Building Capacity to Scaffold Online Discussion: Enhancing students’ construction of knowledge and communication competencies

Final report 2019

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www.fold.org.au
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List of acronyms used

AARE  Australian Association for Research in Education
CHAT  Cultural historical activity theory
CQU   Central Queensland University
DLT   Digital learning thresholds
ESL   English as a second language
FOLD  Fostering online discussion
HDR   Higher degree by research
HSC   High School Certificate
IMPEL Impact Management Planning and Evaluation Ladder
NCSEHE National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education
OLT   Office of Learning and Teaching
PD    Professional development
PG    Postgraduate
RHD   Research higher degree
SFL   Systemic functional linguistics
TESOL Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
UG    Undergraduate
UOW   University of Wollongong
USC   University of the Sunshine Coast
VU    Victoria University
Executive summary

Project context

The literature demonstrates that positive interaction with peers is important in online learning, with benefits such as the development of new understandings and practices, a heightened sense of community, increased student satisfaction and higher retention rates. Asynchronous online discussion has been identified as one of the most-used modes of interaction in online courses offered in higher education.

However, research continues to report that students find it difficult to engage in online discussions, with problems identified as hindering students’ learning including limited interactions among participants, low contribution rates and lack of academic focus. At the same time, the literature demonstrates that factors leading to poor discussion include lack of clarity among teaching staff around how discussion works in online asynchronous contexts; students’ and teachers’ previous experiences with online forums being less than satisfying; and teachers’ lack of time or skill in designing pedagogically sound, engaging online discussion tasks.

The rationale for this project was derived from the lack of a comprehensive guide for effective online discussion that was conducive to both the students’ active knowledge construction and the development of their online academic communication skills.

Aim of the project

The aim of the project was to develop and disseminate a Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education – a resource providing guidance for conducting student asynchronous online discussion as a capacity-building tool to support university lecturers in promoting high-quality technology-based education. The design of the resource was underpinned by a pedagogy of social constructivism, as well as sound teaching and learning theories of sociocultural psychology and linguistics.

Project approach

The project was framed as a two-stage project. The first stage included the development and trial of the Draft Guide for Asynchronous Online Discussion (Draft Guide), which was funded by the Educational Strategies Development Fund (ESDF 2015) and the University Research Committee grant (URC 2015) at the University of Wollongong. The second stage included close collaboration between staff from the lead institution and the partner institutions for further development and dissemination of the Guide (funded by the OLT SEED grant).

The development and refinement of the Guide was achieved through the implementation of the Draft Guide in each of the collaborating institutions. This was followed by a series of discussions and exchanges of the ideas, and the collection of a set of examples taken from a variety of contexts and disciplines in which the Draft Guide was implemented. These disciplines included psychology, social work, TESOL, the basics of conducting and managing research, and professional development in higher education.
The results of the implementation were assessed from multiple perspectives, including students’ perspectives on their participation in the discussions (anonymous survey and reflective assessment tasks); teachers’ and staff perspectives (interviews and feedback); experts’ perspectives (feedback and testimonials); review of student engagement (the platform analytics); and the analysis of texts in the interactive posts (thematic and discourse analysis).

Project outputs, deliverables and resources

The major output of this project is the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education (the Guide), which provides support for staff and students across disciplines when using online asynchronous discussion in their teaching and learning. It comprises evidence-based strategies and discipline-specific exemplars to ensure transferability and adaptability of the strategies across different disciplines and institutions. The Guide was developed and trialled by the lead institution with subsequent trials and refinements at partner institutions.

In short, the Guide includes four interrelated components essential to designing and conducting successful online discussion in an online or ‘flexible delivery’ course:

1. ‘Outcome-oriented task design’ – resulting in discussion tasks that are engaging and explicitly linked to learning outcomes.
2. ‘Explicit communicative strategies’ – academically-oriented online communication strategies are explicitly taught, including examples of language choice.
3. ‘Interactional scaffolding by the lecturer’ – the lecturer’s presence in the online forums ensures that the discussion goes smoothly and that the learning outcomes are achieved.
4. ‘Clear expectations for student participation’ – the requirements for student participation in online discussion are outlined in a clear and simple way.

The Guide is both an online and downloadable electronic resource available at an open public access project website – ‘FOLD’ (Fostering Online Discussion) – www.fold.org.au

Additional resources included are student perspectives and reflections, lecturer vignettes and other complementary teaching materials.

Key findings and the impact of the project

The impact of the implementation and dissemination of the Guide has been evaluated from multiple perspectives, including:

- examination of learning analytics
- thematic analysis of student posts and reflective tasks
- descriptive statistics of an anonymous student survey
- discourse analysis of students’ and educators’ interactive posts
- educator interviews and feedback, and
- expert reviews.

The overall high levels of interaction with peers, as well as the students’ meaningful uptake of the strategies and the language prompts provided in the Guide, indicate the effectiveness
of the Guide for scaffolding online discussion. Students’ positive experiences in online
discussion are evidenced in them feeling connected, obtaining new knowledge and
appreciating the explicit and clear instructions, which made them increasingly confident in
their participation in the discussion.

The Guide has made an impact not only on students’ learning but also on lecturers’ teaching
at the participating institutions, where it has been trialled in flexible learning delivery
programs. The lecturers involved in the project reported that the Guide gave them confidence
when facilitating online discussion for learning and made the process enjoyable for them.
Discourse analysis indicated a strong connection between the interactions and the
development of ideas related to learning outcomes.

The evaluation and dissemination of the Guide indicated the demand for such a resource from
educators, who are seeking theoretically sound and evidence-based guidance to support their
online teaching.

**Dissemination of the findings**

The project findings have been disseminated in a variety of ways, including:

- presentations at a major educational conference, the AARE Conference (at a symposium,
  *Understanding online discussion: sociocultural and discoursal perspective*), and
- dissemination activities within participating institutions, where a number of academics
  expressed interest in adopting the resource and undertaking professional development.

Further dissemination is related to the release of the website www.fold.org.au. Additionally,
several academic publications are at different stages of preparation for submission in peer-
reviewed journals.

**Challenges, limitations and recommendations**

Work on the project did not proceed without challenges, which were mostly of an
organisational nature. Coordinating work with three remote sites – within the time, resources
and scope of the project – proved to be demanding.

We acknowledge that the Guide is limited to asynchronous online forums and does not
address the many challenges of integrating the array of tools available to lecturers and other
subject designers in contemporary flexibly delivered higher education courses.

While the Guide provides straightforward, practical advice on the strategies for conducting
successful online discussion, it is suggested that lecturers who wish to adopt the Guide use it
creatively and adapt it to their own needs. However, it is recommended that they become
familiar with the theories that underpin the Guide – that is, social constructivism and the
concept of scaffolding.

This project found that professional training in using the Guide was beneficial to staff. To this
end, the project participants are currently working on the design of academic professional
development workshops and online modules at partner institutions.
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Chapter 1: Project Context

The aim of the project was to develop and disseminate a resource for fostering student online discussion as a capacity-building tool to upskill university lecturers in the use of asynchronous forums to promote high-quality technology-based education. This was achieved through collaboration with partner institutions to further develop the initial guide (Draft Guide), which was trialled at the lead institution. Broadening the research to other institutions and wider discipline areas enabled the team to develop a comprehensive online resource, the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education, which can be readily implemented in a range of contexts in tertiary education.

The literature demonstrates that positive interaction with peers is important in online learning, with benefits including the development of new understandings and practices, a heightened sense of community, increased student satisfaction and higher retention rates (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). The need for ‘guidelines for online activity’ was reported as being highly rated by educators (Clark, 2001, p. 123). Recent research indicates that explicit instructional activities and teaching strategies are crucial for enhancing the productiveness of asynchronous discussions (Gao, Zhang & Franklin, 2013; Salter & Conneely, 2015). Furthermore, research provided evidence that different teaching styles largely determined the quality and extent of asynchronous online discussion (Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina, 2014).

Facilitating online discussion in asynchronous online forums is becoming more important as they are ‘one of the most used internet-based technologies in higher education’ (Wen-Yu Lee, 2013, p.345) and are ‘increasingly used as a main activity for blended learning’ (Kim et al., 2016, p.1). However, fostering asynchronous online discussion is no easy matter. In the face-to-face classroom, teachers and students naturally draw on a range of meaning-making modes, while in online discussion this interaction is restricted to written language. This means that more is at stake in terms of how participants initiate and sustain interactions, question and clarify information and respond to others’ ideas. Therefore, we argue that explicit guides are necessary to increase awareness of language choices through which the academic content of the subject is collaboratively negotiated.

The practical need for such support is evident in the number of emerging guides developed for specific purposes (Salmon, 2013; Gao et al., 2013). Few, however, have focused on a holistic, theoretically based teaching-and-learning approach in which there is a consistency of advice for both students and lecturers. Fewer still provide exemplars that make explicit the communicative language choices necessary to ensure an effective online discussion.

Theoretical framework

Online interactions (e.g., live chats, video conferencing, online forums) offer a variety of opportunities for engagement in both synchronous and asynchronous modes. Of these, asynchronous forums are the focus of this project because they combine features of oral dialogue with the advantages of written work, i.e., time for re-drafting and reflecting (Comer & Lenaghan, 2013). This ‘mixed mode’ provides unique opportunities for learning through dialogue, which combines reflection on subject content and strategies for communication (Hull & Saxon, 2009).

The project draws on sound teaching and learning theories of sociocultural psychology (Vygotsky, 1978) and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014).
Sociocultural theory allows for conceptualisation of effective social interactions in relation to notions of scaffolding (Verenikina, 2008; 2012), collaborative reasoning (Mercer & Littleton, 2007; Mercer & Howe, 2012) and co-construction of knowledge in online environments (Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina, 2014; Gao, et al., 2013). SFL theory provides the tools for identifying how the quality of learning (i.e., the knowledge constructed) is shaped by the language choices made. The discourse analysis also renders visible the interpersonal dialogic moves between participants – which influence the building of trust, rapport and subject expertise – as well as the effect on students’ engagement in productive online discussion (Delahunty, Jones & Verenikina, 2014). Both social and learning-related interactions are crucial for positive online teaching and learning experiences.

Background
The initial guide (Draft Guide) was developed and trialled by the lead institution. The current project allowed trial and evaluation of the Draft Guide in broader higher education contexts across the four partner institutions, each of which is committed to using digital technologies to deliver flexible opportunities for education to their students.

University of Wollongong (UOW)
UOW is a large regional university with a number of satellite campuses extending from western and southern Sydney to the southern highlands, the south coast and the far south coast of New South Wales. UOW requires all teaching staff to incorporate ‘good practices in digital learning’ to enhance the learning experiences of students, as outlined in its Digital Learning Thresholds (DLT) policy. The DLT policy states that all students must have access to digital learning, and both students and staff are to have clear expectations about the use of digital learning within the curriculum.

Victoria University (VU)
VU is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne, Victoria. VU is committed to high-quality higher education delivered through best use of current and emerging technology. The project was located at the main campus in Footscray Park. The project, Fostering Online Discussion Forums (FOLD), was embedded in a Masters of Teaching research subject in Semester Two, 2016.

Central Queensland University (CQU)
CQU is based in North Rockhampton, Queensland, with numerous campuses across Australia. It offers both distance and on-campus courses. CQU is committed to providing multiple learning experiences and opportunities to enrich the learning journey of students. These learning opportunities assist in the development of discipline-specific skills and generic transferable skills relevant to lifelong learning.

University of the Sunshine Coast (USC)
USC in Queensland is committed to expanding the delivery of learning from its immediate area on the Sunshine Coast to share its blend of quality education and coastal lifestyle with the coastal region, from north of Brisbane to Gympie and the Fraser Coast. Flexible delivery of USC programs allows students to maintain focus on work goals and acquire advanced knowledge and skills. USC enables students to choose a blend of learning on campus and online.
Chapter 2: Project Approach

Overview

The project was framed in two stages. The first stage included the development and trial of the Draft Guide at the lead institution. The second stage involved further development, implementation, evaluation and dissemination of the Draft Guide in collaboration with partner institutions, made possible through the Office of Learning and Teaching (OLT) SEED grant (Fig 1).

