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**The use of an on-line discussion forum to  
support collaborative studying practices and  
argumentation amongst trainee teachers**

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**Abstract**

This study emerged from my concern as module tutor over the lack of participation amongst my student teachers on an Initial Teacher Training degree in lively, reasoned debate. Traditional approaches to teaching, which see learning as primarily a cognitive, internally-driven process, rarely take into account learners' linguistic and cultural worlds outside the classroom. A sociocultural perspective of learning makes clear the links between individuals' personal worlds and learning, and acknowledges the crucial role these worlds play in shaping a person's language and cognitive abilities. Facebook and Moodle sites were designed, aimed at promoting student participation in the debate around developing early reading. The research question concerned how far social media could contribute to enhancing students' critical thinking and academic language, and what role the course tutor had in facilitating effective, online discussion. Findings identified a high quality of debate and critical thinking on the two sites, with my role as facilitator of the discussion being crucial in maintaining participation and guiding language use. Further research needs to be undertaken in order to investigate the potential of social media for encouraging and facilitating meaningful and challenging educational debate.

**Key-words**

Socio-cultural research; socio-cultural discourse analysis; systemic functional linguistics; social media; online discussion; student teachers; critical thinking; argumentation; home-based literacy practices.

**Background**

This study emerged from concern, in my role as module tutor for English on an undergraduate Initial Teacher Training course, over the lack of participation amongst second-year students in lively, reasoned debate. Within one of the modules, 'Developing Early Reading', the understanding and critiquing of theoretical principles and pedagogy, and the application to classroom practice is crucial, as is an ability to present evidence-based arguments to support and refute opinions. However, amongst these students professional communication is minimal, with only a few students speaking out in class. Conventionally, students are set focused questions linked to key readings, which are discussed in subsequent sessions, with varying degrees of engagement. In order to try to facilitate critical debate and deepen understanding, and to tap in to students' home-based literacy practices, on-line discussion fora were set up.

**Context**

Traditionally, approaches to teaching have regarded the learner as an 'empty vessel', to be filled with knowledge and information about the world imparted by an expert. These traditional approaches, which see learning as primarily a cognitive, internally-driven process, rarely take into account learners' linguistic and cultural worlds outside the classroom (Hall, 2012). A sociocultural perspective of learning, on the other hand, makes clear the links between individuals' sociocultural worlds and learning, and acknowledges the crucial role these worlds play in shaping a person's

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language and cognitive abilities, as well as their beliefs about the language and their identities as language users (Hall, op cit.). Freire (1972) describes this use of students' own life experiences in literacy teaching as 'conscientization', where students 'find their voice and are able to become subjects, rather than objects, within their own histories' (Maybin, 2013).

Despite concerns over the increasing use of digital media reducing youth participation in literacy, often fanned by moral scare stories in the media (e.g. Thompson, 2009; Beck, Ritter and Lash, 1992), it has been acknowledged that a wide range of literacy practices are occurring in most people's everyday lives (Ivanic et al., 2007; Lunsford, 2009). Ivanic et al. (2007) define a literacy practice as a social practice which is generally textually mediated, and which includes certain tools, technologies, materials and resources which are specific to text generation or a communicative event. Such elements as genre, audience and participants are also pertinent to the literacy practice or event. Literacy practices are wide-ranging by their nature, and cover any form of communicative event, for example, the use of social media, reading a novel, writing an assignment, sending a birthday message. Ivanic et al. (op. cit.) suggest, rather than focus on the deficit model, one which compels educators to 'fix communities...so that they match normative views and practices' (Gutierrez, 2008:151), educators should 'build relationships between students' everyday literacy practices and those of the curriculum' (Ivanic et al., 2007:704). Being aware of students' outside literacy practices and using significant elements within the classroom learning environment is likely to be more contextually appropriate and accepted by students: it is supporting the 'border crossing of literacy practices from the vernacular and informal to act as resources for learning across the curriculum' (Ivanic et al. 2007, Maybin, 2002:706).

