



Student Expectations of Peers in Academic Asynchronous Online Discussion

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Abstract

In open, flexible, and distance learning, asynchronous online discussion persists as a popular means of interaction and collaboration. The research literature abounds with consideration of instructor roles and expectations of teachers and tools. Student-to-student interaction is widely acknowledged as a salient benefit of asynchronous online discussion, with implications for collaborative learning and problem-solving, as well as student satisfaction and course commitment. But what do students expect of their peers when communicating online for learning purposes? This question has seldom been considered, despite common reliance on peer-to-peer learning interactions. This small-scale case study incorporates an online focus group and semi-structured interviews with second-year undergraduate students studying primary teaching in Aotearoa New Zealand. The students in this study expect responsive, free-flowing contributions by peers, culminating in discussion that is active and interactive. Given the imperative to value student experience and to involve students in active learning, it is timely to share peer expectations so that students are accountable to their class community and are better prepared for collaborative learning through asynchronous online discussion.

Keywords: asynchronous online discussion; student expectations; interaction; peer learning; social presence

The continuing relevance of asynchronous online discussion (AOD)

The online discussion forum is a mainstay of open, flexible, and distance learning. It has long been used in a range of disciplines and endures as a foundation of university courses. Interactions with peers are a crucial form of learner support, and are a critical component of collaborative learning, fundamental to extending students' theoretical, conceptual, practical, and innovative thinking. Positive social interdependence is the foundation of group learning, with implications for individual accountability and personal responsibility (Johnson & Johnson, 2009). Such student-to-student interactions are frequently linked to increased course connection, enjoyment, and satisfaction, with implications for retention (Ghadirian et al., 2018; Peacock et al., 2020).

Over many years, asynchronous online discussion has been variously referred to as web-based conferencing (Angeli et al., 2003), electronic discussion (ED) (Ferdig & Roehler, 2003), threaded discussion or conversation (Welser et al., 2007), discussion boards (DBs) (Al Tawil, 2019), online discussion forums (ODFs) (Tan, 2017), or simply ODs (Ghadirian et al., 2018). These discussions occur in an internet-enabled environment, typically a learning management system (LMS), without the need for discussion participants to be present in the same physical location or available at the same time. The "asynchronous" character of the discussion means

that it occurs over time, with participants “posting” messages to a discussion over a period of hours or days. Communication occurs intermittently, at any time, and at irregular intervals. Asynchronicity is beneficial because it is a low-bandwidth solution that allows participants to have flexible access. Although synchronous communication opportunities are technically more accessible now than in the past, the need for every participant to be available at the same time can prove challenging for students with demanding schedules and a range of commitments beyond study, and for international students working in different time zones. Even when an online course incorporates synchronous aspects (e.g., meetings), there are still good reasons for retaining AOD.

There is a consensus in the literature that asynchronous online discussion affords four key advantages.

1. Inclusivity: All participants can contribute.
2. Flexibility: Class time is extended.
3. Textual communication: The writing process is valued.
4. Deep learning: Reflection and depth are promoted.

In inclusive terms, AOD enables participants to contribute concurrently without fear of interruption; there are often higher levels of peer discourse because every participant can contribute to the discussion. When flexibility is valued, AOD affords convenience and accessibility, because learners choose the time and place to contribute. When students are time-poor, often juggling paid work, family commitments, and striving for work/life balance, flexibility means study “fits into their lives” (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018, p. 202).

In part, it is the textual communication of AOD that enhances structure and depth. Reading and writing afford meta-linguistic and analytic advantages, enabling learners to share thoughts and ideas informally, but also to review them. Writing is useful as both process and product of rigorous critical thinking, argumentation, and reflection (Garrison & Anderson, 2003; Hew et al., 2010). Writing communicates style, tone, and effort (which are akin to nonverbal cues), and these influence how people learn together (Al Tawil, 2019).