Stage 1 (2014-5)
- ESDF funded project @ UOW
- URC funded project @ UOW
- 2 discipline areas: psychology, linguistics
- Output: Draft guides
- Positive evaluations from students’ and lecturers

Stage 2 (OLT Seed 2016)
- UOW partner with USC, VU, CQU
- Additional 3-4 discipline areas
- Output: The Guide - online resource

Figure 1: Two-stage approach to the project

Further details of each of the stages are provided below.

Stage 1: Development and trial

This stage of the project was funded by internal grants from the University of Wollongong – a competitive teaching and learning grant of $10,000 (Verenikina, Jones & Delahunty, 2014–2015) and a competitive research grant of $5000 (Jones & Verenikina, 2014–2015). As a result of this stage (completed in 2015), the Draft Guide was partially developed, piloted and evaluated for online teaching in two disciplines in the Faculty of Social Sciences – psychology and linguistics. At this initial stage, the Draft Guide included only the communicative strategies and examples of language choices.

Stage 2: Refinement, implementation, evaluation and dissemination

The second stage included further development and dissemination of the Draft Guide (created at UOW in the first stage) and its further refinement in collaboration with partner institutions. This stage was conducted in three phases.

Phase 1, February–May 2016: Refinement of the Draft Guide and preparation for implementation of the Guide at the partner institutions in Semester Two

This phase involved further trialling of the Draft Guide at UOW in the discipline areas of psychology (PG), TESOL (PG) and social work (UG). During this phase, the Draft Guide was extended to include additional sections such as task design, interactional scaffolding and clear expectations. The partner institutions identified the following disciplines/courses for Semester Two implementation and evaluation: USC – commerce (MBA) and Foundations of University Learning & Teaching; VU – Masters of Teaching (PG); and CQU – higher degree research (PG).

Phase 1 activities involved:
- regular weekly meetings of the UOW team from February 2016
- resource sharing across partner institutions via Dropbox
- further trialling of the Draft Guide in psychology, TESOL and social work at UOW
- planning for dissemination, and
- consultations with web designers in preparation for establishing the project website.
Phase 2, May–November 2016: Collaboration and Implementation

This phase was crucial for providing support to the partner institutions to implement the Guide in Semester Two. Phase 2 involved all team members and comprised the following activities:

- **Team Meetings**
  - Travel to UOW by team members from VU and CQU (8 and 9 June 2016) and travel to USC by two UOW team members (1 July 2016).
  - At these meetings, partners were presented with the Draft Guide; given an update on the project; and provided with an opportunity for clarification and advice prior to implementation.

- **Training sessions**
  - Each team member developed discussion tasks aligned with subject/course learning outcomes.
  - They were provided with protocols for online discussion in preparation for Semester Two implementation and examples of the linguistic evidence for the effectiveness of the strategies were examined.

- **Ethics approval**
  - An application was submitted to the Human Research Ethics Committee and was approved, first in the lead institution and then in all partner institutions.
  - Ethics approval to collect the data and use it in a confidential manner for reports, presentations and publications was granted by the University of Wollongong on 15 March 2016 (HE13/399). Subsequently, the partner sites sought and were granted ethics approval by their institutions.

- **Implementation**
  - Each partner implemented the Guide in at least one subject at their institution (see Table 1 under ‘Sites’).
  - All partners collected evidence of successful implementation of the strategies in their discipline to contribute to the final draft of the Guide.

- **Evaluation**
  - Interviews with lecturers were conducted.
  - An online anonymous survey was distributed to the students involved.
  - Forum discussion data were collected at each site by the partners.
  - Student reflections were obtained from one site, where a reflective essay was included as part of the student assessment task.

- Discussion and consultation
  - As the Draft Guide was implemented, team members engaged in ongoing shared and personal reflection on the process of implementation

Phase 3, November 2016–February 2017: Consultation in the Analysis, Evaluation and Production of the Final guide, the Website and Formal dissemination.

This phase involved all team members and comprised the following activities.

- Presentation of preliminary findings at AARE 2016 conference symposium (Appendix G).
- Finalisation of the FOLD website in preparation for the presentation and explication of the Guide and preparation for the launch of the website.
• Consultation with the Group of Experts and responding to their feedback to finalise the Guide.
• Evaluation of the Guide by team members.
• Preparation for promoting the Guide in 2017 at relevant forums at the participating institutions – including Wollongong Academy of Tertiary Teaching and Learning Excellence (WATTLE, UOW) and via the Learning Teaching & Curriculum units at partner institutions.
• Preparation of manuscripts for peer-reviewed publications in relevant higher education journals.
• Arranging for the Guide website link to be included on partnering institutions’ relevant webpages (e.g., UOW Learning & Teaching Professional Development modules for teaching staff).
• Academic professional development: beginning the conceptual development of academic staff workshops/online modules for partner institutions.

Implementation of the Guide

During the implementation phase (Autumn/Spring 2016), the Draft Guide informed practice in collaborating institutions as explained below. Some impact details, as they pertain to individual subjects, are also included. More general reflective and evaluative findings can be found in Chapter 3 of this report. The implementation schedule at the participating institutions is summarised in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of implementation of the Draft Guide across institutions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Discipline area/course</th>
<th>Delivery</th>
<th>2016 Semester</th>
<th>No. of students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Educational psychology - Master of Education</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>UG</td>
<td>Social work - Master of Education</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>108</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Education, TESOL - Master of Education</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Education, TESOL - Master of Education</td>
<td>Online and on campus</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VU</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Education – Master of Teaching</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CQU</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Research - Higher Degree Research course</td>
<td>Online</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USC</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Higher education – a course for academic staff</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>Summer</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USC</td>
<td>PG</td>
<td>Research management - MBA</td>
<td>Blended</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

University of Wollongong (Autumn 2016)

The Draft Guide was implemented in three subjects as specified in Table 1. Apart from the project staff – who taught the educational psychology unit – two other lecturers (from a PG TESOL course and an UG social work course) expressed interest and were provided with advice on using the strategies and on task design to foster online discussion. At this stage the
Guide was still in its draft form, so these lecturers had access to the communicative strategies only.

The educational psychology unit was a postgraduate subject unit offered in the Masters of Education (M Ed) course. The subject was completed by a total of 46 students from the M Ed course across various disciplines including TESOL, educational leadership, early childhood, literacy, special education and educational technologies. Besides, one doctoral student (PhD) was enrolled. Four discussion forums were conducted and students were divided into five groups of 8–10 students each. Students from this subject participated in the survey and produced Students’ Reflection Assessment Tasks. Additionally, an interview with the lecturer was conducted. All posts from consenting students were collected for analysis.

Overall, the evaluation of student participation revealed that the discussions had a highly positive impact on their learning behaviours and experiences. Learning analytics revealed that all but one of the students participated in the discussions and posted 1–5 messages per forum. The participation was interactive in style, with students responding to each other and to the lecturer in a productive and positive manner. The lecturer was satisfied with the level of student engagement with educational content, based both on the students’ posts and their reflective essays. The latter revealed the ways the students enhanced their understanding of the learning outcomes through participation in the discussions. A significant number of students (21 out of 46) responded to the anonymous survey, which revealed their positive uptake of the strategies and the discussion with peers. The lecturer’s satisfaction with the Draft Guide was revealed in the interview.

The ‘TESOL’ subject was a postgraduate subject also offered in the M Ed course. The 22 students included 11 off campus (mostly domestic) and 11 on campus (mostly international). The discussion forums were a way of bridging the two groups of students and participation was worth 15 per cent of the total mark. For various reasons, only the first set of communicative strategies was given to students; however, the lecturer described the discussions as going well (‘gangbusters’).

The ‘Social Work’ subject was an undergraduate first-year subject with over 100 students across various campuses. Students met every second week and, on alternate weeks, posted to the forums within tutorial groups. Discussions were assessed at 20 per cent of the total mark and required contributing at least six posts as well as a short reflection for the final assignment. The discussion tasks were around readings, and the purpose of the forums was to ‘force’ students to ‘do’ the readings and become open to others’ perspectives. This was aligned with the course learning outcome of ‘becoming effective communicators’. A number of communicative strategies from the Draft Guide were used and student responses are discussed in Section 3 below). For sample discussion tasks at UOW, see Appendix I.

Towards the end of the semester, the Draft Guide was extended to include four key features of productive online discussion identified during Phase 2 of the project: outcome-oriented task design; explicit communicative strategies; interactional scaffolding by the lecturer; and clear expectations for student participation. These formed the first version of the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education (hereafter ‘the Guide’).

**Victoria University (Spring 2016)**

The Guide was implemented in the capstone unit in consultation with the VU blended learning developer, the unit coordinators and tutors. Ethics approval for the project was received in
March 2016. A total of 55 students were completing the requirements for teacher registration in either the Masters of Early Childhood, Masters of Primary Teaching or the Masters of Secondary Teaching courses. The Masters of Teaching capstone is the last unit in a sequence that includes prior study of research methods in education. The unit learning outcomes included the articulation of the ethical conduct of research; a critical review of current literature in their chosen project; analysis and synthesis of a research project that they have designed and conducted; a creative research project; and demonstrated critical evaluation of research data. Thus, each student had a different research problem to solve.

Blended learning was embedded into the unit through the use of online materials and the explicit use of the discussion forum approach. Participation in the discussion forums was directly linked to contributions and a reflective aspect was embedded into their final assessment piece. Students were organised into tutorial groups, which were further divided into Freirean learning cycles (Souto-Manning, 2010) with 6–8 students in each group.

Four discussions were developed using the principles espoused in the Guide. As this was the first time most students had used a discussion forum in their master’s course, student awareness was prompted through Dr Gilmore attending the unit lectures and tutorials. Students were enrolled in the groups on the basis of their Freirean learning circle membership.

**Sample Discussion Tasks: VU**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Task 1</th>
<th>Online discussion forum introducing yourself and your topic. Communicative strategies: personalising responses by naming, acknowledging others through complimenting and showing support or agreeing.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Task 2</td>
<td>Use this forum to clarify your capstone project questions, data gathering and creativity. Communicative strategies: re-stating, extending on ideas, presenting alternatives.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 3</td>
<td>Approaches to data and deepening your understanding of your educational context and research project. Communicative strategies: presenting alternatives, challenging ideas and justifying your position.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Task 4</td>
<td>Analysis and report writing – ‘My literature and data don’t align – what do I do?’ or ‘Everything is falling into place – have I missed something?’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Explicit instructions for student participation:**

- Posting should be oriented towards an issue or idea that is relevant to you and others in your learning circle.
- Minimum number of postings will be four – one in each forum. If you are unable to attend sessions and learning circles, you are expected to use these forums as appropriate to build collective understanding, support the establishment of a positive social space and construct new knowledge.
• Take a position in your posting. Research is about taking a risk and learning to see in a new manner.
• Use the discussion forums and postings to support your development as a researcher.
• A posting should be no more than 100 words.
• An appendix for the final assignment is attached to use for the reflective part of your assessment.

Data were collected on the basis of a review of discussion forum text in relation to the use of the Guide; the student survey; final assessment data in the reflective narratives; self-reflective data from Dr Gilmore and the tutorial team; and interviews with students.

Analysis was undertaken using Infometrics extracted from the VU Collaborate site, review of student reflective discussions and interviews with some students who volunteered to contribute their time.

**CQU (Spring 2016)**

A research unit, ‘Fundamentals of Research’, was selected as the subject for implementation at Central Queensland University. Successful completion of this subject is the first milestone for higher degree by research (HDR) students. Students from across Australia participated in the online discussion forum established for the subject. The lecturer’s goal was to guide students in providing constructive feedback to others and to help shyer students become more confident in interacting.

**Sample Discussion Task: CQU**

Communicative Strategies: naming, acknowledging, re-stating and extending on ideas.

Extract from explicit *Instructions for student participation*:
Assessment 1: Preliminary Research Topic is due on Friday of Week 2. It requires you to fill out a proforma which will provide me with information about your enrolment, your supervisors and your proposed research topic. Though this is a brief assessment (<2 pages), I would still expect you to send it to your supervisors for their feedback and for you to engage with their feedback BEFORE you submit it for marking.

I will also be requiring you to post some of this information onto the Q&A Forum as a way to introduce yourself to the other students in the course.