Both Ivanic et al. (2009), and Maybin (2013) identified Further Education students' preferred and valued home literacy practices to be active, collaborative, multimodal, flexible, non-linear and online working. Vital to harnessing the potential of home literacies to enhance learning is providing students with 'opportunities to identify with the selves' (Ivanic et al., 2007: 718) within reading and writing activities. Conversely, if students associate reading and writing practices with identities which they resist (e.g. providing information for the tutor's purposes) engagement is less likely. The process of re-contextualising home literacy practices into the school or university curricula is complex: what works in one situation, with one group of students may be less successful elsewhere (Ivanic et al., 2007). Achieving a resonance between students' vernacular practices and those addressed in the classroom, is crucial to the successful use of any literacy practices and events. Gutierrez (1995, cited in Gutierrez, 2008), in noticing that in classrooms, a 'counter-script' connected to the students' home lives and experience was occurring alongside the more academic script, proposed the concept of an unscripted 'third space' between students and teacher. They saw this as the intersection between 'teacher script' and 'student script', in which is formed a new sense of 'knowledge and knowledge representation' (Gutierrez, 1995, cited in Gutierrez 2008:465). In this 'third space', they suggest the chance for students to achieve a stronger sense of identity, and an understanding of appropriate and important forms of participation (Duff, 2004). This calls into question the role of the tutor-facilitator. For some, it is seen as pivotal in helping students develop their 'semiotic awareness and take a critical perspective on meaning, context and semiotic choice' (Coffin, 2009:529), in supporting learning through modelling dialogue moves and encouraging challenge during the discussion (Pilkington, 2001; Guldberg and Pilkington, 2007), and in promoting the language of argumentation, e.g. challenging, evidence giving and requesting elaboration, within educational debate (McAlister et al. 2004).

The use of a socio-linguistic approach moves the focus from language itself to language functions for 'thinking collectively' and 'the pursuit of joint intellectual activity', (Mercer, 2004:138-139). The establishment of an online discussion space attempts to promote Mercer's 'Exploratory Talk', where 'knowledge is made more publicly accountable and reasoning is more visible in the talk' (Mercer,

2004:146); and aligns with Alexander's 'cumulative talk', where pupils and teachers build on each other's talk to develop 'coherent lines of thinking and enquiry' (Alexander, 2008). Using social-media such as Facebook or the university's Moodle aims to enable a 'multi-voiced' and 'reciprocal' exchange of contributions (Lund, 2008:48), where students are learning *through* and *about* language (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004 cited in Hall, 2012), developing knowledge through dialogic exchange, arriving at a 'collective production' (Lund, op.cit) of what constitutes early language and reading development. As social discussion platforms, Facebook/Moodle are 'conversational and public' (Thompson, 2009:1), and it is this public engagement of thinking and understanding which heightens learning through written language (O'Halloran, 2013a). It is also at the heart of the sociocultural perspective of language learning, where language is seen to 'mediate and shape thinking', rather than a reflection of mental processes (Lund, 2008:39). Through collaboration, as ideas and reflections of fellow students feed into students' own internal dialogues, students will attempt to construct knowledge and meaning, enabling them to see different points of view and perspectives, which helps create their own arguments (e.g. O'Halloran, 2013b; Coffin, 2009). The skills of argumentation are particularly useful in exploring the themes of the current module. There is much debate and controversy both within the educational research community and policy-makers, over the pedagogical approaches recommended to teach young children to read. In order to be reflective classroom practitioners, students need to be aware of the evidence which underpins effective practice. As such, they are required to critically appraise evidence and policy relating to developing early reading, make evidence-based challenges to both past and current claims, and engage in a high-level, professional discussion, where they are using the skills of both demanding and giving clarification, elaboration and justification.

### **Research aims and questions**

The research aimed to address the following questions: first, to what extent were students more likely or not to engage in discussion on-line, than in the classroom, and what were the reasons for this; second, were the skills of argumentation and collaboration being displayed in the on-line discussion, and if so, how far did students believe this contributed (or not) to their capacity for critical appraisal and understanding of the issues and research evidence around the development of early reading? Collaboration is not only an important approach to develop students' own critical thinking, but it embraces a set of skills which, as student teachers, they are encouraged to develop in their pupils. A further aim was to examine techniques for facilitating an effective, synchronous online discussion (e.g. Pilkington and Walker, 2003).

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The study involved 155 Level 5 undergraduate students on a Bachelor of Education (QTS) degree at a university in northern England. One cohort (Group A, 79 students) were third years on a four-year degree course, the other (Group B, 76 students) were in their second year of a new, three-year degree. Each cohort is divided into two groups of 35-40 students, with groups having a weekly two-hour lecture on Early Reading Development. Lectures comprise teacher input, whole-class and small group discussions, and interactive activities to exemplify effective teaching practice. Working in small friendship groups is preferred by most, but some have expressed reluctance to sharing their ideas with others publicly, lest they be 'poached'.

