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Title

A great resource that should be utilised more, but also a place of anxiety: student perspectives on using an online discussion forum.

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Abstract

A range of studies into the efficacy of online discussion forums is available, and this study seeks to add to the body of evidence around how students say they feel about using online discussion forums within a distance learning context. The Open University (OU) is still the UK's largest provider of distance higher education. OU distance learners are encouraged to participate in asynchronous online discussion forums and collaborate with their peers, thus benefiting from working with others and reducing social distance. We investigated student perspectives on their feelings about participation in 'tutor group' forums. We drew on comments provided via email to identify key themes and provide insights into positive and negative experiences, and some findings reinforce existing research, e.g. forums as a welcome source of peer and tutor support. However, we also identified practices and factors reported as causing anxiety or reluctance to enter an online 'space', and leading to non-participation. These included the nature of other students' posts, dominance by peers, unwelcome demands on students' time and the 'exposure of the self' through writing online. We consider the tensions and anxiety reported, discuss the implications and suggest ways forward to improve the online student experience.

Key words: distance learning online forums student participation

student perspectives academic writing

Introduction

This paper reports on a study which drew upon insights into student perceptions and experiences of using an online ‘tutor group’ discussion forum in one faculty at The Open University (the OU). These experiences and views were initially sought for the purposes of conducting a broader evaluation of forum use within the Faculty, and to then share with colleagues ideas for improving future presentations. However, as we will go on to explain more fully, during this process, the authors encountered reports of how students felt about such experiences which merited a closer look, as what they were reporting potentially had implications for their learning experience which went beyond forum use. The continuing growth in digital technologies has enabled HE institutions, and ultimately practitioners, to make use of increasing possibilities for involving students in participation and collaboration with others in online teaching and learning contexts and the OU has been using online forums since 1988 (Thorpe, 2014). Access to asynchronous discussion forums is seen as one way to ‘take the distance out of distance learning’, according to the University’s own website, (Open

University, 2018) by encouraging and, in some cases, requiring students to contribute to discussion forums for a range of purposes. We focused on the use of asynchronous online forums, specifically ‘tutor group’ forums used by students and tutors across a range of modules in the Faculty of Education and Language Studies (FELS, recently re-named WELS, the Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies). The tutor group forum is an important site for online interaction between an individual student and a small group of other students, offering the opportunity to communicate within a more clearly defined context of a community of learners. The group tutor is expected to have a regular social presence on such forums, moderating and managing discussions, and so students are strongly encouraged to make use of the tutor group forum for social as well as learning purposes.

It is generally agreed that participation by students, in the form of active engagement with discussion threads started by tutors and/or other students is highly desirable, (Fayard and De sanctis, 2010) and the OU, as a leading distance education provider, is very keen to encourage and sustain such participation. In the initial evaluation of Faculty modules, we had sought insights into how students felt about their own experiences of using discussion forums, a survey motivated by a desire to enable the ‘learner voice’ (Sharpe et al., 2010) and which viewed students as ‘experts of their own experience’ (Symeonides & Childs, 2015 p. 540). We asked two simple questions of students: *What did you like about using your Tutor Group Forum on x module? What did you not like about using your Tutor Group Forum on x module?* This evaluation, conducted via email, was carried out in order to enable us to eventually use such insights for the purposes of staff and module development, with a view to improving the student experience. The email responses we received did indeed offer insights into what effective – and less effective - online tutor group forums ‘feel’ like, both for students and for tutors, though in this paper we do not report on tutor responses. However, we were struck by one particular aspect of the student voice, i.e. how they reported ‘feeling’

about forum use, particularly when their experiences of using – or not using- the tutor group forum were less positive. Such experiences have implications beyond the use of the tutor group forum on one module, i.e. for the quality of the students overall learning experience and potentially their success on future modules. Once the evaluation was completed, we revisited the considerable body of written data we had elicited in order to consider the following: How do students say they feel about being invited to use such forums? What kinds of feeling do they report? As practitioners, we had some reservations about the nature of some of the recommendations we were aware of and had encountered in the literature. These seem to focus mostly on what tutors need to do, for example in terms of offering ‘icebreakers’ and other such activities. However, if such ‘solutions’ were appropriate, we wondered why students in our context were still expressing reluctance to engage with forums, and still felt such trepidation around posting to a forum. We also considered, could this reluctance and anxiety related to tutor group forum participation be better anticipated and addressed?

The context

Students who study at undergraduate or postgraduate level with The Open University (OU) are usually allocated to a tutor group of between 15 -20 students, and have the support of a tutor who also assesses their academic work. All students have access to an online tool known as a ‘tutor group forum’. This is used asynchronously, and can be defined as ‘a text-based computer-mediated communication environment that allows individuals to interact with one another without the constraint of time and place’ (Hew et al, 2010). It is moderated and managed by the group tutor. Forums operate at other levels in the Open University - for example those available to the whole module cohort - but this study focused only on the forum available to the tutor group. Student activity on forums can be an assessed part of their

studies on a module, or participation can be optional. In a large distributed distance learning university such as the OU, the use of online tools that enable students and tutors to interact, both in real time and asynchronously, is a well-established practice. The tutor group forum is used to interact for a variety of purposes:

- practical, e.g. to share information, such as when tutorials take place;
- educational, e.g. to discuss module content and ideas, as part of an assessment process, where students are required to engage in specific activities;
- for social purposes, e.g. to introduce themselves to each other at the beginning of the module.