When making comments and suggestions on other people’s work, please use the following communicative strategies:
- Address the person(s) you are responding to by name(s).
- Acknowledge what they have written in some way by complimenting (e.g., something that has impressed you, such as an idea, an experience, etc) or supporting/agreeing with something they have written.

Re-stating: this is to rephrase, clarify or refine an idea which may also reflect your perspective.

Data were collected from learning analytics on students’ participation, lecturer feedback and formal teaching evaluations of the course.
Sample discussion tasks

(i) Strategies for building collective understandings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After reading, summarising and reflecting on Chapter 2, ‘Effective Classroom Teaching’:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Refine your journal entry on your personal belief about effective teaching.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Watch the video ‘Dangerous minds’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• After watching the video, review your beliefs about effective teaching with emphasis on engaging students in the learning process.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Create a thread in the forum on your views, with emphasis on the ways of engaging students in the learning process from the video ‘Dangerous minds’.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Respond to at least two other posts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips for responding to others’ posts:
In reflecting on your responses, consider how they build a collective understanding.
You may like to take one of these actions:
• Restate or refine an idea.
• Extend an idea by adding a new insight or a new perspective.
• Present an alternative perspective to enrich the discussion.

(ii) Strategies for advancing critical discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>After reading Chapter 5, ‘Using effective assessment to promote learning’, engaging with the journal activities in online Module 3, ‘Focus on assessment and feedback’ and reading the article by Nicol and MacFarlane-Dick (2006):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1) Watch ‘Assessment for learning’ by Dylan William (a resource on the use of formative assessment practices) or ‘I want to be a starting tailback’ (an example of assessment for learning which adds an interesting twist on the principles of assessment).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2) Create a thread and write, from your perspective:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• What are the fundamental principles to be considered when ‘assessment is at the heart of learning’?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Have these principles prompted you to rethink your stance on assessment?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3) Respond to at least two other posts.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tips for responding to others’ posts:
In reflecting on your responses, consider how they advance the critical discussion by thinking more broadly and deeply about the principles of assessment.
You may like to take one of these actions:
• Present an alternative perspective to enrich the discussion.
• Challenge the principle(s) to stimulate the discussion towards new understanding.
• Justify your position by providing further evidence to explain your understanding.

Data were collected through participant and lecturer feedback together with learning analytics regarding posting density.
Chapter 3: Project Outputs, Findings and Evaluation

In this chapter, the major outputs and deliverables of the project, as well as the main findings related to the implementation and evaluation of the Draft Guide, are presented.

The outputs of the project include:

- the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion (the Guide), and
- the project website – Fostering Online Discussion, www.fold.org.au

The main findings related to the implementation and evaluation of the Draft Guide that contributed to the development of the Guide and FOLD website include:

- student engagement with communicative strategies
- student survey
- student reflections
- discourse analysis
- educator interviews and feedback, and
- expert views.

Outputs of the project

The Guide

This project allowed the project team to develop, implement and refine the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion – a comprehensive online resource to build the capacity of teachers to engage learners in productive online discussion across a range of discipline areas.

The Guide includes:

- principles of design, pedagogical rationale and exemplar activities that build the skills of productive online discussion for a range of disciplines
- dialogue protocols in the form of language-based strategies to initiate, maintain and sustain interactions in online discussion (for both students and lecturers), and
- exemplar activities which embed the use of dialogue protocols in activities which lead to co-constructed knowledge.

The Guide includes the principles in relation to the four interrelated components essential to designing and conducting successful online discussion in an online or flexible delivery course.

- ‘Outcome-oriented task design’: the discussion tasks are engaging and explicitly linked to learning outcomes.
- ‘Explicit communicative strategies’: academically-oriented online communication strategies are explicitly taught including examples of language choice.
- ‘Interactional scaffolding by the lecturer’: the lecturer’s presence in the online forums ensures that the discussion goes smoothly and that the learning outcomes are achieved.
- ‘Clear expectations for student participation’: the requirements for student participation in online discussion are outlined in a clear and simple way.
The aim of the Guide is to provide the guiding principles, which are not prescriptive but can be used by university staff creatively in their work with online discussion forums.

The Website (www.fold.org.au)

The FOLD website – ‘Fostering Online Discussion in Higher Education’ – is an open access resource. The screenshot (right) is an early version of the website prototype (see Appendix H for more detail or visit the website). The website features the Guide, together with numerous additional resources. An ‘About’ page provides information about the project and the team as well as a link to the Final Report. There are four main topic sections: the Guide, Student Perspectives, Lecturers’ Vignettes and References, which also includes project presentations and resources. The Guide can be read on screen with the option to download a PDF version. Hyperlinks are provided throughout the text to other resources on the website.

Lecturer vignettes were created from interviews with staff and provide snapshots of their experiences. The next section focuses on students’ perspectives, including quotes from an anonymous online survey and a reflective assessment task.

Findings and evaluation

Student engagement with the communicative strategies

Student engagement in the discussion was evident in the ways that they adopted and/or adapted the communicative strategies suggested by the lecturer. Below are examples of analysis of the discussion posts in relation to the students’ use of adopted/adapted communicative strategies. The strategies introduced in the Guide were found to be very amenable to adoption by students across the institutions. The strategies highlighted in the students’ postings include:

- **Building a positive social space**: naming the person; agreement with/acknowledgement of someone else’s idea/contribution through complimenting them or the ideas; and showing support by agreeing with them or the idea.
- **Building a collective understanding**: re-stating for the purpose of clarifying, refining or reflecting; extending on ideas to add more information or perspective to someone else’s; presenting alternatives by proposing a different perspective to allow broader discussion.
- **Extending knowledge and creating new understandings**: challenging the ideas to stimulate further discussion; justifying your position by providing further evidence to explain your understanding.
Overall, the analysis demonstrated that students were able to assimilate the suggested strategies and make them their own by embedding them in meaningful, authentic online conversations. Some examples of authentic messages are presented below, with the strategies used indicated in brackets [...].

I agree with your comment, S. [NAMING] [AGREEMENT/ACKNOWLEDGE] about the importance of teachers 'staying current' in order to engage their students and understand new approaches [RESTATE]. I do think though (from my short time teaching) that there is a problem with professional development in schools [ALTERNATIVE]. It can be difficult to get opportunities if you are in a rural location.

Thanks for sharing your ideas [ACKNOWLEDGE]. You’ve made some meaningful points here about Jessica’s active role as a teacher in enhancing her students’ intrinsic motivation and engagement in class [RESTATE] … On the other hand, Matt’s suggestion on the system of external rewarding has no universal effect [ALTERNATIVE].

I agree with your responses, A. [NAMING] to the scenario we have been given [AGREE]. I share your thoughts on Jessica presenting some positive strategies to help in the development of intrinsic motivation [RESTATE]. As you have both alluded to [ACKNOWLEDGE], this is the type of motivation we want to build and support in our students.

Hi, M. [NAMING]. I enjoyed reading your reasons for supporting both strategies [ACKNOWLEDGE]. I think Matt’s idea for using an extrinsic motivator to initially engage the students would work well if the students are showing a complete lack of interest in classroom activities [ADDITION].

Wow, that’s a great quote, A. [NAMING & ACKNOWLEDGE]. I agree [AGREE] that Jessica’s methods are more likely to enhance her students' intrinsic motivation and in the long term [RESTATE], as you have found in your own classroom [ACKNOWLEDGE], this will give the students confidence and a sense of achievement. I think, by comparison, Matt's suggestion could be detrimental in the long term [ADDITION].

Hi, N. [NAMING], I too, have wondered about the 'negative impacts' of extrinsic methods [ACKNOWLEDGE & RESTATE] … The whole point system or tally system becomes far too distracting and can be viewed as a competition between classmates, the focus is on “winning” rather than learning [ADDITION].

I agree with your post, M., and also believe both strategies have a place in the classroom [AGREE & ACKNOWLEDGE]. In particular, I support your view on the extrinsic reward system [ACKNOWLEDGE]. Working in a school that deals with students who are very oppositional and failing in mainstream high schools, we do utilise a very rigid extrinsic reward system [ADDITION].

Hi N., K., and A. [NAMING]. Everyone seems to agree that extrinsic motivation does not work on children for very long, yet the whole education system is built on it [CHALLENGE]. Study hard, get a good HSC result so you can have a good job so you can have the good life with cars, electronic gismos and all the modern gadgets to make life wonderful!

Building collective understandings in discussion using the above strategies allowed students the opportunity to unpack their understandings of the content and become more confident in expressing a range of perspectives, experiences and opinions in relation to a case. The need
to justify or defend their understandings provided students with opportunities to actively create their understandings of the learning and apply them to explaining the dilemma presented in the case. The contradictory opinion presented by the characters of Jessica and Matt encouraged the students to actively debate their views, thus comparing and contrasting different opinions. Overall, the strategies introduced in the Guide were found to be very amenable to adoption by the students across the institutions.

Student survey

The online survey was administered to students at the end of the semester (June and November 2016), and returned anonymously (see Appendix C). The survey questions were grouped into four themed sections with a total of 18 questions, using a mix of Likert-type ratings and qualitative comments. The first six questions gathered relevant demographic information such as institution, course, gender, age and whether English was a first or subsequent language. The remaining questions were themed around (a) the usefulness of the forum guidelines, (b) participation in discussion and learning, and (c) sense of community. The final questions gave students the opportunity to add other comments about their experience of participating in the forums or make suggestions for improvement (for more detail on the survey questions and descriptive statistics, see Appendices C and D).

Descriptive statistics of student survey responses

A total of 59 surveys were returned, with two of these incomplete and subsequently removed from analysis (#57 and #58). The survey was administered by UOW (across three courses, a semester-long unit of study within a degree or program) and VU (one course), with 39 responses from UOW and 18 from VU. No surveys were returned by CQU and USC, although student feedback was sought at both sites. Surveys returned from courses at UOW and VU are detailed in Table 2 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 2: Student survey – by institution/course</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Level</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW UG (Social Work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW PG (Ed Psychology)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW PG (TESOL)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VU PG (M. Teaching)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents (84 per cent) were female. Most students (76 per cent) identified English as their first language while 24 per cent (n=12) indicated English as a second or subsequent language. Over a third of students (39 per cent) were in the 25–34 age group, with 78 per cent being 25 or over. More information on student demographics can be found in Appendix E.

Students’ responses

Overall, students indicated the guidelines were helpful when participating in discussion forums (90 per cent) and almost two-thirds of students said they always referred to the guidelines before posting or did so often or sometimes (27 and 33 per cent respectively). In terms of the communicative strategies, 90 per cent of respondents indicated they were useful, with comments such as:
- It led me to converse rather than post. (#36)
- They provided me with a good basis for structuring responses, particularly if my response voiced disagreement with the previous forum post. (#4)
- The examples of the wording I could [use] when responding to my colleagues was insightful and a good guideline. (#17)
- They were helpful in that they encouraged me to reflect on the purpose of my responses. (#10)

The majority of students (61 per cent) felt very confident or quite confident in using the communicative skills in other contexts and further 31 per cent selected an option “somewhat confident” without further comment. Some characteristic comments are below

- The communicative skills and strategies incorporated into this course are easily transferable to other subjects and will be of great benefit when participating in future asynchronous online discussions. (#1; very confident)
- I applied these skills in other subjects too and [they] were really helpful (#35; quite confident)

In terms of the effect of the discussion forums on learning the course content, the majority (60 per cent) felt that participating was very helpful or quite helpful with another 19 per cent indicating participation was somewhat helpful. The remaining 21 per cent felt it did not make much difference to their learning.

- The online forums developed my learning through interaction with others – something I miss out on being a distance student. (#3)
- I would have absorbed nowhere near as much without the opportunity to consolidate my understanding through cooperative dialogue with my peers. (#10)

The students’ response to the involvement of the lecturer in the discussion was also explored. The majority of students (84 per cent) were very satisfied or quite satisfied with the lecturer’s participation while a few felt it didn’t matter to them, or were unsure (six and 10 per cent respectively).

- The lecturer’s contribution was vital. I found that it reinforced or clarified the discussions. More importantly a few responses confused me and the lecturer was careful to point out any misunderstandings of the theory. I found that I kept logging back in to check for her contribution as I valued it as part of my learning. (#38)
- I liked that our lecturer did not become too involved in the forums, preferring instead to leave their comments until the end of the forum. Otherwise they could have become too much of an authoritative voice which may have deterred us from taking risks with our contributions. (#4)

Feeling a sense of belonging was important for most of the students (90 per cent) in varying degrees from very, quite and somewhat important (43, 29 and 18 per cent respectively). The remainder said that it wasn’t important for them.