#### *Data collection*

Data were gathered through a range of qualitative and quantitative methods: pre-design anonymous questionnaire to all students to gauge interest in an online discussion forum, student preference for the platform (Facebook or Moodle), preferred mode of use (mobile phone or computer), perceived advantages and disadvantages of a discussion group, and probable use; postings on the discussion forum; post-design group interview (10 students from Group B, self-selected through open invitation to the whole class, including participants and non-participants to

the on-line discussion); end-of-module evaluation questionnaires (MEQs). The post-design interview was only conducted with Group B due to the timing of the research: Group A had already left for their summer vacation.

*Setting up the on-line discussion groups*

Following the pre-design questionnaire (23% response rate), both Facebook *and* Moodle were set up to accommodate the minority of students who expressed a preference for Moodle. 85% of respondents from Group B, and 78% of respondents from Group A said they would either prefer Facebook over Moodle, or did not have a preference. This was linked to ease of access (via phones), reliability, instant notifications, and connection to friends. A desire to keep work and social life separate, and the view that Facebook was not appropriate for academic work purposes were reasons for a preference for Moodle. Perceived advantages of a discussion forum centred around sharing of points of view, understandings of the course readings, seeing things from a different perspective, and flexibility of access. Main disadvantages foreseen concerned inequity of contributions, and non-participating students benefiting from the ‘hard work’ of others. A new Moodle discussion forum dedicated to the module topic was established for each cohort, as were ‘closed’ Facebook pages for each group, meaning participation was via invitation only. Ground rules for use were set, stressing the importance of maintaining professionalism during the discussions. Initially, questions were set to show understanding of the course readings. Subsequently, I posted two typical school scenarios, concerned with the adoption of a strategy for improving reading, which students were asked to comment on, using the literature to support their claims (see Figure 1 for an exemplar question and scenario). The same questions and scenarios were posted by the tutor to both Facebook and Moodle: the only difference being student responses and thus tutor replies.

A typical question given to students, in relation to one of their readings.	<i>How far do you agree with Medwell et al (2012), that stories should give pleasure and should never be seen ‘just as vehicles for teaching skills’? Support your reasons with evidence.</i>
The first scenario posted onto the discussion sites.	<i>‘School A has been achieving very low SATs scores in reading for both KS1 and KS2, and the school recognises it is a problem. OFSTED are due to come within the next 6 months. The Literacy Coordinator proposes to introduce an intensive phonics-based programme across the school for all children in EYFS and KS1, and for any children who need it in KS2. Instead of a literacy lesson, children would have one hour of intensive phonics: no other literacy would be taught. Children in KS2 who don’t need this intervention would continue with normal literacy lessons. Do you think this is an effective way to tackle the school’s reading problems? What do you think OFSTED might say? Support your responses with evidence (from research/readings, session content, your own experience).’</i>

**Figure 1.** Examples of a question and scenario students were asked to respond to.

The fora were introduced three to four weeks before the end of the module. Participation was optional, though the anticipated benefit to students’ critical thinking and understanding was stressed. To facilitate collaborative argumentation, encourage justification of claims, and the use of appropriate academic talk within postings, students were encouraged to use McAlister et al.’s (2004) framework for ‘Academic Talk’, including a series of sentence openers linked to *informing*, (e.g. ‘The evidence presented by x...’), *questioning* (e.g. ‘Is it the case that...?’), *challenging* (e.g. ‘A counter-argument is...’), *reasoning* (e.g. ‘Both are right in that...’) and *supporting* (e.g. ‘I agree with x

because...’). In class, I explained how such sentence openers could be used to develop argumentation skills, and in turn, enhance joint critical thinking, and posted them onto both the discussion sites.

Group B also had the opportunity to respond and debate online at the beginning of our session, using their phones, responding in pairs or groups preferred. For timetabling reasons and lack of Moodle access on phones, this was not possible with Group A. See Figure 2 for a time-scale of the project.

Date	Activity
4/5/14-11/5/14	Students complete pre-forum questionnaire
12/5/14-16/5/14	Set up forum; explanation and ground rules to students
17/5/14-6/6/14	Students contribute to forum. I monitor and gather evidence on contributions, social connections, comments and use of argumentative language.
9/6/14-13/6/14	Group interviews with students for reaction to forum.
w/c 16/6/14	Exams. Students leave for summer.