Finally, in relation to deep learning, both the asynchronicity of time and the written communication format can enhance critical and creative thinking. By affording time to think, there is potential for informed, considered, structured responses, and for flexible thinking (Fauske & Wade, 2003; Ferdig & Roehler, 2003; Hew et al., 2010). Ideally, participants question their own assumptions and perspectives and challenge those put forward by other participants. The use of AOD as a forum for dialogic peer formative feedback involves active and constructive sharing of alternative perspectives as part of collaborative learning (Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018). Students can construct deeper meaning through thoughtful and personal contributions to online discussion (Johnson, 2016).

The four aspects (inclusivity, flexibility, textual communication, and deep learning) are affordances of AOD. They have the potential to support equality, student choice, and the ability to revisit and synthesise persistent text—and they lead to thinking, reflection, and conceptual understanding. However, as Haythornthwaite and Andrews (2011) remind us, affordances are what the media allow or make possible. Affordances such as the advantages listed above are opportunities and potential benefits, but they might not always be realised in practice.

Thus, there can be gaps between the potential and actual use of AOD for learning and, despite many years of use, the gaps persist. In particular, AOD falls short of its considerable potential for quality learning if student expectations are not met. There are times when discussions are flat and

uninspiring, and when participants seem to be merely going through the motions, posting to meet course or instructor requirements rather than attaining deeper levels of learning and interaction.

Bishop (2002) offers a telling critique of online discussion:

Although asynchronous discussion is supposed to be a benefit of online learning, I found it tedious. Delays of hours or even days between postings killed their spark. Few people contradicted each other and even fewer made jokes. Unable to see each other's body language, and perhaps concerned about surveillance, students chose their words too carefully. (Bishop, p. 234)

In a similar vein, Thomas' (2002) critique of online discussion considers AOD to be incoherent.

For Thomas (2002), this student's quote captures the essence of AOD:

In [face-to-face] tutorials the discussion is much more alive and direct. My ideas can be changed, influenced and appreciated in a more integrated environment. The online discussion forum felt too much like monologue vs. monologue. It needs to be a discussion. (Thomas, p. 261)

It is apparent that Bishop's (2002) and Thomas's (2002) students have experienced AOD as lacking in energy and largely devoid of interpersonal or intellectual connection, probably culminating in a frustrating and unsatisfactory experience. The missing ingredients in their experience can be theorised in terms of Garrison et al.'s (2000) seminal community of inquiry (COI) model. Conceived at the start of the online course era, the COI framework comprises three interrelated presences: social presence, which refers to the projection of self and personality as people interact online; cognitive presence, which refers to the ability to construct meaning through online communication; and teaching presence, which supports the social and cognitive via design and facilitation. Bishop's (2002) experience of online learning implies a lack of social presence because there was little spontaneity or natural interaction, while Thomas' (2002) critique also suggests that the online discussion was less lively. The absence of cognitive presence is indicated by the effect on construction of meaning in both cases, in that Bishop's remark about contradictions and careful word choices implies a lack of challenge, argumentation, or sharing of diverse perspectives. As Thomas concludes, ideas were not changed, influenced, or appreciated to the extent the student expected. By implication, there was a need to improve design and facilitation (teaching presence) to support the social and cognitive elements. This is not to suggest, however, that the teacher must come up with all the answers about how to improve the quality of online discussion. Rather, to inform design and facilitation, it is sensible to consult students and to ask: What do they expect of each other as participants in AOD?

Because learning collaboratively involves students' active involvement in peer interactions, it is important to ascertain what students want from their collaborators. Student perspectives and the student experience are increasingly the focus of practitioner research in open, flexible, and distance learning. It is timely to recognise and attend to the value of student perceptions, and the relevance of doing so has been celebrated in the literature—including, for example, comparisons of student perceptions between online and face-to-face courses (Smothers et al., 2020; Spencer & Temple, 2021), and how students feel connected through online social presence (Peacock et al., 2020). Some studies have looked at what students expect of teaching staff or how they perceive the affordances of the technologies (Fiock et al., 2021; Spencer & Temple, 2021), most recently during remote teaching and learning induced by COVID-19 (Means & Neisler, 2021). However, online communities don't comprise just teachers and technology—they rely on the contributions of fellow learners (Fiock et al., 2021; Garrison et al., 2000; Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018; Peacock et al., 2020). This point has received some recent recognition in research about learner presence, an “emergent construct involving thoughts and actions initiated by students” (Honig &