- Absolutely helped when I got a response. I was surprised at how disappointed I felt when I didn’t get a response. Feeling connected was extremely motivating. (#38)
- Having people respond to your posts makes you feel included and part of the group, which is particularly important for off-campus and online learners. (#4)
As far as enjoying their participation in forum discussions, most of the respondents said they always or often enjoyed it (35 and 29 per cent respectively), while almost a quarter (23 per cent) indicated they enjoyed it sometimes. Only 13 per cent indicated they did not enjoy participating.

For more details on the survey results see Appendix D.

**Student reflections**

**UOW, Educational psychology unit**

In this subject, the students had to complete an assessment task in the form of a reflective essay that required them to think how participation in online discussion assisted their learning. To complete the task, students were asked to revisit their posts and provide specific examples of their interaction with other students in relation to specific ideas and concepts that they had discussed. The task was presented to the students as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Statement:</strong> Social constructivist theorists believe that</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>[E]very function in the child's cultural development appears twice: first, on the social level, and later, on the individual level; first, between people (inter-psychological) and then inside the child (intra-psychological). (Vygotsky, 1978, p. 57)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Task:** Discuss the idea that social interactions play a fundamental role in effective learning and teaching. Reflect on your participation in the Online Discussion Forums. You should consider the ways that your interactions with others in these forums influenced your learning in the subject. In your reflection, provide specific examples to support your argument. Then, using your reflection and relevant reading, consider what this means in your practice as an educator. |

To complete this assignment you will need to participate in Online Discussions, using the Discussion Guides provided on Moodle. Note: while the quality of your participation in online discussions is not assessed, the quality of your reflection is part of the assessment criteria.

Each student reflected on their own participation and shared their experiences and thoughts. The main themes that emerged from the thematic analysis of students’ reflections included:

- safe and supportive environment – was encouraging and motivating
- enriched individual learning outcomes – resulted from shared experiences
- clear instructions and scaffolding – assisted interactions and learning with others, and
- authentic scenarios – triggered prior experiences

Below are characteristic quotes from the students’ reflections in relation to the above themes (pseudonyms used).

**Safe and supportive environment:** All students stated that the forums provided a safe and supportive environment in which their opinions were accepted and valued. They appreciated the positive social interactions and attributed this to the design of the discussion. Only one student expressed mixed feelings as some of her posts were not answered as promptly as she expected. Overall, the positive environment helped students feel part of the community and allowed them to freely express their ideas. Positive feedback from fellow students motivated further participation. Below are characteristic quotes.

- The manner of interaction in the forum was positive by design and was strictly adhered to by all participants and this reduced any feelings of anxiety about making contributions. (Alex)
• The approval and praise of my peers was the stimulus that increased my desire to learn. (Melanie)
• There was a level of professional respect and it was evident that each participant was able to clearly state why they had chosen their preferred method. (Mary)
• Positive strategies – such as complimenting each other and finding common ground to agree on – created a sense of belonging within the forum. (Joanne)

Enriched individual learning outcomes: All of the students provided specific examples of how their knowledge was enhanced as a result of communication with others. Specifically, they referred to real-life experiences, diverse views and the multiple perspectives of the group that enriched their individual views and understandings.

• One of the most valuable aspects of participating in the online discussion forums was the opportunity to hear the unique perspectives and experiences of my peers who came from a diverse range of backgrounds and teaching areas. (Jamie)
• A strong engagement level was present within the discussion as each student posted a response to the previous, building on their answers and providing a different approach to the objective. (Erica)
• The ability to socially interact was valuable in learning the content as ideas proposed by others allowed an examination of different perspectives and the responses. (Alex)

Clear instructions and scaffolding: While reflecting on their participation in the forums, the majority of the students (39 out of 46) referred to the importance of the clear instructions and the supporting resources that were provided for them in this subject. Characteristic responses include:

• I found the forum guides a fantastic tool I could utilise to aid the construction of my posts. (Katrina)
• The reflective contribution by the facilitator after each discussion cycle was incredibly useful in acknowledging responses, elaborating further and creating a response. (Harry)
• Teacher presence [was] particularly valuable in prompting increased sharing of experiences and guiding extended discourse in relation to certain aspects being discussed. (Alana)

Authentic scenarios: Many students (27 out of 46) noted the value of authentic scenarios provided for the discussions, which triggered the participants’ prior experiences and therefore made the discussions relevant to their workplace. Some examples include:

• [B]y drawing on real-life, case-based scenarios, the forums also provided an invaluable opportunity to read and understand my fellow educators’ pedagogical beliefs. This helped me to conceptualise my own pedagogy as a work in progress. (Jamie)
• I related content to past experiences, identified changes in personal practice, and worked towards the co-construction and negotiation of knowledge whilst actively reflecting on the beliefs that influenced and guided my actions. (Alana)
• I have been able to effectively connect what I am learning to previous experiences and possible future situations within my field and make connections with other like-minded learners. (Mary)

More quotations from students’ reflections can be found on the FOLD website.
VU, masters and bachelor courses in Teacher Education

In these courses, students were asked to complete reflective narratives for their assessment tasks. In their comments, the majority of students recommended keeping both the Freirean learning circles and the discussion forums going. They provided a number of reasons for this.

First, the visibility among peers of their respective research projects seemed to give students confidence in creating new possibilities for their own research projects. One student commented in her reflective journal (the discussion forum) that it ‘encouraged me to build alternative ways of thinking about the data and how to conduct my research.’

Second, the discussion topics offered a focus for and link to the purposes of their research projects. For example, developing a creative piece in the context of a research project was a very unfamiliar approach for a majority of the students and most were puzzled and challenged by the possibilities in this part of the capstone. The discussion forums reinforced ideas through both teacher engagement online and having the contributions of colleagues in a visible, safe space, which meant students who were not always able to physically attend could view ideas and progress online.

Third, students appreciated the professionalism that the FOLD principles elaborated. For example, one student in the survey commented that they ‘gave you helpful tips on how to conduct the response in a professional and engaging manner’. Clearly the FOLD principles have improved student experience and engagement in their emerging professionalism as researchers in their own classrooms.

CQU, ‘Fundamentals of Research’ unit

All but two students participated meaningfully in the discussion. They shared their views on the use of the Guide with their lecturer. They expressed their satisfaction with the discussions and identified that they valued the impact of other students’ feedback on their projects. The student formal teacher evaluations were positive, with the majority of students (10 out of 13 respondents) agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were satisfied with the quality of the course. In written feedback, students referred positively to the discussion forums and suggested improvements for the next year (e.g., the posting of a summary of the projects prior to the discussion). The lecturer plans to continue using the Guide in subsequent offerings of this subject, with improvements suggested by students.

USC, Professional learning course for academic staff

The majority of participants (80 per cent) engaged in the discussion in a meaningful way, posting two to three comments each with one or two responses to others’ postings. The participants were asked to provide anonymous comments on the usefulness of the discussion guides (titled ‘Tips for responding to others’ posts’). At the time of writing this report, responses had been received from 40 per cent of the participants. The participants noted the importance of the ‘Tips’ in framing the discussion as follows.

- [T]he tip box helped to keep focus on the actual discussion rather than going off on a tangent.
- Helped by prompting us to engage more deeply than just saying ‘oh yes good point’ or ‘oh yes I agree’.
- Tips – gives useful structure – so don’t just waffle.
• Give them insight into how to write reflectively – difficult – so skill needs to be practised and encouraged.

Because the participants in this course were lecturers, they also noted that this approach would be useful to adopt with their own students.

**Discourse analysis**

Discourse analysis of forum interactions around a case study in the educational psychology unit (offered at UOW) provided insights into the ways in which the social and experiential strategies outlined in the Draft Guide worked in concert to build understandings about scaffolding, a key concept in educational psychology. In the analysis, linguistic data from one discussion forum (five discussion chains, 31 posts over two weeks) were divided into turns (taken by participants) and clauses (1 clause = 1 idea) and then coded for the strategy used (sometimes a turn contained more than one strategy). Because the strategies introduced by the lecturer in this discussion forum were those oriented towards establishing a positive space and those for building collective understanding, the linguistic data were coded accordingly.

The discourse analysis allowed close examination of the nature of the collective knowledge built across the discussion. A ‘first pass’ over the forum responses revealed three different contexts in which participants located their understandings about scaffolding: practical, specialised and theoretical. With respect to the practical contexts, participants (most of whom are educators) talked about specific instances of what they did in the classroom to support their students. In the specialised contexts, participants referred to scaffolding techniques and practices more generally, often locating these concepts in curriculum and associating them with other educational concepts, such as engagement and assessment. In the theoretical contexts, participants referred explicitly to theory, such as social constructivism and reading theories. Using insights from recent work in the sociology of knowledge (Maton, 2014), such shifts were labelled over the duration of a discussion according to whether the knowledge under negotiation was practical, specialised or theoretical in orientation. This enabled the shifts in conceptual understanding across the discussion to be mapped (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 Mapping shifts in conceptual understanding during a forum discussion (Jones, Delahunty & Verenikina, 2017)](image_url)
Colour coding indicates the ‘pulse-like’ nature of the socially supportive moves, occurring as participants (‘interactants’) introduce themselves and respond to previous posts. Other responses are coded for the nature of the knowledge under construction. The palest colour indicates a practical context, a mid-strength tone indicates a specialised context and a dark tone indicates a theoretical context. The mapping shows that most of the discussion is concerned with practical contexts, as participants located their understanding of scaffolding in terms of their professional lives. Specialised contexts were referred to as participants discussed the importance and contributions of scaffolding to learning generally. The dark shaded contributions occurred just twice, the second of which concludes the discussion. This mapping suggests that, in this particular task, the participants’ experiences of the classroom contribute significantly to knowledge building, enabling them to generalise key concepts of scaffolding. At the same time, in this discussion participants are less occupied with theory and more with practical implications and generalisation.

This finding underscores the importance of considering the place of the asynchronous forum in overall subject or unit design. Analysis of this particular forum not only confirms the importance of collective reflection on the critical concepts offered by the asynchronous discussion forum through opportunities for shunting back and forward between experience and generalising, but also affirms the place of other elements of pedagogic design – such as the expert lecture, the literature and the written assignment – as sites for sustained engagement with theoretical contexts. Thus, it can be argued that further investigation of the range of online tools used, as well as their contribution to students’ learning experiences, is needed.

**Educator interviews and feedback**

Interviews with teaching staff revealed the value of the Guide through lecturers’ reported increased confidence and positive attitudes towards designing and conducting online discussions. Interviews were semi-structured and conducted face-to-face or by phone. Three interviews were conducted within the timeframe of the project; however, these lecturers had a range of experience: two were full-time lecturers and had some experience of facilitating online discussions (L1 and L2) and the third (L3) was a part-time lecturer who had very little experience in conducting online discussions. Two were from UOW and one from CQU. Only one lecturer had access to the first version of the Guide, while the other two used the ‘communicative strategies’ component only (the strategies and the rationale for them). Therefore, for ease of reading, in this section we refer collectively to the use of the strategies or of the Guide hereafter as use of the ‘guidelines’. The lecturers’ perspectives are presented as vignettes on the website (see Lecturer Vignettes at [www.fold.org.au](http://www.fold.org.au)).

The interview questions sought to obtain in-depth insights into the nature of the lecturers’ experiences both before and after using the guidelines (Appendix F). When asked about their previous experiences of facilitating online discussion, lecturers tended to express a sense of dissatisfaction. Language used to describe these experiences (in relation to discussion forums for large classes, with a high percentage of ESL students) included ‘unfeasible’, ‘logistically … a nightmare’, ‘messy’ and ‘overwhelming’. Lecturers also mentioned issues including students who ‘didn’t communicate’, lack of participation and lack of interaction. General dissatisfaction was summed up aptly by L1 as ‘I wasn’t happy … I didn’t like it’. After lecturers began using the guidelines they were asked how helpful these were. Each felt the strategies were easy to
understand, straightforward, clear in their intent and based in common sense, noting that students obviously understood them as they were using them ‘appropriately’ (L1).