Figure 2. Time-table of the research.

The tutor’s role as facilitator was explained, following McAlister et al.’s (2004) ‘Phased Activity Model’ (Figure 3). This included four key phases: *considering* (the question posted by the tutor in relation to the relevant course readings); *comparing* (research evidence and opinion on early reading); *debating* (taking positions and either defending or refuting them); and *consolidating and summarising* (tutor’s synthesis and understanding of students’ thinking and arguments). Once the scenarios were given, the tutor focused on ‘monitoring discussion and intervening to ensure meaningful outcomes without inhibiting discussion’ (Guldberg and Pilkington, 2007:62).

<b>Tutor (facilitator) sets question offline</b>	<b>Students’ offline preparation</b>	<b>Online group sessions</b>	<b>Tutor online</b>
Linked to source materials.	<b>Considering</b> source materials.	<b>Comparing</b> issues and elaborating of arguments.	
		<b>Debating</b> of arguments.	<b>Consolidating</b> issues, picking up on salient points, and identifying areas of misconceptions.
		Taking positions and defending them.	<b>Summarising</b> key arguments posted to the group

Figure 3. Adaptation of McAlister et al.’s (2004) collaborative learning activity model.

I explained that, with their written permission, data generated would help me plan discussion groups for the future, contribute to any research papers, and that extracts from all data sources would use pseudonyms. Ensuring appropriate privacy settings for the Facebook page was of prime importance: the ‘closed’ status of the page ensured only our groups could be invited and see the page. Cognizant of the possibility of Facebook being used inappropriately, in my dual role as teacher-researcher (BERA, 2011), I adopted Kubanyiova’s (2008) two ethical dimensions: ‘ethics of care’, in my

responsibility towards the forum participants, and 'virtue ethics', looking out for potential points of conflict or upset, and being willing to deal with them (e.g. BAAL, 2006).

### **Findings and Analysis**

The data generated from the on-line discussions were studied using two related frameworks of analysis, commonly used in research on language use and culture. Socio-cultural discourse analysis was used to study links between students' communication and their thinking processes (e.g. Mercer, 2004). This method of analysis attempts to assess the intellectual quality of teacher-student and student-student interaction (Hall, 2012), and focuses less on the language itself, and more on 'its functions for the pursuit of joint intellectual activity' (Mercer, 2004:141). A second analytical framework was used: systemic functional linguistics (SFL), based on Halliday's theory of language (Halliday, 2004). This approach seeks to understand the linguistic choices individuals make in particular contexts, and the function of these choices. These two approaches, taken together within the context of the current research, sought to explore how language mediated the construction of knowledge between student-student and tutor-student, and how it contributed to the construction of an effective argument (e.g. Coffin, 2013; Donohue, 2011).

#### *Engagement with the on-line discussion forum*

In Group B, 32 out of 76 students responded, individually or in groups, both in-session and out, all on Facebook. In Group A, only 5 students responded, all as individuals, all on Moodle. Most students posted one response, some posted two or three. Posts ranged from 50 – 400 words, (average 150 words). All discussions were on-topic and focused on academic argumentation. In the 25 postings from Group B, 96% referred to or asked for evidence, 72% citing at least two different sources. In Group A's 8 postings, 75% gave evidence, all from at least two different sources. For Group B this marks a significant difference from in-class participation, where only around 10-15 students will offer comments, most with no supporting evidence. For Group A, however, this is a decline in the number who would normally engage (8-10).

The initial questions prompted little engagement. Once the first school scenario had been posted, however, students in both groups started to respond. Last-minute postings were noted from Group B, once I told them we would look at their postings in the session the next day.

Following the posting of the second scenario, students in both groups responded in their free time, without prompting: *'It just needed one of us to start!'* commented one student. I responded to postings, picking up on key issues, posing questions, and addressing misconceptions (the *'consolidating'* phase). Once the scenarios had run their course, I summarised the main points, and added points for further consideration.

After the module had ended, and the exam question distributed, activity on Group B's Facebook page continued with students using it to clarify understandings, and issues related to the exam. Activity on Group A's Moodle forum ceased once the question had been distributed.

#### *The pursuit of joint intellectual activity*

The two discussion fora produced a large amount of data. Data used for this analysis are examples of both groups' responses to Scenario 1, chosen to show multi-voiced interactions and the use of argumentation. In these respects, they are reasonably representative of the whole data set. Students Fran, Kieran and Shelly were in Group A, responding on Moodle; Ella, Poppy, Annie, Roseanne and Ellen were in Group B, using Facebook.

