Communicating with peers online: What do students expect of each other?

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This study looks at how students experience asynchronous online discussion (AOD) within initial teacher education. In particular, the study investigates what students expect of their peers when communicating online for the purpose of learning. Ascertained via an online focus group and interviews with students, findings indicate student preferences for academic netiquette. Student expectations can inform pedagogy for AOD if used as a basis for negotiation of guidelines for online communication.

Keywords: Communication, asynchronous online discussion, student perspectives, learning, pedagogy.

A mainstay of online learning, Asynchronous Online Discussion (AOD) is used in online courses in a range of disciplines. Online interaction between students can be both supportive and challenging, as peers express either their own breakthroughs in understanding, or their own struggles to understand. But what do students expect of each other when communicating online for learning purposes?

AOD is also referred to as web-based conferencing (Angeli et al, 2003), Electronic Discussion (ED) (Ferdig & Roehler, 2003), and Threaded Discussion/Conversation (Welser et al, 2007). These discussions occur in an Internet enabled environment without the need for discussion participants to be present in the same physical location or at the same time. In the discussions of relevance to this study, the participants are student teachers engaged in discussions for learning purposes. Each discussion is a formally constituted, topic-centred conversation established in the context of a specific learning environment (i.e., Moodle), using a web-based bulletin or message board (Locke and Daly, 2007).

Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) assert that "the asynchronicity of discussion boards is the mainstay of contemporary e-learning practice" (p. 210). There are often high levels of peer discourse in AOD (Hewitt, 2005), and in Clegg and Heap's (2006) view, this opportunity for student-to-student interaction "means that online discussions are often the glue that binds a group of students together to become a collaborative learning community" (p. 1).

Since learning collaboratively involves students' active involvement in peer interactions then it is important to ascertain what students want from their collaborators.

Research Context and Design

The University of Waikato Faculty of Education's Mixed Media Programme (MMP) was among the first of its kind in New Zealand (Dewstow, 2006; Donaghy et al, 2003). Established in 1997, this initial teacher education degree course was designed for primary pre-service teachers. Traditionally, MMP has catered for student teachers living at a distance from the University, blending on-campus block time, primary school placements and online study (Campbell, 1997; Donaghy & McGee, 2003; Donaghy, McGee, Ussher & Yates, 2003). Online

study incorporates AOD as an interactive tutorial opportunity for MMP students, as well as a way of establishing attendance (Forbes, 2012). Typically, learning through AOD involves a series of (weekly) forums for students and lecturers to discuss literature and practice related to class topics throughout the semester. As such, this is the type of discussion activity that Hew and Cheung (2012) identify as a future research direction, given the emphasis on reading, philosophy, and the lack of face-to-face class time. MMP is the context for this study, in which 12 student teachers engaged in an online focus group for 18 weeks, and seven student teachers participated in a series of three semi-structured interviews.

Findings

Data were analysed with respect to what students expect of their peers in AOD. Several themes emerged, each of which are discussed in turn.

Relevant participation

Students said they expected their peers to join the discussion promptly and to post regularly. They said they expected peers to be experienced at managing their time in online discussion by their second year of study and were surprised by those who had to resort to double-posts due to time management issues:

> "What irks me is people who post but don't discuss. I know we have busy lives. But it irks me when fellow students haven't been in discussion all week, haven't bothered to read what has been discussed (I know they haven't when they repeat what has already been said without acknowledging this). Or they then post three posts in a row!! That frustrates me!" (Nina).

Students suggested that it could be challenging to have a flowing discussion when group members did not appear online until late in the week, disrupting continuity.

Students expected their peers to ensure examples and anecdotes or illustrations were relevant to the discussion topic and the discussants:

> "When considering the relevance of your postings, it is a good idea to be aware of the discussion group you are in and adjust your discussion accordingly. Try to be aware of where others are at" (Sarah).

While appreciating personal experience as a useful entry point worthy of exploring and sharing, students said they found fixation on personal experience to be limiting.

> "Every time we've gotten onto a discussion [it] has focused around how bad they were at maths when they were at school and so you know that seems to pervade the discussion and, so I get on there and try and politely change the tone of the discussion and say more or less you know you're not in primary anymore and I know those things can have some effect but trying to get them to see the positive side of those things instead of the negatives… Continually going on about your own experiences all the time, it's not enough" (Sarah).

On the other hand, the students wanted to talk about their lives and experiences and to relate their parental experience to discussions where possible. However, they expected peers to look beyond their own children as a sole point of reference. A wider, more diverse view of children in the school system was valued. Tarryn, for example, illustrated this point clearly:

> "One thing that's a huge turn-off to me is when people start talking about their personal experience in relation to their children and only their children. That's important but they need to bring it into the school system as well, they need to talk about their base school experiences and back up with their readings so it's sort of interweaving it… It is good when the discussion question, literature, classroom practice and personal experience (e.g. as parents) all link together, enabling students to engage in "interweaving" multiple sources of learning" (Tarryn).

The students unanimously appreciated opportunities to link theoretical concepts with classroom teaching incidents. Discussions that incorporated talk about learning in the classroom were considered superior to those perceived as more literary, without a practical element. When students related instances where discussions linked directly to classroom learning, they used words like "fantastic" and "exciting".

Responsiveness

Another expectation was that peers would acknowledge and respond to others in discussion. Students indicated that they expected others to read what had been posted rather than repeat or ignore points made by earlier contributors. Several students mentioned face-to-face etiquette regarding the impoliteness of ignoring others by repeating points already made online. For example:

> "…rude because you know that would be like if I was face-to-face with you and you've come and said something to me and I've just walked away and started talking to somebody else" (Sarah).