Acknowledging that not everyone communicates in the same way, one lecturer felt that the guidelines provided good grounding for communicative skills: ‘it works and it gives everyone a clear expectation’ (L2). Another found the guidelines gave the forums structure, as the instructions were ‘really simple and straightforward and easily adapted to my particular circumstance’ (L3). Discussions were also ‘a lot more polite ... more personable’ as students direct more meaningful responses to the person (L2). Another observation made was that students seemed to be

\[\text{taking a lot more notice of what people are saying and responding a lot more appropriately and, rather than just putting on their own comments just for the sake of having to pass a course, they are actually taking note of what people are writing and adding their own thoughts. (L2)}\]

To gain insight into the effectiveness of the guidelines, the lecturers were also asked about ways in which they benefited from the experience, including changes in attitudes/feelings towards facilitating forum discussion or heightened awareness of the different skills when communicating online. One lecturer commented that change involved ‘my whole expectation of online learning’, with a realisation that students need motivation to interact – they ‘are not likely to just get up and talk without some sort of reason’ (L2). L1’s attitude towards facilitating online discussion changed ‘drastically, opposite, 180 degrees’, transforming from ‘I didn’t like discussion’ to ‘now I love it, I really love it’. For one lecturer, her whole expectation of online learning changed as well as her attitude towards discussion forums: ‘I could see that with me posting comments as well and the responding, they knew what the expectation was’ (L2).

In addition to the three interviews, feedback from participating staff at USC also noted ‘the significance in the articulation of these guides, stating the kind of richness this verbalises and making the implicit explicit by putting it into words’. Report from USC staff indicated that the

\[\text{implementation of the Asynchronous Online Discussion ... resulted in a more active student discussion forum than previous offerings of [this subject]. Students were very polite to each other and praised the positive aspects of other student submissions. The students felt confident making suggestions or asking questions.}\]

Expert views

Expert Group members also provided feedback at different stages of the development of the Guide. Dr Russell Cross provided his feedback to the project as symposium discussant when project members were presenting at a conference. His ideas are summarised in this section (with the full version of his analysis presented in Appendix G). Professor Jan Herrington and Dr Cathy Stone gave their feedback on a draft of the Guide and then expressed their views on the final version of the Guide, which are presented below.

Professor Jan Herrington
Murdoch University, February 2017.

\[\text{The Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education is a timely and exceptional resource for online lecturers wishing to maximise the effectiveness of discussion}\]
forums in learning management systems. It provides a model of four essential principles that can guide the design and implementation of online forums, to truly maximise the benefits for students. As such, it provides guidelines that go beyond the types of advice frequently found, such as ideas and tips for ‘ice-breakers’.

This Guide far exceeds these low-level approaches, to systematically take the designer/lecturer to facilitate deeper levels of communication. The Guide cogently explores the difference between online contributions – where individual posts accumulate without meaning – to true collaboration through reciprocal understanding and development. I highly recommend this Guide to beginning and experienced online lecturers in higher education.

**Dr Cathy Stone**
Equity Fellow and 2017 Visiting Research Fellow, University of Newcastle, February 2017.

This is an extremely useful guide for those teaching online, addressing the importance of ‘teacher presence’ in promoting not only learning but also a sense of engagement and belonging to a learning community. Building learning and engagement through asynchronous discussion is particularly important, as the flexible nature of online learning means that students are engaging with learning materials at varying times, hence synchronous activities can be problematic and often poorly attended. It is this flexibility of being able to fit their studies in around other life commitments, at irregular times, which attracts many students to online learning; therefore the asynchronous activities provide the key to their learning, and need to be as engaging, relevant and interactive as possible.

Beginning with a clear description of each of the four components fostering asynchronous discussion, the Guide then expands on each of these, with practical and detailed examples of how to put each of these components into practice, in order to deliver an engaging and quality online learning experience. The list of references at the end of each section adds value to this guide, enabling users to expand their knowledge further. The authors are to be congratulated on producing this guide, which fills a significant gap for the many academics teaching online, who are seeking ways to better connect with their students asynchronously, to help students engage with content in meaningful, constructive ways, thereby enriching and deepening their learning.

Dr Stone referenced the Guide in her 2017 Fellowship Report for the National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education (NCSEHE) and received inquiries from some colleagues requesting the Guide, as the website was not yet live at the time of publishing her report. She shared the Guide with Gillian Hatt, Student Wellbeing Advisor at Curtin University, and Dr Jill Downing, Course Coordinator in the Faculty of Education at the University of Tasmania.

**Dr Russell Cross**
The University of Melbourne, December 2016.

Dr Cross provided his detailed feedback at the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) Symposium, at which the findings of this project were disseminated (see Appendix G). He pointed out the timely nature of the project given staff at universities are currently required to deliver online education regardless of whether the institution has any history or track record of online teaching and learning. Academics today are required to teach with technologies and strategies to which they have not been exposed as students nor trained
in, which is a very real problem. Therefore, the Guide will be highly anticipated by educators in tertiary education.

Dr Cross noted that the strength of the project is that it is evidence-based. The evidence-based scholarship demonstrated by the project team is important for moving ‘teaching and learning with technologies’ forward. All the papers presented at the symposium established a genuinely robust and deeply empirical account of what works effectively when engaging in this new instructional space. Dr Cross concluded his presentation by saying:

_Focusing on the systemic collective that comes together to form the community of learners, this work helps illuminate the rules, mediation, and other contributing influences that work to both enable and constrain the possibilities that exist in the online space that we take for granted through other modes_

_I really look forward to where this is going – and particularly the guides that are coming out early next year. I can’t wait for this guide coming from this OLT Seed project to be released!_

As Dr Cross requested, the final draft of the Guide was emailed to him to share with his colleagues at The University of Melbourne.
Chapter 4: Project Impact and Dissemination

The impact of this project in the context of teaching and learning in higher education is that its major output, the Guide, is a self-sustaining resource that provides non-prescriptive strategies and exemplars, which teachers can adapt to their particular teaching contexts. The self-sustainability of the Guide bodes well for transformative online practices and continuing professional development for teachers. The Guide is accompanied by a website, which provides additional resources and examples for educators to use when designing and managing discussions in their online courses.

The Guide has been well received by students and lecturers involved in this project. It has already made an impact on students’ learning and lecturers’ teaching at the participating institutions where it has been trialled, in flexible learning and online delivery programs. Student surveys, teacher interviews, student reflections and discourse analysis of discussion texts used for evaluation of the Draft Guide revealed highly positive feedback from the majority of participants. The lecturers involved in the project reported that the Guide gave them confidence in facilitating online discussion for learning and made the process enjoyable for them. Discourse analysis indicated a strong connection between the interactions and the development of ideas related to the targeted learning outcomes, and showed that these interactions helped create a positive social and emotional environment, with the acquisition of essential, transferrable online communicative skills evident for both students and teachers.

The evaluation and dissemination of the Guide indicated the timely manner of its delivery. There is high demand for such a resource from educators who are seeking theoretically sound and evidence-based guidance to support their online teaching.

In this chapter, the project impact is summarised using the ‘Impact Management Planning and Evaluation Ladder’ framework (IMPEL, 2016), followed by an outline of the major dissemination activities that supported the impact of the project. Finally, avenues for further potential impact of the project in the near future are suggested.

The IMPEL model of the project

Table 3. Impact and dissemination of the project using the IMPEL framework

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IMPEL rungs</th>
<th>Changes at: Completion of the project (C); One year Post-completion – P (1) and Two years Post-completion – P (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| 1. Team members | C  • Staff professional development (PD): develop explicit knowledge and skills for facilitating online discussion  
               • Continuing staff PD: transferability of skills – increasing confidence in and awareness of conducting online discussion  
               • Development of instructional resources for other staff at partner institutions  
               P (1)  • Initiating the use of the Guide in other courses within the participating institutions  
               • Staff career development: publication of the project findings |
| 2. Immediate students | C  • Development of online communication skills: feeling connected, enhanced acquisition of the learning outcomes  
               P (1)  • Improved student experience, confidence; Improved student retention  
               C  • Availability of the Guide as an open online resource |
### IMPEL rungs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>3. Spreading the word</th>
<th>Changes at: Completion of the project (C); One year Post-completion – P (1) and Two years Post-completion – P (2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Included link to the website in email signatures; announcements in participating institutions’ news/media</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>P (1)</strong> Submitted at least two peer-reviewed papers in academic journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>P (2)</strong> Published three to four peer-reviewed papers in academic journals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Narrow opportunistic adoption</td>
<td><strong>P (1)</strong> • Respond to interest from other faculties/schools in partnering institutions • Assist development of continuing PD modules for staff at partner institutions’ Learning, Teaching &amp; Curriculum units</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>P (2)</strong> Guide adopted by other discipline areas in partnering institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Narrow systemic adoption</td>
<td><strong>P (1)</strong> • Facilitate and support adoption of the Guide in faculties/schools in partner institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Broad opportunistic adoption</td>
<td><strong>P (1)</strong> • Sustainability of resources: maintenance and update of the website and the Guide for 5 years, to enhance broad opportunistic adoption • The website and the Guide: analytics on frequency of hits and downloads, user type • The Guide and supporting workshops presented to other institutions • Target new adopters based on website analytics</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>P (2)</strong> • The Guide adopted by other institutions • Publications in academic journals released and disseminated through the website</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Broad systemic adoption</td>
<td><strong>P (2)</strong> • Investigating potential sources of funding to support a broader dissemination of the Guide</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

---

### Dissemination activities supporting the project impact

#### AARE Conference presentations

**Conference symposium**

The project team organised a symposium at the Australian Association for Research in Education (AARE) International Conference, Melbourne, in November–December 2016 based on the project outcomes (see further detail at Appendix G). The symposium was titled ‘Understanding online discussion: sociocultural and discoursal perspectives’. Associate Professor Irina Verenikina chaired the session and Dr Russell Cross (The University of Melbourne) was the discussant. Dr Janine Delahunty (UOW), Dr Pauline Jones (UOW), Dr Gwen Gilmore (VU) and Dr Jo Luck (CQU) delivered the symposium papers (presentations are available on the [FOLD](#) website). Approximately 20 people attended the session.

The aims of the symposium were to disseminate the findings from the project to a national and international audience; to flag the upcoming FOLD website; and to ascertain interest in future dissemination activities. The symposium was conducted for the Sociocultural and Activity Research Special Interest Group. The project used sociocultural approaches to learning and language but the participant presentations added related different theories and approaches. This illustrates the richness that complementary theories can bring to research sites. As discussant, Dr Russell Cross summarised his views of the presented work individually...
and collectively. He emphasised the significance of intersection between theory and practice, which is a characteristic of this project (see Appendix G for full text).

**SIG workshop**

Associate Professor Irina Verenikina delivered a talk at a workshop for the AARE Sociocultural and Activity Research Special Interest Group. The talk was based on the findings from the project and was titled ‘Scaffolding asynchronous online discussion: Students’ perspective’ (see the [FOLD](#) website for the presentation). The talk stimulated a great deal of interest from academics and anticipation of the Guide being released soon.

Some academics who attended the symposium and the workshop expressed their interest in the implementation of the Guide. These included Dr Kim Dang, Monash University, Office of Learning and Teaching; Dr Russell Cross, The University of Melbourne; and Professor Tuija Turunen, University of Lapland, Finland.

**Dissemination at the participating institutions**

Public presentations, as well as discussions of the project with colleagues at partner institutions, resulted in expressions of interest for applying the Guide as follows.

- **Peer Learning Unit, UOW:** developing online Peer Learning with a small internal grant. Melissa Zaccagnini, the Peer Learning Unit Manager, UOW, has expressed interest in using the Guide to support a pilot Online Peer Learning program.
- **Academic Development & Recognition, UOW:** Interest expressed in developing discussion tasks for UOW ‘Introduction to Teaching’ online program for sessional staff.
- **PG Education TESOL, (capstone) subject, UOW:** the lecturer trialled the guidelines in 2016, and redeveloped the forums in Semester One 2017 using the Guide.
- **Educational psychology unit, UOW:** the lecturer continues using the Guide; he has developed additional tasks using the Worksheet.
- **PG Early Childhood subjects, UOW** – the lecturer will adopt the Guide for teaching two subjects.