Salmon, 2021, p. 100). With complex links to the COI framework, learner presence involves regulation and metacognition at individual and shared levels, with implications for what students need from their peers. If class interaction is a precursor to professional learning networks and lifelong communities of learning, the expectations and contributions of peers become crucial. To this end, in the context of an online teacher-education degree programme, the current study asks: What do students expect of peers in AOD? How can surfacing these peer expectations inform pedagogy?

Research context and design

The University of Waikato Bachelor of Teaching, Mixed Media Presentation (MMP), was among the first of its kind in Aotearoa New Zealand. Established in 1997, this initial teacher-education degree course was designed for primary pre-service teachers. It blends on-campus block time, primary school placements and online study. The online study component incorporates AOD as an interactive tutorial opportunity for students, alongside supportive synchronous opportunities. Typically, in a range of subjects in the degree, learning through AOD involves a series of forums, throughout the semester, for students and lecturers to discuss literature and practice that is related to class topics. Topics vary by discipline and curriculum area as would be expected in an initial teacher-education degree, which is inherently interdisciplinary. The context for this study is MMP, in which student teachers in the second year of their 3-year degree were invited to join an online focus group to discuss their perspectives and experience of online discussion. Twelve students volunteered to join the online focus group, opting into a Moodle forum to discuss their ideas about effective learning and teaching through AOD, based on their experience as online students. The focus group continued for 18 weeks, during which time seven of the student teachers volunteered for a series of three semi-structured interviews. The findings reported here were part of a larger study involving both staff and students. In this paper, the focus is on the student participants and their expectations of peers in AOD, with insights drawn from the online focus group and the semi-structured interviews.

The methods employed aimed to co-construct meaning between participants by supporting a social dynamic, via focus groups, interviews, and co-analysis with participants, culminating in microethnographic case studies. Case studies such as those reported here can be regarded as “microethnography”, because the focus is on small units of an organisation and on very specific organisational activity (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 66). Case studies allow us to illuminate a particular situation in order to get a close understanding of it (Yin, 2006) and, in particular, to understand participants’ perceptions of events and their “lived experiences of, thoughts about, and feelings for a situation” (Cohen et al., 2000, pp. 182–3). Collective case studies that incorporate multiple cases, serve to strengthen findings due to the potential for cross-case analysis (Johnson & Christensen, 2008; Stake, 2005; Yin, 2006). Cases replicate each other, producing confirmatory and contrasting illustrations, enabling a fuller picture of localised experience. In this way, case studies are useful if there is a need to discover important features, develop understanding, and conceptualise for further study (Punch, 2009).

The in-depth work involved in an ethnographic case-study design entails a small sample size. In this study, convenience or opportunity sampling involved recruiting student volunteers, and a degree of balance was achieved through negative case sampling by involving students who claimed to dislike AOD. The project received institutional ethical approval and adhered to standard principles of informed consent, confidentiality, and avoidance of harm. Pseudonyms are used in reported student data.

The students’ online focus group was separate from their regular Moodle classes (to distinguish the research involvement from coursework) and from the staff members involved in teaching the students (teaching staff did not have access to the online focus group). Students quickly joined in

and spread the word to their peers, encouraging others to make contact and request access. Overall, the student online focus group remained active for 18 weeks and had 30–40 posts each week. It functioned in part as an opportunity to recruit volunteers ($n = 7$) for individual interviews to explore experiences of AOD in more depth.