> "I felt like I'd made a valid point but it was completely ignored and it's just like well if we were in a group discussion once again, face-to-face, it would be like they all just turned their back on me and carried on talking" (Nina).

> "Same as in a classroom, someone's asked a question and then Johnny puts his hand up and says the same thing" (Tia).

The students reported a tendency to post more often in discussion when peers responded to posts and questions. They suggested that they would rather have their ideas actively challenged than ignored. For example:

> "I have noticed in a few discussions this semester that when someone has a different opinion from the rest of the group that person's ideas are ignored and no one responds to their comment. I know in one particular paper we are encouraged to disagree with the lecturers or others in the group but when someone disagrees and is ignored for doing so I feel like that voice is not heard. To even agree to disagree is better than ignoring what that person has to say" (Nina).

In a similar vein, the students emphasized that acknowledgement should move beyond bland agreement. The stock standard phrase "Oh yes I agree with so and so" could be overused, with one student describing this behaviour as "nauseating", "puppet"-like, and a hindrance to discussion (Tarryn).

Students appreciated names being used as part of peer-to-peer responsiveness. Focus group members said:

> "Names are important. It gives the discussion that human face when we wish we had one to look at!!" (Tarryn).

> "The importance of a name cannot be overstated. Naming the person online is equivalent to "looking" at that person in class" (Mei).

All of the students voiced an expectation of their peers connecting via AOD. They said that discussion provided a vital connection with their peers. They had difficulty envisaging MMP without online discussion components. Notions of connection and community were mentioned by all students:

> "Being able to connect with other people is pretty important to online learning I would have thought" (Don).

> "The plus of discussions is it keeps me connected to others - this is a lifeline" (Dana).

Leaving space

Leaving space was an expectation voiced by students, and referred to the need to keep comments short so as to avoid dominating discussion. The students conveyed a preference for posts to be succinct, and reported that they:
> "I hate having to trawl through really long discussions" (Jacqui).

> "I won't read them if they're too big" (Don).

Five of the seven students interviewed specifically expressed a dislike of lengthy postings. They agreed that when posts were too long, they typically skimmed rather than reading thoroughly. Contributions without paragraph breaks were similarly skipped over. Lengthy posts that attempted to address every point in one hit did

not leave space for others to enter the discussion.

Free-flowing communication

A sixth student expectation related to the style of language used in AOD. It helped to write as they would talk, they said, putting things in their own words. They felt that discussion was better when people wrote honestly and sincerely ("being true to who you are"), rather than wallowing in academic jargon:

> "It was like we were actually talking to each other, that's when you know it's a good discussion… When it's free-flowing and you've got debate and it makes me look at things from a different perspective when someone's brought something up, something I wouldn't have considered … and I'm enjoying it and you're posting because you're really engaged in what you're actually talking about online" (Nina).

> "I think discussion should be more of a free-flowing thing rather than an academic writing exercise" (Don).

Effective use of literature

The students expressed particular expectations regarding how peers used literature in AOD, and were critical of the practice of copying and pasting material directly from set readings into the discussion.

> "I see a lot of quoting, retelling and reproducing rather than critical thinking in discussions, but I feel this is more because the onus on those particular discussions is on showing that literature has been read rather than making real connections to it through group discussion" (Don).

Students characterized this practice as false, pointless, irritating and confusing.

> "If everyone's just in there quoting the readings… I'm not learning anything because I've already done the readings. I'm just reading them all again… I mean, what is so interesting about going into a discussion and re-reading readings?" (Dana).

The students did not question the value of reading academic literature and regarded it as fundamental to their learning. They appreciated that readings could help them understand what they may not be seeing in schools, represent expert opinion and enlarge their experiences vicariously.

Recent research by Hew and Cheung (2012) supports some of these findings in relation to peer facilitation of discussion. In particular, Hew and Cheung (2012) report students' need for acknowledgement from peers, in the form of "sincere appreciation" (p.83). As in my study, their participants also advocated refraining from citing or quoting sources too often in online discussion.

In summary, the MMP students' expectations of their peers in asynchronous online discussion were that peers participate in a relevant and responsive manner, making human connections, leaving space for others by being succinct, communicating in a clear and free-flowing manner, and using literature effectively. These findings have subsequently been shared with other cohorts as a set of 'initial discussion guidelines' for critique and renegotiation by participants in online classes. Specifically, following this study, students have been provided with a rationale for discussion, and a set of 'do's and don'ts' based upon the expectations of previous online students. For example, the initial discussion guidelines advise students to:

- Respond to others in the discussion, building on ideas. Aim to ensure that others are acknowledged directly. Attempt to respond to different people throughout the discussion so as to be inclusive.
- When you refer to readings, avoid lengthy direct quotes in discussion. Instead, discuss readings by paraphrasing the key ideas and applying your own thinking to these.

The initial discussion guidelines take a blunt approach to warning students of online behaviours to avoid. For example:

- Do not post lengthy contributions. Research suggests that your fellow students will not read your posts if they are too long.
- Do not post without reading what others have said. This can be perceived as ignorant and disrespectful.

Follow-up research (Forbes, in press) indicates that students appreciate the guidelines, finding them helpful and reasonable, while also valuing the opportunity to propose modifications to the initial set of guidelines in order to

evaluate, adjust and enhance discussion protocols over time.

Ultimately, this study reveals a little of students' expectations of their peers when communicating online in initial teacher education. Highlighting these participant perspectives generates possibilities for negotiation, change and improvement. That is, by making the perspectives, experiences and expectations visible, we render them revisible (Halse & Honey, 2010), inviting critical consideration of how to interact effectively within AOD in wider contexts. Understanding student expectations is a crucial part of understanding and informing present and future practice.

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