Further activities identified by the project team partners include:

- promoting the Guide at relevant forums at the participating institutions, including Wollongong Academy of Tertiary Teaching and Learning Excellence (WATTLE, UOW; CQU) and via the Learning Teaching & Curriculum units at partner institutions
- arranging for the Guide website link to be included on partnering institutions’ relevant webpages (e.g., UOW Learning & Teaching professional development modules for teaching staff)
- developing workshops and online modules for academic professional learning at partner institutions
- continuing use of the Guide and redevelopment of the forums in the 2017 PG Masters of Education (capstone) subject at VU
- continuing use of the Guide in ‘Fundamentals of Research’ unit, CQU, making amendments based on students’ suggestions, and
- sharing the Guide with other lecturers at USC with a view to its implementation in other courses.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

Project key findings

This project resulted in two major outputs:

- the Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education, and
- the website, www.fold.org.au, which provides additional and complementary resources.

The Guide proved to be useful to students and lecturers involved in this project, as was evident in student survey responses, student reflections, discourse analysis of discussion materials and lecturer interviews. The dissemination of the findings through the major educational forums revealed a demand for the resource in the field of higher education. This view was endorsed by the expert reviews, which were in agreement that the Guide is a highly needed and timely educational resource.

The analysis of the project findings using the IMPEL model demonstrated the scope of its impact on the field both currently and potentially. Current dissemination activities are ongoing to ensure continuous dissemination and increased impact in the future.

Essential to the success of the project was the training and professional development of participating staff in relation to the major principles of fostering asynchronous online discussion. While specific resources were provided, it was important that staff understood the general approach so they could adapt and adjust the resources to their specific contexts, the discipline of study and the needs of their particular cohorts of students.

Project success was also ensured by the willingness and interest of participating staff, who were thoughtful and enthusiastic in making use of the resources offered by the Guide. The Guide reaffirms the importance of lecturers’ presence, expertise and commitment to ensuring quality learning takes place.

Challenges and limitations

The project was not without challenges, mostly of an organisational nature and particularly in relation to the timeframe and scope. The initial challenge arose even before the start of the project, with a change in participating staff occurring in two partnering institutions, USC and CQU. This change had an impact on the project resources in relation to establishing the new partnership in terms of familiarisation and building trust with new participants. This was partly responsible for a delayed start to the implementation of the Guide at the partnering universities, which were unable to begin data collection until Autumn 2016; naturally, they needed lead-up time to be able to plan in preparation for the second semester. Subsequently the whole team meeting was delayed until June 2016, with members from only three of the four partnering institutions able to attend. As staff from the fourth institution were unavailable, two partners from the lead institution arranged an additional meeting at their site to ensure all the partnering institutions were well-informed about the project. After the joint points of reference were established, the Guide was implemented at all the sites; however, ongoing communication with three remote sites placed constant demands on the resources available to the project in relation to the timeframe and the scope of the project.
While the strength of the project was in its diverse participants, this also brought some challenges. The participants adapted the Guide from the perspectives of their academic disciplines and course organisation, which tested the extent to which the guiding principles of participation in online discussion can be adjusted. For example, when participation in online discussion was made assessable in one of the courses, the lecturer found that some students plagiarised others’ discussion comments.

Finally, we acknowledge that the Guide is limited to asynchronous online forums and does not address the many challenges of integrating the array of tools available to lecturers and other subject designers in contemporary flexibly delivered higher education courses.

Recommendations and future directions

This *Guide to Fostering Asynchronous Online Discussion in Higher Education* articulates a set of principles to help university lecturers and other teaching academics in the higher education sector to set up and conduct successful asynchronous online discussions for students in distance or flexible delivery courses. These principles are based on theory, a review of the literature and research trials conducted in the four participating institutions.

While the Guide provides straightforward practical advice on strategies for conducting successful online discussion, it is suggested that lecturers who wish to adopt it should approach it creatively and adapt it to their own needs. However, to do this successfully, it is recommended that lecturers take a thoughtful approach and become familiar with the theories that underpin the Guide, namely social constructivist approaches and scaffolding. This is particularly important in relation to ‘interactional scaffolding’, in which a contingent response is required from the lecturer to address questions and issues as they arise.

It is recommended that users of the Guide consider the major principle of the purpose of a forum in the overall subject design, asking such questions as: How does a forum co-ordinate with other modes of delivery, such as face-to-face lectures and tutorials and individual study? How does it align with other online tools, such as quizzes and video content?

It was the finding of this project that professional training for staff should occur to maximise the impact of using the Guide. The team members in this project are currently working on the development of academic professional development workshops/online modules at partner institutions.

Due to the upsurge of online learning options – and the subsequent need for regional universities to keep abreast of trends – online teaching and learning practice that fosters excellence in delivery will have immediate and long-term benefits for staff and students in the participating institutions and beyond.
Bibliography


Richardson, J. C. & Ice, P. (2010). Investigating students' level of critical thinking across instructional strategies in online discussions. The Internet and Higher Education, 13(1-2)


Scott, K. S., Sorokti, K. H. & Merrell, J. D. (2016). Learning ‘beyond the classroom’ within an enterprise social network system. The Internet and Higher Education. 29, 75-90.


Appendix A

Certification by Deputy Vice-Chancellor (or equivalent)

I certify that all parts of the final report for this OLT grant/fellowship (remove as appropriate) provide an accurate representation of the implementation, impact and findings of the project, and that the report is of publishable quality.

Name: Prof. Joe Chicharo  
Date: 16/3/2017

Signature: Joe Chicharo
Appendix B: Student Evaluation – Survey Monkey

1. [OPENING PAGE: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET] Agree/Not agree

DEMOGRAPHICS INFO (check boxes unless stated otherwise):

2. Your university: UOW  VU  CQU  USC

3. The subject / course is: undergrad  postgrad  other [comment box]

4. The delivery is: online only  blended/flexible  other [comment]

5. My gender is: female  male  other

6. My age range is: under 24  25-34  35-44  45-54  over 55

7. English is: first language  second language  other [comment]

GUIDE FOR COMMUNICATION IN ONLINE DISCUSSIONS:
These questions related to the usefulness of the guidelines and communicative strategies for participating in online discussion

8. How helpful did you think the guidelines to the communicative strategies were for you when participating in the online forums?
   i. □ very helpful
   ii. □ somewhat helpful
   iii. □ did not matter
   iv. □ not very helpful
   v. In what way/s? [TEXT]

9. Did you refer to the guidelines before posting your responses?
   i. □ sometimes □ often □ always □ never

10. Were the communicative strategies helpful to you when thinking about how to construct your responses?
    i. □ Yes □ no
    ii. If YES, in what way/s? If NO, how could they be improved? [TEXT]
11. How confident would you feel about applying these communicative skills to other online subjects which use discussion forums?
   i. very confident
   ii. somewhat confident
   iii. not very confident
   iv. not sure
   v. Any other comments? [TEXT]

CONSTRUCTING KNOWLEDGE: Your experience of how/whether online discussion assisted your learning

12. How helpful was discussion forum participation in terms of your learning?
   i. very helpful
   ii. quite helpful
   iii. somewhat helpful
   iv. didn’t make much difference
   v. not sure
   vi. Further comments? [TEXT]

13. How helpful were the responses of others in helping your learning of the content?
   i. very helpful
   ii. quite helpful
   iii. somewhat helpful
   iv. didn’t make much difference
   v. not sure
   vi. further comments? [TEXT]

14. Do you feel you gained more knowledge about the subject matter than if there were no discussions?
   i. yes  no  not sure  other: please specify [comment]

15. How did you feel about the lecturer’s participation in the discussion forums?
   i. very satisfied
   ii. quite satisfied
   iii. didn’t matter to me
   iv. not sure
   v. What feedback do you have about the role of the lecturer participating in the online forums? [TEXT]
SENSE OF COMMUNITY

These are the final questions and relate to participating in discussions for creating a sense of being in a learning community

16. How important was it for you to feel a part of the learning group (sense of belonging)?
   i. □ very important
   ii. □ quite important
   iii. □ somewhat important
   iv. □ didn’t matter to me
   v. □ not sure
   vi. Did this help or hinder how you participated? [TEXT]

17. Did you enjoy participating in the discussions?
   i. □ yes, always
   ii. □ often
   iii. □ sometimes
   iv. □ not really
   v. Can you give the main reasons for your answer? [TEXT]

SUGGESTIONS:

18. Do you have anything else to add about any aspect of your experience of participating in discussion forums, or suggestions for improvement? [TEXT]
Appendix C: Student Survey – Descriptive Statistics

Summary

A total of 59 surveys were returned, with two of these incomplete and subsequently removed from analysis (#57 and #58). The survey was administered by UOW (across three courses) and VU (one course). To date there are no surveys returned from CQU and USC.

Note:
1. Demographic information such as age, gender and English language was added after the survey had opened; thus, the first eight responses do not contain this information.
2. *Skipped* responses will not be included in the remaining analyses.

General demographics information

Descriptive statistics from the 57 completed surveys, with the breakdown by institution.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>57</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VU</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CQU</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>USC</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Surveys returned from courses at UOW and VU.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>57</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UOW UG (Social Work)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW PG (Ed Psychology)</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW PG (TESOL)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VU PG (M. Teaching)</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The majority of respondents were female, with the gender ratio shown below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>57</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Skipped</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondents ranged in age from under 24 to over 55, with one-third being in the 25 to 34 age group.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age ranges</th>
<th>57</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 24</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>19%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25 to 34</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>35 to 44</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>45 to 54</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>55 or over</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Skipped</em></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
For the majority of respondents English was their first language, with 24% indicating English was a second or subsequent language.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English is my:</th>
<th>49</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>First language</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second/subsequent</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Quantitative responses: overall and by institution/course

1. How helpful were the guidelines when participating in online discussion forums?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Guidelines were:</th>
<th>N=52</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter to me</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very helpful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Results by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>70%</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter to me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter to me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

2. Did you refer to the guidelines before posting your responses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I refer to the guidelines:</th>
<th>N=52</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>33%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>20</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Always</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Often</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sometimes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Never</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
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<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW Social Work</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
<th>17</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Always</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Often</strong></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sometimes</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Never</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3. Were the communicative strategies helpful to you when thinking about how to construct your responses?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communicative Strategies were useful:</th>
<th>N=48</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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<th>19</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>11</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>19</td>
<td></td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>4</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
<th>14</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Yes</strong></td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td></td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>No</strong></td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td></td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4. How confident do you feel about applying these communicative skills to other subjects or contexts?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Applying skills to other contexts:</th>
<th>N=52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very confident</strong></td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Quite confident</strong></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Somewhat confident</strong></td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not very confident</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not sure</strong></td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution/Course</th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very confident</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite confident</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat confident</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very confident</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. How helpful was discussion forum participation in terms of your learning in the subject?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participation in discussion and learning</th>
<th>N=52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t make much difference</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution/Course</th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t make much difference</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution/Course</th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t make much difference</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

6. How helpful were the responses of others in helping your learning of the content?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Others’ responses for learning</th>
<th>N=52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t make much difference</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very helpful</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite helpful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat helpful</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t make much difference</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Do you feel you gained more knowledge about the subject matter than if there were no discussions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gained more knowledge than if no discussions?</th>
<th>N=50</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Breakdown by institution/course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>65%</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sure</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>18%</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UOW UG Social Work</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>yes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>no</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

8. How did you feel about the lecturer’s participation in the discussion forums?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lecturer’s participation</th>
<th>N=52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very satisfied</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite satisfied</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not sure</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Breakdown by institution/course:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very satisfied</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite satisfied</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>didn’t matter to me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>very satisfied</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>quite satisfied</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>not sure</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>didn’t matter to me</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 9. How important was it for you to feel a part of the learning group (sense of belonging)?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of belonging is:</th>
<th>N=51</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG TESOL</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very important</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite important</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat important</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Didn’t matter</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### 10. Did you enjoy participating in the discussions?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enjoyed participating</th>
<th>N=52</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Often</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not really</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skipped</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Breakdown by institution/course

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW PG Ed. Psych</th>
<th>UOW PG</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Always</strong></td>
<td>9 45%</td>
<td>3 27%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Often</strong></td>
<td>5 25%</td>
<td>5 45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sometimes</strong></td>
<td>6 30%</td>
<td>2 18%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not really</strong></td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>1 9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>1 1%</td>
<td>1 6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UOW UG Social Work</th>
<th>VU PG M. TEACH</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Always</strong></td>
<td>1 25%</td>
<td>5 29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Often</strong></td>
<td>2 50%</td>
<td>3 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sometimes</strong></td>
<td>1 25%</td>
<td>3 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Not really</strong></td>
<td>0 0%</td>
<td>6 35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td>2 1%</td>
<td>1 6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix D: Student Survey Demographics Summary

Note: demographic information on age, gender and English language was added after the survey had opened, and thus the first eight responses do not contain this information.