The main dialogue moves (Pilkington and Walker, 2003), were for informing, support and reasoning. Phrases such as *'I believe...'*, *'I think...'* were typical when making initial responses to the scenarios.

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Phrases of agreement and support later appeared e.g. *'We agree with Rosanne that...'*, *'I agree so far that...'*, *'Fran rightly points out...'*, *'I agree with Kieran...'*.

There is evidence of engagement with course readings and co-construction of knowledge:

Ella: *'Although the Rose Review (2006) states phonics is essential for a child to understand how to decode....'*;

Poppy: *'Adding to what Ella says, Hynds (2009) also states the evidence for the Rose Review...'*;

Kieran: *'evidence from Bielby (2002) supports the use of a balanced teaching method....'*;

Questioning was used occasionally, to build on ideas, and could be a sign of increasing confidence:

Fran: *'But is giving them more phonics the answer?...Will it tackle comprehension and enjoyment of reading?'*

Kieran: *'What about the things Fran was talking about [...] how does the school intend to support and develop these skills...?'*

Shelly: *'[...] surely the purpose of phonics is to allow children to read?'*

Challenge occurred, usually in relation to the messages posed in my scenarios, rather than students challenging each other:

Ellen: *'Goswami explains that there is no empirical evidence to conclude that SSP is the best method to teach [...] reading...'*;

Fran: *'A drawback in the programme the school want to implement... I disagree with the school's actions...'* .

During the post-design interviews students expressed unease at challenging or disagreeing with each other, for fear of being wrong. The only instance of one student challenging another was Annie in response to Julie's uncritical claim:

Julie: *'Rose said that phonics instruction produced superior performance in reading compared to all types of unsystematic phonics or no phonics instruction'*

Annie: *'Although the Rose Review emphasises the use of SSP, other alternative strategies need to be taught. Johnson and Keier, 2010, identify that phonics can be too heavily relied upon and is often not the best strategy used due to our inconsistent English language'*.

Applying the framework of social discourse analysis, there is some evidence to show that students were building on both their own thoughts and claims, and those of their peers, through joint discussion, clarification and questioning. Overall, the analysis could suggest that the students are starting to engage in peer-to-peer intellectual debate through a low level argument pattern (Osborne et al. 2002, cited in McAlister et al. 2004), where extended argumentation involving claims and reasoned arguments are used, but are not yet extending to the higher level of argumentation, which concerns challenging each other.



*The building of knowledge through language and linguistic resources*

The overall communicative goal, through discussion, was to put forward a case, using supporting evidence, and comparing opinions with others. The following series of postings from Group B (Figure 4) were studied using Halliday’s framework for systemic functional linguistics (SFL) analysis. .

<b>Ella</b>	<i>‘Although the Rose Review (2006) states phonics is essential for a child to understand how to decode and blend word formations, it seems apparent that Hynds (2009) believes that the rose review is a ‘rather accomplished piece of spin doctoring’ with little evidence to validate the importance of SSP as the main tool for children’s reading abilities. [...]’</i>
<b>Poppy</b>	<i>‘Adding to what Ella says Hynds (2009) also states the evidence from the rose review was based on data from children aged 6 and up, which is a criticism for general use of phonics in FS but could be used to argue that phonics would be effective for aiding children with their SATs as they are older children.’</i>
	[other posts from different students over several days]
<b>Tutor – clarifying and consolidating</b>	<i>‘Naomi is right to make reference to Rose in support of such a scenario[...]. Would you say, that much of the research we have studied supports a broad approach to reading development, whilst acknowledging the important role of phonics, where appropriate?’</i>
<b>Rosanne</b>	<i>‘Indeed [to tutor]. The evidence seems to suggest overall that although SSP helps children decode and read words, it is not the only approach to be considered.[...] After all, engaging children’s emotions helps aid deeper levels of thinking and understanding, (Wray, 2004) making learning more memorable to help create schematic means of thinking (Piaget).’</i>

