

Negotiating community and knowledge in asynchronous online discussions in higher education

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CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP/ORIGINALITY

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the enactment of teaching and learning in asynchronous online discussions in a postgraduate context. Specifically, it explores and seeks to explain the disjunct between the pedagogical promise of such discussions, founded on the collaborative construction of knowledge within supportive and democratised online communities, and the experience of teaching and learning through them, reported both in the research context and in published research. This experience often includes concern that students are failing to reach higher levels of knowledge construction, uncertainty on the part of moderators concerning their role and feelings of discomfort, disengagement and inadequate interaction on the part of students. The aim of the study is to provide a detailed account of this new and still evolving genre, rendering it transparent and able to be modelled and scaffolded pedagogically.

The data for the study are the online discussion posts as captured by the learning management system, supplemented by survey responses. The approach taken is discourse analytical, informed by a social theory of language, namely Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). The core of the analysis is a detailed study of the discourse semantics of interpersonal meaning drawing on the system of APPRAISAL (Martin & White 2005), with some reference to INVOLVEMENT and NEGOTIATION.

The negotiation of interpersonal meaning, studied within the context of community formation and maintenance, is profoundly influenced by mode features (written but dialogic, public, visible, persistent). Moderators' linguistic choices commonly include incongruent instructions, reduced commitment of meaning, implicit feedback and a tendency to expand rather than contract space for other voices and meanings. This serves to reduce status differentials and support a sense of community but potentially impacts on the negotiation of ideational meaning. Similarly low-key was students' relationship to the knowledge they brought into the discussion, particularly seen in the absence of standard forms of engagement in favour of narrative approaches and a tendency to open discursive space for others. Interaction with peers was likewise low-key for the most part, with little challenge and argumentation. Interestingly, students showed an individualistic concern with their own actions and postings, foregrounding their mental processes and personalising their approach to knowledge. Again attention to interpersonal relations appears to undermine to a certain extent ideational meaning-making. Addressing structural questions, a curriculum macrogenre was proposed and the presence of whole or fragmented written academic genres embedded in a quasi-conversational matrix identified. The pedagogical implications of these findings are discussed.