Student Survey: Demographics Table – all respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>University:</th>
<th>Course</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age range</th>
<th>English is</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
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<td>7</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>UG Social Work</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG TESOL</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
<td>SKIPPED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG TESOL</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>55 years or above</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG TESOL</td>
<td>female</td>
<td>35 to 44 years</td>
<td>First</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>UOW</td>
<td>PG Ed Psych</td>
<td>male</td>
<td>35 to 44 years</td>
<td>First</td>
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Appendix E: Lecturer Interview Questions

1. What has been your previous experience of facilitating online discussions?

2. Comparing online discussions without communicative strategies, and those of this subject which had explicit communicative strategies:
   a. How helpful were these strategies for you as facilitator/mediator?
   b. How easy were they to use/understand?
   c. What improvements/changes could be made?
   d. In what way/s do you think the students benefited (or not)?
   e. Did your own attitudes/feelings towards facilitating online discussions change at all? In what way/s?
   f. Did the quality or effectiveness of the online discussions change? In what way/s? Can you give example(s)?

3. How has your own awareness of the different skills for communication in online discussion changed/been influenced by these online discussion strategies?

4. In what way/s did being involved in online discussion influence the quality of your online teaching experience?

5. Have there been any lasting benefits of this online experience that you can tell me about?

6. The Instructor Guide: if you were given access to the Productive Online Discussion: An Instructor Guide, how useful was this to you?

7. What did you find most helpful about the Guide?

8. What do you think is lacking?

9. How could we improve the Guide to be more useful?

10. Is there anything else you’d like to add or suggest?
Appendix F: AARE Symposium Presentations

TUESDAY, 29 NOVEMBER 2016

Robin Banerjee, Sue Kilpatrick, Sarah Fischer, Marcel Karran
University of Tasmania, Launceston, Australia

Presentation 1: Equipping Parents to support their children’s aspiration: What works?
Presentation 2: Parents Matter
Presentation 3: Facilitating school-parent-community partnerships throughout Tasmania

SIG: Sociocultural Activity Theory | John Landy Room, Members Stand
Type: Symposium
Chair: Pauline Jones
Discussant: Irina Verenikina and Russell Cross

Understanding online discussion: socio-cultural and discoursal perspectives
In collaboration: Green Glories, Pauline Jones, Irina Verenikina
Victoria University, Melbourne, Australia; University of Wollongong, Sydney, Australia; Central Queensland University

SIG: Social Justice | Horn Ebeling Room, Members Stand
Type: Individual Presentations
Chair: Erica Southgate

Travels in extreme social mobility: Prestige, professional identity and the ‘price of the ticket’ for first-in-family medical students
Erica Southgate
University of Newcastle, Callaghan, Australia

AARE Symposium abstract (November 2016, Sociocultural SIG)
Chair: A/Prof Irina Verenikina
Discussant: Dr Russell Cross

Title of Symposium: ‘Understanding online discussion: sociocultural and discoursal perspectives’.

The aim of the symposium was to present preliminary findings from the implementation of The Guide for Productive Online Discussion (hereafter ‘the Guide’) across four Australian universities. The Guide was developed in response to a lack of explicit support for effective online discussion in which knowledge can be co-constructed. It was designed to support and upskill university lecturers and students in the use of asynchronous forums, as asynchronous forums are a frequently used mode for discussion in higher education. Their appeal lies in the flexibility about when participants (students and staff) engage in dialogue so that opportunities for reflection and re-drafting are increased.

The literature demonstrates that it cannot be assumed that lecturers or students have adequate online communicative skills for engaging in productive discussion – which can often be less than satisfying experiences – and that such skills need to be explicitly taught (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). The project aims were twofold: to support lecturers in scaffolding student participation through tasks designed to promote effective discussion (as opposed to dutifully ‘posting’ responses) and to improve student understanding of their learning. This was achieved through providing explicit strategies for engaging in the forums for the purposes of building sociality and co-constructing knowledge.

The project is a partnership of four universities led by the University of Wollongong together with University of the Sunshine Coast, Central Queensland University and Victoria University,
Melbourne, as part of an Office for Learning and Teaching (OLT) project (Ref: SD15-5131). The presentations involve two of the four participating institutions. The project moves beyond providing information about communication protocols, such as Email Etiquette (2018), to explicit evidence-based strategies for engaging students in learning and for understanding ways of communicating effectively in technology-mediated environments. As part of routine teaching practice, a range of students (undergraduate and postgraduate) studying in a variety of modes (i.e., flexible delivery, fully online) were provided with specially designed communicative tools to support them to engage in productive forum discussion.

This symposium relates different strands and findings emerging from the participating universities, using sociocultural approaches to learning and language to illustrate the richness these complementary theories can bring to research sites. The colloquium began with a brief introduction to the project followed by presentation of four papers drawn from three of the four participating institutions. Final discussion was facilitated by Dr Russell Cross (The University of Melbourne) and Associate Professor Irina Verenikina (University of Wollongong) around such questions as:

- What can we learn about the nature of online teaching from the project?
- What are some of the barriers to engaging in online discussion from the perspectives of staff?
- What, if any, principles for the design of online discussion tasks are emerging from the study? Are these generic or discipline-specific?
- What is the contribution of contemporary work in fields such as educational linguistics and sociology to sociocultural theory?

Presenter 1: Dr Janine Delahunty (University of Wollongong)

Evaluating a guide for productive online discussion: lecturers’ perspectives

Ready or not, teaching staff in higher education are expected to embrace various technologies in learning and teaching. For online discussion to be productive, lecturers need not only to be cognizant of the complex relationship between interpersonally and experientially oriented dialogue moves, but also be aware of language choices through which the academic content of the subject is collaboratively negotiated. Thus it is important for lecturers (as well as students) to understand how to manage this mode of communication, in which face-to-face pedagogies are not directly transferable due to the gap created by separation in time, place, physical and geographical location and the ‘interruption’ this creates for discussion (Delahunty, Verenikina & Jones, 2014). This paper reports the experiences of staff at a large regional university. First, it presents data collected through an anonymous online survey for the purpose of understanding lecturers’ needs, and provides a contextual backdrop for how online discussion was experienced by staff across two faculties. Second, it describes the implementation of the Guide, specifically the attitudes and opinions of interviewed lecturers who used the Guide. The project sought to better understand the experience of lecturers using online forums for co-constructing knowledge from the perspectives of cultural-historical theory (originated by Vygotsky, 1978), which allows us to conceptualise effective social interactions through notions of scaffolding (Hammond & Gibbons, 2005), and systemic functional linguistics (SFL) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014). Combining these frameworks allowed us to explore the lecturers’ conceptions of the role of dialogue in the teaching-learning experience. Using the SFL resource of appraisal (Martin & White, 2005), close examination of attitudes and opinions was enabled through a comprehensive range of
descriptive categories for evaluative language choices that lecturers used to reflect on their experience.


**Presenter 2: Dr Pauline Jones (University of Wollongong)**

**The dynamic life of ideas: Collaborative knowledge building in asynchronous online forums**

This presentation explores the dialogue generated in two asynchronous online forum discussions when students and staff in an educational psychology unit were provided with an interaction guide to facilitate collaborative knowledge construction. The analysis is informed by the dual perspectives of systemic functional linguistic theory (Halliday, 1978) and sociocultural theory (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2010). Combining these frameworks allowed us to explore the dialogue from both the broad contextual or macro-level perspective of contemporary knowledge practices in tertiary settings and the unfolding or micro-level language choices as participants interact move by move to construct the learning environment. Because SFL theory approaches cognition from the perspective of meaning-making, the linguistic data provide useful insights into students’ learning and the co-construction of knowledge (in other words, their changes in meaning-making) (Halliday & Matthiessen, 1999). Our major interest here lies with tracing the ways in which core concepts or ideas from educational psychology are introduced into discussion, how they are negotiated among participants, and the nature of common understandings arrived at. Preliminary results showed the guides fostered a high level of involvement of all the students in peer interaction and an apparent consciousness about the relationship between interpersonal and knowledge-based contributions. Drawing on systemic functional linguistics (after Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004; Martin & Rose, 2007), the analysis reveals the fluid nature of ideas, the relations between academic concepts and students’ everyday and professional experience, and the role of carefully orchestrated language choices in creating intersubjectivity. In this way, we gain insights into ‘the sequential and contingent development of concepts over time’ (Daniels, 2010); in other words, in what Maton (2014) has described as the ‘wave-like’ nature of knowledge building. The contribution of Maton’s work in the sociology of knowledge enables us to profile the unpacking of theoretical concepts into accessible forms of knowledge and their repackaging into more abstract ideas through the forum contributions by participants. Thus, the importance of the interpersonal as the gateway to the experiential (Halliday, 1993) is evident. The findings suggest a unique place for the asynchronous online discussion forum in enabling the interplay of guided reflection, sociality and individual reflexivity. They also confirm the importance of the expert as mediator in the process of collaborative knowledge construction.


**Presenter 3: Dr Gwen Gilmore (Victoria University)**

Asynchronous symbolic mediation in Masters of Education teacher education. So what do the tools do for student learning?

Masters of Education students should expect that their online interactions develop and link with pedagogical capabilities and capacities for their teaching careers. Students and tutors are increasingly expected to engage in online processes to enhance their student learning and experiences. However, limited attention has been focused on how tutors design these online experiences to negotiate meaning, synthesise information and apply new information to enhance these students’ experiences (Gao, Zhang & Franklin, 2013). In addition, while it is possible to argue that online discussions allow for more time to be thoughtful and reflective (Hawkes, 2006), asynchronous discussion forums may not be the best way to support collaborative and conversational learning models (Thomas, 2002). Australian research is starting to clarify the importance of online communications that go beyond requiring participation through question responses, through assessment-related means, for example, but there are few exemplars and guidelines for tutors in designing online communications (O’Shea, Stone & Delahunty, 2015, p. 54).

The project draws on trialogical approaches for knowledge creation, to bring to the fore the learning practices and artefact processes as a basis for understanding epistemic activity (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014). Trialogical processes aim to enhance processes on collaborative knowledge creation with concrete outcomes (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014, p. 54). The trialogical approach itself is based on ‘theoretical traditions on learning where practices, object-orientated and artefact-mediated processes are emphasized as a basis for understanding human cognition and epistemic activity’ (Paavola & Hakkarainen, 2014, p. 53), and thus builds on activity theory (Engeström, 2003) concepts. Activity theory further enables a rich analysis of the context through the use of subjects, objects, tools, community, roles and outcomes within this online learning context. I also draw on symbolic mediation concepts drawn from Kozulin (2003) to present a rich analysis of this blended learning environment including my own self-reflective diaries, a student survey and interviews with some students.
in this unit. In addition, this research the aim is to make more explicit collaborative student communication through the development of focused cases and communication dialogues to enhance collaborative design. This presentation illuminates how and why symbolic mediators, productive online discussion forums, enables students to clarify (or not) their interpersonal and learning skills. The findings from this project could inform future asynchronous learning contexts for Masters of Education courses.


O’Shea, S., Stone, C., & Delahunty, J. (2015). ‘I feel’ like I am at university even though I am online’: exploring how students narrate their engagement with higher education institutions in an online learning environment. Distance Education, 36(1), 41-58. doi: 10.1080/01587919.2015.1019970


Presenter 4: Dr Jo Luck (Central Queensland University)

Creating a research community for distance students: Using guided asynchronous online discussion groups.

