes. Particularly those who wish to use computers as part of their lessons, or teachers who wish to have some form of online virtual exchange, have much to say on the topic. Some teachers create two accounts, one for students and one for themselves as their 'non-teaching persona'. Others refuse to 'friend' their students, although this is also a face-threatening act, one which can have connotations in face-to-face interactions. For instance, one teacher told me that students have asked him to 'friend' them during a face-to-face conversation whilst holding their smartphones in their hands, ready to do it in real-time as part of the face-to-face exchange. This could make for a very awkward situation, in which the barrier between student and teacher is made abundantly clear. Others still avoid SNS altogether. It is not necessary to become 'friends' with students just to participate in an online virtual exchange with another institution or social group, however it is still likely that this situation would arise.

Conclusion

In addition to discussing how language and social identity is mediated through online forms of interaction, this article has attempted to highlight a few of the specific issues that might surface if teachers and students were to interact in SNS and other online forums. Basically, as this is still mainly uncharted territory it presents a rich ground for further inquiry. There are several researchers working in this area (Blattner & Lomicka, 2012; Lantz-Andersson, Vigmo, & Bowen, 2013), but the need for a deeper, critical and qualitative understanding of this area seems paramount to gaining further insights into how online social interactions and new modes of discourse are linked to identity development. Teachers should make ensure they understand the ramifications of contacting students through SNS and put in place measures to delineate their own identities in online exchanges. Therefore, I think identity management is as important as digital literacy when considering interactions on SNS between students and teachers.

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