Data generation therefore also involved individual semi-structured interviews with seven case-study students, to gather, clarify, and probe interviewee's ideas. Such open-ended interviews, employing semi-structured or interview guide protocols, are useful for enabling participants to express their own perspectives on specific situations. In keeping with the intent of the research, this style of interviewing "is a very good way of accessing people's perceptions, meanings, definitions of situations and constructions of reality" (Punch, 2009, p. 144). The method supports co-constructing research knowledge as researchers and interviewees interact, while individual students tell their stories (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018).

The intentions of the three interviews with seven students were as follows.

Interview one: To explore initial views about AOD and the participant's personal experience of AOD.

Interview two: To co-analyse the nominated asynchronous online discussion/s that were occurring, delving into participants' thinking about the AOD and their intentions for their postings.

Interview three: To complete co-analysis of the nominated AOD by reviewing the forum when it had ended; to consider the key messages emailed to participants based on their first two interviews, and to invite correction and expansion on these points; and to revisit the general aspects of the first interview to consider, in more depth, participants' views and reflections on AOD and their personal experience.

All participants were provided with the information above and the three sets of questions at the outset of the data-generation phase, and were re-sent the questions as a reminder shortly before each interview. The seven students participated in a series of three 45-minute interviews, totalling 21 student interviews. After the first interview, students checked the transcript in raw form, noting modifications, additions, and clarifications. After the second interview with each participant, preliminary analysis involved summarising the participants' key messages. Each participant received a list of key messages in bullet form, along with the raw transcript of their second interview, with a request that they consider the messages with a view to discussing, correcting, and expanding them at the third interview. This led to some useful input, as students used the bullet-pointed statements as a stimulus to probe meanings, provoking extension of thinking and explanation, correction or disagreement, in order to go deeper and arrive at a clearer encapsulation of the participants' views or thinking. Students were later emailed the transcript of their third interview and invited to make final comments.

An inductive approach to analysis meant themes emerged progressively and were tentatively defined and tested against the data, then adjusted and retested until the meanings stabilised, in a similar way to the constant comparative method drawn from grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This method of analysis served to document participants' perspectives and experiences on their own terms, striving to reflect the meanings intended by the participants.

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. They comprise relevant participation, responsiveness to peers, succinct posts, and free-flowing communication.

Relevant participation

Students said they expected their peers to join the discussion promptly and to post regularly. 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 . . . that seems to pervade the discussion . . . 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, 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 such as "fantastic" and "exciting". Thus, "relevance" means the comments were of interest to students, closely linked to the topic of discussion, and timely.

Responsiveness to peers

A related expectation was that peers would acknowledge others and respond to them 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.

[I consider it] . . . 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 backs 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.

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)

Similarly, students emphasised 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 their 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 their course 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 discussion is it keeps me connected to others—this is a lifeline. (Dana)

The correspondence between relevant and responsive contributions is evident; a responsive contribution will probably be timely and relevant to another group member.

Succinct posts

Students referred to the need to keep comments short to avoid dominating discussion and characterised this as “leaving space” for other participants.

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 fourth student expectation related to the style of language used in online discussion. They said it helped them to write as they would talk, 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)

The students expressed 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 in those particular discussions is on showing that literature has been read rather than making real connections to it through group discussion. (Don)

Students characterised 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 might not be seeing in schools, represent expert opinion, and enlarge their experiences vicariously.

Discussion: Two key expectations

The student findings coalesce around four features of discussion in the hope that it is relevant, responsive, succinct, and free flowing. Taking this analysis one step further, it is helpful to further distil two key student expectations of peers in AOD. That is, students expect their peers' contributions to be responsive and free flowing.

In summary, responsive contributions are relevant to the topic, and are timed to ensure they are relevant to the pace of discussion. As well as being responsive to the discussion, responses to individuals are important, and acknowledgement of peers is an important way to convey respectful listening. Contributions or posts that fall short of being responsive tend to be prepared in isolation and are disconnected from the flow of discussion, either disregarding or repeating what has already been raised.

Free-flowing contributions are succinct, appropriate in tone, and couched in plain language. They use literature effectively as a stimulus or support. These contributions avoid the pitfalls of being too long to read, laden with jargon, and/or full of verbatim quotations.