Central Queensland University is a regional university based in Rockhampton in Central Queensland. Many of the HDR students are enrolled as distance students and rarely get to meet other RHD students in person. ‘Fundamentals of Research’ is a unit designed to provide guided support for RHD students to prepare their ‘confirmation of candidature’ document. Despite actively encouraging the students to use the Question and Answer forum on the course Moodle site to connect with other RHD students, the students communicated primarily with the course coordinator but not each other.

In Term 2, 2016, guided asynchronous online discussion groups were implemented to act as a catalyst in the creation of a research culture among the RHD students. Utilising student and lecturer guides created by Delahunty (2014), three tasks were designed to foster conversations among the students about their own individual research projects, issues faced by RHD students when first embarking on their study and resources that they found useful and wished to share with other students.

This paper reports on the experiences of the course coordinator as she aimed to create a sense of community among the 2016 RHD student cohort. Data collected were personal reflections, student postings on the online discussions, data on which posts were accessed and how often, and an anonymous online survey.

The findings reveal how the student-to-student interactions changed as a result of the guided
Building capacity to scaffold online discussion


Discussant notes: Dr Russell Cross

(1) The discussant provided a detailed feedback to the symposium participants with a clear positive view of the presented findings and ideas.

Being a discussant on the symposium was one of the most valuable things for me – I can say that I learned so much from the presentations in terms of how my own online teaching can be improved in this area. I was invited to be discussant because of my expertise in sociocultural and theory and linguistics underpinning the project, however I did not know much about online teaching, and online discussion.

Some specific comments in relation to presentations:

Just for a bit of context – going back to Gwen's point on the importance of the history in person, is that Melbourne itself (as in the university) doesn't have a history of track record of online learning, so it is something that it often feels like we're doing in the blind and Janine's reference to 'hit and miss' really resonates with me. So actual evidence-based scholarship like this for moving teaching and learning forward is so important.

And I think this is what all the papers shared in common – establishing a genuinely robust, and deep empirical account of what works effectively when engaging in this new instructional space. Academics today are having to teach with technologies and the strategies that they were not exposed to or been trained into as students themselves, and this is a very real problem. It's one worthy of the type and quality of research profiled here in terms of what it is trying to address.

The challenge, just as Gwen reminds us (with a little prompting from John), that the experiences have to be just as high-quality, purposeful, and engaging as if we were to depend on any other mode – but that is a real challenge when we don't have a strong experience let alone knowledge base on which to advance some kind of agenda.

I think in Janine's paper the findings resonate with my own feelings – particularly the quote from one of lecturer’s interview: ‘Students don’t feel that this forum is real: it’s like a log book students write the night before it is due! This is (partly) my fault!’

But what I also think is really illuminating here is the extent to which instructors were self-critical of their capacity and responsibility for struggle with using online space effectively – and this was revealed through the deeper systemic functional linguistics analysis of appraisal in Pauline’s presentation.
The analysis Pauline presents helps make really visible and transparent the importance of the oscillation between the interpersonal moves and the professional, theoretical, and most abstract.

And this is something that I think we would be hoping to achieve in the transformation of the students' everyday spontaneous experience, into evidence-based, shared professional and disciplinary knowledge.

Gwen’s research reminds of the significance of the person – as an historical subject with a life and lived experience beyond that of the detached asynchronous virtual space that we are attempting to engage with pedagogically – and ways that can still be effectively achieved in the online environment.

Focusing on the systemic collective that comes together to form the community of learners, this work helps illuminate the rules, mediation, and other contributing influences that work to both enable and constrain the possibilities that exist in the online space that we take for granted through other modes.

The scary thing for me, and this also leads into one of the questions I’ll raise at the end, is just how heavily dependent the students seem to remain reliant upon the instructor to continue to apprentice them into the community, and sustain it — I suspect from Janine’s references to the guide earlier that there are solutions to this, and I look forward to seeing how these really real challengers might be possibly better handled.

Jo’s final paper was interesting in that it turns to Actor Network Theory to frame possible ways forward – and I say interesting here because it’s a useful reminder how much of the sociocultural and activity theory (CHAT) work in the mid-1990s was about human-computer interaction, and how much CHAT can continue to lead the knowledge building and research in this area given its cross links with learning, collaboration, virtual spaces and tools, and language.

But together these papers don’t just leave us with problems, but tools that provide a possible solution and set of answers (as well as raising new questions). I really look forward to where this is going — and particularly the guides that are coming out early next year.

I can’t wait for this guide coming from this OLT Seed project to be released!

Some question for the future work:

- How are workloads for lecturers going to be managed?
- What will we count as quality of teaching and learning – should they be the same or different to face-to-face pedagogy, for example in relation to autonomous learning/independence/etc. in the asynchronous space?
Appendix G: The Website ‘Fostering Online Discussion’
A snapshot of the home page of www.fold.org.au

### HOME PAGE

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Appendix H: Workshop Model of Task Design

1. A task and Worksheet example for educational psychology unit at UOW

The task as presented to the students:

Read the case below:

Jessica is an experienced year 4 teacher. In conversation with a new teacher, Matt, who just joined the school, she is saying: ‘Kids these days don’t listen as well as they used to. They spend less time attending to things and we have to do a lot more to engage them’.

She then asks Matt’s opinion on a couple of strategies that she wants to use. She explains that students might be more motivated if they accept responsibility for their learning. Her class is currently doing a unit on kites, and she is going to give students freedom to form their own groups and to choose a topic for their research (e.g. how to make kites or how they are used in festivals). She also wants to use verbal presentations, claiming they are motivating because students feel ‘proud of doing well in front of their peers’. For example, her students are asked to give a verbal presentation on their current unit on kites.

However, Matt suggests that she could motivate her students more effectively if she uses a system of rewards. For example, she could divide the class into groups and award points for good behaviour or correct answers, but deduct points when students don’t behave or are off task. He suggests using the Interactive Whiteboard to display the points for everyone to see.

Whose ideas would you support, Matt’s or Jessica’s?

Write at least two short posts of approximately 50-70 words: one in response to the case and one to another person in the group or you can choose instead to make two posts in response to at least two people in the group.

Use the following communicative strategies in your responses to other students:

- Re-stating: to clarify or refine ideas – repeat in your own words (‘as you said, ...’).
- Extending ideas of others: to add more information or a new perspective (‘you said ..., and...’).
- Presenting alternatives: to propose a different perspective (‘you said...but on the other hand...’).

Don’t forget to use the strategies from the Introductory Forum (Forum 1):

- Addressing people by name.
- Acknowledging their ideas by complimenting and supporting them.
- Agreeing with their point of view.
The Worksheet for the above task filled in by the lecturer

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### Learning Outcome(s)
- Understanding children’s learning motivation in the classroom.
- Differentiating between ‘intrinsic’ and ‘extrinsic’ motivation.
- Understanding the advantages and disadvantages of these two types of motivation, and their interrelatedness.
- It is essential to nurture intrinsic motivation so children are interested in learning.

### Is the task authentic? How is it linked to learning outcomes?
- The task is authentic as it portrays a school-based case which relates to the postgraduate education students’ work environment.
- The views of the characters in the case expressed in a detailed and practical way resembling everyday conversation.

### What is the ‘controversial’ element, issue or problem to solve?
- The students are asked to explain which character’s point of view they will support. Because the points of view are opposite, this creates a controversy in the discussion.
- The students have to support and/or critiques each point of view.

### Anticipate / prepare for when you expect students will need steering (e.g. when the students do not address the concepts which you anticipated them to)

*In their discussion I expect the students to address the following concepts:*
- Intrinsic motivation lays the foundation for lifelong learning.
- Extrinsic motivation (e.g. awards, points) should be used with caution and only when it supports the development of children’s intrinsic motivation.
- If not used properly extrinsic motivation can be detrimental to intrinsic motivation.

*If the students do not touch upon these points in their discussion, I would prompt them by questioning or providing an example (‘interactional scaffolding’).*

### What communicative strategies will students be focusing on?

In this forum students are explicitly asked to use the following strategies:
- Justifying their position through explanation.
- Presenting alternatives.
- Challenging the idea(s).

Language choices are provided for each strategy. Additionally, students are reminded to use the ‘positive social interaction’ strategies which they used in the introductory forum, including ‘addressing by name’, ‘acknowledging’ and ‘supporting others’ ideas’.
Explicit instructions for student participation

- It is made clear to students that it is compulsory for them to participate in all the forums; however, their participation is not graded, but counted towards class attendance.
- Students have to contribute to each forum with at least two messages. Each message should be short, and written in a spoken-like manner. The suggested strategies should be used.

Planning for lecturer participation (e.g. what do you anticipate your own participation will be? How will you organise discussion structure to suit your class?)

My participation in the forums includes

- Reading all the messages which students post but responding only when necessary.
- Identifying the moments when the students need clarification or prompt to keep them moving towards achieving the identified learning outcomes.
- Replying to students who did not receive any responses, to keep them feeling connected.
- Model the communicative strategies when posting my messages.

The subject enrols approx. 50 students so I divide them in 5–6 discussion groups.

2. Example of the Worksheet for postgraduate subject ‘Language in context’

The following worksheet was used to demonstrate another application of the strategies. It featured a discussion task designed for a postgraduate educational linguistics subject. Rather than a case study approach, the lecturer used an opinion piece from online media about the nature and place of grammar in current curriculum. For more examples see the website www.fold.org.au

Learning Outcome(s): Students will
- better understand the approach to grammar that underpins English K-10

Discussion Starter 1

Grammar stirs up a lot of passion and at no time more so as when our recent national English Curriculum mandated that students develop a cumulative knowledge about language across the years of schooling. However, many commentators have argued that teachers themselves struggle with aspects of grammar. Misty Adoniou agrees but argues that there’s more to grammar instruction than teaching students about nouns and verbs:

‘I’m going to put it out there – most teachers don’t know enough about how the English language works [aka grammar], and this inevitably impacts upon student literacy outcomes. There are grammar pundits who love their knowledge about the language for the haughty power it affords them: the ability to write corrective letters to the editor and the certain belief there is one right way to write and speak – their way. This group gives grammar a bad name. Grammar isn’t about linguistic straitjackets and rules; it is how creativity manifests itself in language. Grammar is how we organise our words and sentences to communicate with others and to express ourselves.’

https://theconversation.com/grammar-matters-and-should-be-taught-differently-25604

Do you agree with Misty? What are the challenges for you and your students with respect to the grammar requirements of the curriculum?
### What is the ‘controversial’ element, issue, problem to solve?

- Grammar as accuracy vs grammar as a resource for making meaning (precursor to reading: Derewianka, 2012).
- Teachers’ lack of linguistic subject knowledge (precursor to reading: Myhill, 2016).

### Anticipate/prepare for when you expect students will need steering ...

- Grammar beyond the sentence and word – we look at language patterns across the whole text, as well as at sentence, group and word levels (4x4?).
- Is accuracy important at all? (Yes).
- Anxiety is okay ...
- Students’ literacy attainment.
- Commercial materials.

### What communicative strategies will students be using?

- Naming.
- Acknowledging.
- Initiating ideas ‘I think ....’; ‘In my opinion ...’
- Clarifying ideas ‘Can you give an example?’, ‘What do you mean by ..?’
- Agreeing ‘I agree’; ‘That’s true’.

### Explicit instructions for student participation:

Please read the discussion starter and make at least two responses on the forum (50-70 wds). As this is our first discussion task for the semester, in your responses you might like to use some of the following communicative strategies developed from our recent research.

In order to establish social rapport, we’ve found strategies such as **naming** the colleague to whom you are responding and **acknowledging** an aspect of their post are useful. For ways to explore the topic of grammar teaching, you might **initiate** one or two ideas in response to the discussion starter, or ask a colleague to **clarify** theirs or perhaps let someone know that you **agree** (or disagree) with them.

The purpose of this task is to engage you with the topic of this subject (that is, the knowing about language strands of the Australian curriculum) and to begin to build a community of learners in the subject. This discussion forum is key to the latter. Here’s where we will meet now and at the end of each topic to collectively build our understandings of the subject topics and to hear how individuals are working with the ideas in the classroom. Don’t worry if you are not in the classroom at the moment – we will have plenty to work with!

### Planning for participation: Your own? How will you organise a discussion structure to suit your class?

Consider putting forum activity into the specific week.

### Follow-up:

Locate one student text rich enough for working on each of the three topics.