**Figure 4.** Extract showing the building of knowledge through discussion.

Applying Halliday’s (1993) framework for making visible the connection between language use and context, the three components of *field*, *tenor* and *mode* have been used in this analysis. The field, or social activity taking place, is a discussion about best approaches for teaching early reading, the topic being discussed a fictitious school scenario. Students need specialised knowledge of the evidence to support or refute arguments: both the evidence and the researchers are put in the position of agents responsible for guiding decision on which model of reading to adopt. In relation to tenor, the three students appear to have equal power and authority. Despite differences in tutor-student status, this is not a barrier to discussion, with Rosanne responding confidently to the tutor’s remark, suggesting she regards the tutor as an equal – *‘Indeed, Helen’*. The general absence of modality suggests students are fairly sure of each other’s alignment with their own positions. However, Poppy’s use of *‘... could be used to argue...’*, and Rosanne’s *‘the evidence seems to suggest...’* could be an indication they are opening up the argument for negotiation. In relation to mode, students and tutor are responding both to each other, and to the scenario, making it highly interactive, although not very spontaneous, as the exercise is guided by the tutor. There was a degree of planned response, students being encouraged to refer to course literature. Whilst language mainly constitutes the text there was occasional use of other semiotic resources, including smiley faces, and thumbs up sign for ‘likes’.

This brief SFL analysis suggests that the communicative goal, of putting forward evidence to support an approach to developing reading in young children, has been achieved, and that new communicative routes were formed amongst students who in class would not normally have conversed, nor with such authority. It would also seem that their language choices in several cases,

has enabled the students to construct meaning and extend their understanding of the key issues involved in the debate.

#### *Students' perceptions of the Facebook page*

Through the qualitative focused discussion, it was evident that the forum would have been better introduced at the beginning of the module, with more discussion about its purpose:

*'I found it really helpful in the end[...] but at first I didn't see the point in it. So maybe more discussion about why we're doing it...'. (S2)*

Facebook appeared to give students a sense of ownership, independence and collective learning, in a familiar environment, with more time to reflect on people's comments and the course readings (compared to discussion in class), and prepare for the exam, even if students did not personally post comments:

*S5: 'Well you weren't put on the spot as much, and everyone had to kind of input as well, and you could do it in groups, so it wasn't as intimidating really...[...] you can read it in your own time';*

*S3: '[...] me and [S8] were sitting together yesterday trying to read Clay, and trying to make sense of it all, [...] thinking [...] we don't understand what's going on!', then we went back, and read [S7's] comment on Facebook, and then it all sort of linked in together, to what we had been reading previously';*

*S3: 'I think that's why it's been so helpful for me. It's made me feel more comfortable with the exam'.*

There seems to be a place for both an online discussion forum and in-class discussion, with one feeding into the other:

*S2: 'I think there's room for both, because the Facebook page has helped me with the question, and my understanding, and there's loads of things on there that people have put... I think it helps create a discussion, and actually talking about it as well [in class].'*

#### *The role of the tutor*

Students saw the tutor's input vital in keeping them focused, affirming knowledge and understanding, addressing misconceptions, summarising posts, posing further questions, and generally being positive:

*S5: 'It makes you feel better...yeah... like "I've got it right";*

and in encouraging and supporting the use of academic language:

*S2: I think the way people wrote changed because of the way you were involved. I think if you hadn't been involved in it, and it was literally just students, you wouldn't have got that academic style of writing.'*

As such, this supports the findings of Coffin (2009), Pilkington (2001) and Guldberg and Pilkington (2007), who all emphasised the important role of the tutor/facilitator in maintaining academic dialogue.

## Discussion

The quality of the postings in the Facebook and Moodle discussions indicate that the on-line discussions are likely to have achieved their aim in contributing in some part to students' understandings of the key concepts under discussion, their ability to draw on relevant research in adopting a reasoned, critical stance when presenting an argument and developing someone's else's claim (Coffin, 2009), using the language of argumentation. Social discourse analysis showed that intelligence and knowledge were being generated through the students' own participation rather than by the tutor as the sole voice of authority (e.g. Lankshear and Knobel, 2006), and literacy was placed within a familiar and preferred format (Ivanic et al., 2007) – in this case, chiefly Facebook. Students responded to people they normally had little contact with, resulting in new ways of thinking and alternative connections between ideas emerging (e.g. Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 cited in Leander and Rowe, 2006). From students' comments in the interview, it would seem that my role as facilitator of the discussion was crucial in providing constructive and positive comments on students' contributions (Pilkington and Walker, 2003), in encouraging further participation, and maintaining the language of academic argumentation.

