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Online learning and language: Making evaluative language choices to build relationships and improve engagement

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Online learning is a well-established mode for tertiary education and training. However, technology-mediated learning at a distance continues to face challenges to participant engagement, despite the proliferation of models of effective online learning and the implementation of increasingly sophisticated technologies to enhance learning (Bragg, Walsh & Heyeres, 2021). The critical need to build and maintain relationships for effective learning continues to be confounded by the geographic and temporal distribution of online participants as well as the nuances of the technology in use. Online learning occurs in collaborative text-spaces within learning management systems, social media spaces and their attendant learning objects such as forums, many of which foreground language as the primary resource for making meaning with others. As such, ongoing challenges to engagement in online learning may be viewed with fresh eyes by considering the language-based interpersonal affordances of these text-spaces. This pecha kucha presentation examines how the language choices made by learning facilitators impact on student engagement in online learning. It draws on a case study of the strategic use of evaluative language – the language used to express feelings and build relationships - by one teacher educator to engage initial teacher education students in online learning. Underpinned by the Systemic Functional Linguistic model of language (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014) and following Martin & White (2005), appraisal analysis of weekly forum posts across three iterations of a unit of study shows how changes to language choices made by the teacher educator positively impacted on student engagement. This illuminates the relationship between online learning and language, and how judicious use of language-based meaning making resources can be used to improve online participant engagement.

Keywords: online learning, engagement, interpersonal language, Systemic Functional Linguistics

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