There is support in the research literature for some of these findings in relation to peer facilitation of discussion (Ghadirian et al., 2018; Gikandi & Morrow, 2016; Hew & Cheung, 2012). These studies emphasise the impact of acknowledgement and feedback from peers. As in my study, participants in Hew & Cheung (2012) advocated refraining from citing or quoting sources too often in online discussion. Discussion behaviour relating to pacing or timing of responses (chronemics), and length, style, and choice of words have also been theorised by Al Tawil (2019) in terms of electronic nonverbal communication (eNVC), with implications for students' engagement in asynchronous online learning. Fundamentally, the contributions expected and valued by students in my study illustrate social and cognitive presence and positive interdependence in that the participants expected relational communication and support, in addition to relevant connections that would serve to prompt the construction of meaning (Garrison et al., 2000; Johnson & Johnson, 2009). There are important synergies with the findings of recent Canadian and British studies exploring the experience of online learners in asynchronous courses. For example, in Canada, Oliphant & Branch-Mueller (2018) report that peers were the most positive aspect for over half of their student respondents; that discussion groups helped to create a sense of community; and "the diverse lived experience of other members of the cohort made significant contributions to learning and discovery" (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018, p. 199). Similarly, in a British study, Peacock et al. (2020) discovered the pivotal role of online discussion for generating a sense of belonging via feedback and sharing of contrasting views, as well as providing support and encouragement, to the extent that students who missed discussion felt less connected and were perceived as being less connected by their peers. Importantly, Peacock et al. (2020) note that "the substantial influence of peers was surprising" (p. 29), as "[t]he role of the community and peers in developing a sense of belonging was a key feature for our participants" (p. 30).

Valuing personal prior knowledge as a point of entry is a basic tenet of constructivist learning, and attention to students' personal stories is in keeping with respect for students' voices (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). To learn, however, it is necessary to move beyond one's initial starting point. Learning entails enlargement of experience, and higher-order or critical thinking involves thinking beyond the limitations of one's own personal experience to achieve greater awareness of multiple perspectives and viewpoints. Reviewing the purposes of AOD in a learning context serves as a reminder that care must be taken that discussion is not limited to swapping anecdotes (Angeli et al, 2003; Brookfield & Preskill, 2005). Nevertheless, it is useful for students to articulate and share their personal experience, and when this occurs in a group discussion, the range of personal experience begins to enlarge the perspectives to be considered (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018; Peacock et al., 2020). In the process, sharing promotes empathy, rapport, social presence, and positive interdependence, laying foundations for deeper learning through discussion.

As well as personal experience, teacher-education discussions involve sharing classroom and professional experience, enabling students to theorise practice within the field of study. Opportunities for situated learning and apprenticeship and enculturation into the profession are

promoted, and the range of perspectives is again extended, because students and teachers have a range of professional experience to draw upon. Again, however, the caution regarding uncritical use of experience holds. Just as students can become “stuck in the here and now” of personal experience, so can practical knowledge that is grounded in a local setting become a fixation in the absence of theoretical understanding or awareness of broader contexts.

Although the students in this study offered a range of advice, they placed a great deal of emphasis on three simple behaviours.

1. Active participation

Participants in the study recognised that the community simply cannot be sustained without active involvement from a core group of people. Students characterised this in terms of “courtesy” (Nina), and simply as an “expectation” (Tia). These findings challenge the work of a small number of studies defending students’ rights to read a discussion without contributing actively (e.g., Gulati, 2008; Seddon et al., 2011). Another section of literature reinforces the sense of mutual obligation that holds community together due to generalised reciprocity—where students respond to others because others will, in turn, respond (e.g., Hew et al., 2010). Making time for active participation in online discussion is a challenge, and time management is an area for teachers to address when advising students (Oliphant & Branch-Mueller, 2018).