In response to concerns over new technologies 'dumbing down' writing skills, the SFL analysis applied to the data shows that this research supports Lunsford's belief that modern students are able to adapt the tone and technique of their writing to suit their audience (Lunsford 2009). The Facebook and Moodle discussion groups, rather than 'dehydrating language' (Thompson, 2009), could be providing support for more complex and academic writing tasks: there is certainly evidence of language mediating and shaping thinking (Lund, 2008). It appeared that having an audience to write for was 'essential to the creation of text and the generation of meaning' (Grabe and Kaplan, 1996:207): students were writing in the knowledge that other students and I would read their posts, or be involved in the discussion, and responded accordingly. It would also seem that through the protocol of use established initially, the identity of the discourse community was defined and patterns of discourse established (e.g. Raith, 2009, cited in Thomas, 2014). Facebook, in particular, is normally a forum where students can use more 'relaxed' or casual language (Lankshear and Knobel, 2011). During a university-wide social-media seminar where I presented initial results, colleagues were impressed by the high quality of my students' responses, and linked it to the clear protocol given. It was noted that, in any social media forum, both students and staff need to understand its public nature, and manage their professional identities, and that the culture of an on-line (and indeed off-line) community is typically defined by its first founders and moderators: the tone of the community remains once it is established.

However, the discussion groups did not take off straight away. The low response rate to the pre-design questionnaire to gauge interest in the discussion groups was possibly indicative of some reluctance amongst students to engage in an activity for which they could not see an immediate personal benefit. Much persuading was initially needed to encourage participation, despite my emphasising the benefits. Student feedback in interviews indicated that being the first to submit a post was very scary, with students afraid to 'look stupid' in front of their friends, and I subsequently addressed this by inviting group and in-class postings. I had assumed that writing comments on Facebook would be less intimidating than speaking in front of the class (affirmed by the pre-design questionnaire): students later revealed that the permanency of a written post made them feel vulnerable to peer criticism. Group A's relative lack of engagement may be partially attributed to their module finishing before I had an opportunity to encourage in-class and/or group participation. In addition, for this group, technical problems with Moodle persisted, putting many of them off. It is not clear why they did not engage with the Facebook page, although once contributions to Moodle began, then this probably set the scene. Conducting post-research interviews with Group A would have helped me explore these issues, but due to the module end date for this group, unfortunately, this was not possible.

With regards to McAllister's framework for academic talk, students proved to be confident using the language of informing, questioning, reasoning and supporting, and indeed, made specific linguistic choices to support their arguments. However, there was a definite reluctance to challenge each other, possibly echoing Mercer's definition of 'cumulative talk': focusing on 'positive but uncritical discourse' (Mercer, 2004:146).

### **Conclusion**

Through applying a socio-cultural perspective to the study of language use, the research found that a collaborative on-line learning discussion was established amongst a substantial group of students, where the students themselves developed, and gave meaning to, a socially-constructed learning community: as such, they appeared able to 'find their own voice' (Maybin, 2013). Through adherence to a clear protocol of language use, along with specific linguistic choices, students' critical thinking and understanding of the themes and research under debate were developed. Participation was much greater when students were asked to comment on typical school scenarios where they could draw upon a range of sources and literature and frame this to pose a coherent argument, rather than answering decontextualized questions about course readings. As Guldberg and Pilkington (2007) found, careful structure on behalf of the tutor in advance of the discussion, aimed at developing students' collaborative building of knowledge and inter-discussion skills, is key to any future success. The remit of any on-line discussion forum needs to be shared with students from the start of the module, emphasising purpose and personal benefits.

The preference for Facebook over Moodle was linked to ease of access (instant) and familiarity, although consideration needs to be given to those students who feel Facebook is an inappropriate platform for academic work. If Moodle is to be used, it is essential to ensure a phone App is available. The use of Facebook in an educational debate needs careful management and monitoring to make sure that students feel empowered by the technology in having their opinion engaged with effectively: I have to question how much students felt agents of their own communications (e.g. Lankshear and Knobel, 2011: 188), or was I, as tutor, still regarded as the main agent. The key issue in effecting a similar initiative is to make clear the links between students' personal worlds and the learning, by setting appropriate, engaging and real-life tasks to facilitate their learning and understanding (Crisp, 2013), using a platform relevant to their practices and preferences, thus enabling a strong sense of student identify to flourish within Gutierrez's 'third space' (Gutierrez et al., 1995, cited in Gutierrez, 2008).

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