2. Direct address

Using people’s names when responding is a direct social acknowledgement that communicates social presence by personalising the interaction and signalling active listening. The importance of personal acknowledgement as part of the relational character of communication is reinforced by Lehman and Conceicao (2010), among others. Inclusion can be enhanced by acknowledging several peers in a single message, weaving and synthesising, and concluding a message with an invitation to the wider group to respond.

3. Brevity

A succinct response is less dominant in the conversational space of the forum, allowing room for other interpretations of the topic, and inviting other responses in turn. The literature occasionally mentions brevity as part of netiquette (e.g., Lehman & Conceicao, 2010), and Wegerif (2019) provides useful insight into the reluctance of participants to follow lengthy messages (a long and carefully prepared posting invites a similarly crafted and considered response, which can discourage respondents who may feel intimidated and/or short of time. More recently, Al Tawil (2019) has drawn attention to the significance of length, format, and layout of posts in AOD, suggesting these factors affect students’ motivation, level of engagement, and overall perception of the online learning experience.

Implications

The students in this research explained that they sought exemplars and guidance from experienced online learners. The students needed to know what good discussion looks like. Sharing exemplary responses or vignettes from previous classes can help to clarify expectations related to tone and content, and students can analyse samples to focus attention on how they want their own discussions to be (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005; Fauske & Wade, 2003). This is also an opportunity to surface and deal with students’ own past experiences of discussion, including discussion experiences that might have been less than satisfactory. Along with consideration of effective discussion, students can also identify ineffective discussion behaviours so they can actively discourage them. In the current study, students in the online focus group offered a rich set of recommendations for “newbies” based on their own experience and their expectations of peers (summarised in Table 1). Students also told of modelling or leading discussion for peers

who were new to online classes. In light of the credibility of students' advice, Brookfield and Preskill's use of letters from previous students is compelling. Each cohort of students can be invited to produce "letters from online successors", where students write "exit" letters at the end of their online class, making suggestions for how the next cohort of students might best contribute online (Brookfield & Preskill, 2005, p. 244). Staff and students can then work together to negotiate and modify expectations together over time (Fauske & Wade, 2003).

Table 1 Summary of student expectations and advice

Responsive discussion	
What it is	What it is not
Relevant to the topic Timely Acknowledges other responses	Prepared in isolation Disconnected, tangential Repetitive
Free-flowing discussion	
What it is	What it is not
Succinct Appropriate in tone Plain language Clear Paraphrases literature as a support or stimulus	Too long to read Full of jargon Full of verbatim quotations
Advice and guidance	
Do	Avoid
Discuss the topic at hand, check the relevance of your contribution	Absence from discussion, or posting once and then disappearing
Connect with the topic and thread of the discussion. Follow and extend the thread, or introduce a new direction. In either case, alter the title or subject of your contribution accordingly	Introducing a new discussion topic without signalling the new direction
Read earlier contributions to avoid repeating them	Crafting a full response without reading what has already been discussed
Acknowledge ideas of others before building on them with fresh points	Repeating points made earlier without acknowledgement or advancing the reasoning
Keep posts short (150 words)	Writing a long message, or consecutive posts
Write clearly, as though you are speaking in a class	Using complex terminology without adequate explanation
Relate your own experiences as relevant, but treat these as a starting point and partial perspective. Be prepared to be challenged and to change your point of view	Taking offence when others express a view that differs from your own
Connect insights from readings by paraphrasing the key ideas and applying your own thinking to them	Quoting at length from texts

In summary, students' expectations of their peers in asynchronous online discussion were that peers participate in a relevant and responsive manner and that they make 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. Student feedback indicates that students appreciate the guidelines. They find 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.

While the sample size in this study was (of necessity) small, the findings raise questions for application to wider contexts characterised by AOD and interaction between students. Further investigation could explore the perspectives, experiences, and expectations of students in diverse contexts, inviting students to negotiate mutually agreeable guidelines for peers in online discussion. It is possible that students in degrees unrelated to education and teaching may have quite different insights and expectations of their peers. Application to synchronous discussion and social media would also extend the exploration of student expectations.

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 revisable (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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