OU students can be new to using such tools, and so self-directed support is available online via the OU's website, the 'Help Centre'. Online forums are viewed as a valuable 'resource' in the OU context, and students are reassured that participation 'can make a big difference to your study as they connect you to other students and keep you motivated. You can share problems and ideas at any time' (Open University, 2018). **Indeed Hewitt (2005) identifies benefits such as learners being able to work at times and places of their own choosing, and the disposal of a need for turn taking. He also argues that there is in theory the opportunity for everyone to simultaneously participate without fear of interruption. Learners can also 'reflect in greater depth before they share their ideas publically' (p.568). Much emphasis is placed in the literature on using forums for collaborative purposes and on the academic benefits and Symeonides & Childs (2015) provide a detailed account of research which highlights some of the benefits to students of working in this way. However, they also identify examples of why communication in discussion threads can fail. Some learners reported missing the 'important aspects of face-to-face communication', others became frustrated at those who would not reveal a**

‘true identity’, and some felt they had to ‘force’ themselves to interact. Communication online was seen as ‘staid’ and like talking to strangers publically (p. 541). The development of a supportive online community was hampered by such feelings. They also highlight that little attention has been paid to providing ‘insight into the experience of interacting and the importance of this for learning experience’ (p. 540). Students are also informed via the institutional website at the OU that they will need particular skills in order to use a forum successfully, and that problems can arise due to time delays, or lack of verbal cues, for example. There is therefore an acknowledgement in student – facing websites of the ‘risk’ involved in posting online, though the tone is understandably positive and encouraging. Our written data therefore enabled us to have access to a range of student accounts of actual ‘experiences’ of using tutor group forums, and below we present examples of these from level 1 undergraduate to postgraduate. In the next section, we will firstly discuss relevant literature, and then we explain our methodology. The findings will be presented via selected examples, with discussion, of student comments. We conclude with a discussion of the implications of this study and the issues and tensions it raises for supporting student learning via online discussion forums.

Building an online community

Opportunities, challenges and motivations

Active participation in online environments by student learners continues to be seen as something desirable, for example Prestridge (2010,p. 252) noted that developments in ICT were already providing ‘opportunities for learning communities, enabling many-to-many

communication that is not place or time dependent'. Fayard and Desanctis (2010, p. 383) also note that 'online discussion forums are increasingly regarded as important venues for promoting learning across the boundaries of time, space, and formal organization'. They note how building a sense of 'we-ness', a 'sense of belonging' is important but they add a note of caution, in that it can also 'be difficult to achieve in virtual contexts' (p.384). Much of the literature and the guidance offered to students via institutional websites assumes that a high level of active participation in online interaction is both desirable and beneficial to the learner. Ruey (2010) notes that 'a collaborative, interactive, constructivist online learning environment, as opposed to a passive learning environment, is found to be better able to help students learn more actively and effectively' (p.706) and Milman (2017) argues that student interaction is critical to online social cohesion and collaborative learning.

Research into the use of ICT in online learning has also addressed what motivates students to participate in online forums, and the advantages and challenges of doing so. For example Kear (2004) who noted that students participate in discussion forums if they see 'sufficient benefits' (p.162) in doing so, for instance, if participation forms part of assessment, and Camarero et al (2012) highlighted that perceived usefulness was key to students' engagement in online forums for learning. They also pinpoint the 'crucial' role played by lecturers in supporting and encouraging participation. Others have identified a range of factors which make students reluctant to participate, for example Hew et al (2010), who reviewed 50 empirical studies in order to identify the factors leading to limited student contribution. They identified seven in total, listed below, which included, not in order of priority of importance:

- (a) not seeing the need for online discussion, (b) behaviour of other participants, (c) personality traits, (d) keeping up with the discussion, (e) not knowing what to contribute, (f) lack of critical thinking skills or being content in merely answering queries, and (g) technical aspects. (p.573)

Other research, however, had focused more closely on the lived ‘experiences’ and feelings of students, rather than simply their views on using forums, which are often sought for the purposes of course evaluation. For example Sharpe et al., (2010) found that many studies focused primarily at the level of module evaluations, rather than on how learners actually use and experience technology, and they argue that e-learning research has tended to give far more emphasis to the practitioner perspective and to module design. Recent research which considers a student perspective has focused on, for example, student perceptions of attending online asynchronous discussion forums and what they view as effective discussion (Ebrahimi et al, 2017). Interestingly, in some contexts, for example in the context of L2 language learning, the shift to using online forums for participation has been found to help reduce L2 anxiety and increase perceived competence in the language (Kissau et al, 2010). However, other research has identified students’ lack of experience as an early source of anxiety, for example Zembylas (2008), in a study of the role of and changes in ‘emotion discourses’ in adult learners, found that this anxiety reduces as they gain experience. Though not specifically focused on online discussion forums, O’Shea et al (2015), using an ‘engagement framework’, draw on the student ‘voice’ in their study of the online learning experience for undergraduate and postgraduate students. ‘Student ‘voice’ was also reflected in Shapiro et al’s (2017) study which revealed the ‘authentic voices’ in their focus on the motivations for and barriers to course engagements experienced by students participating in Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Symeonides and Childes (2015) argue, however, that there has been less focus on the ‘emotional aspects of learning’ in recent research into online contexts. In their in- depth inquiry into how 6 mature online students on a Master’s degree course feel about and experience their online learning, the key theme that emerged was ‘difficulties experienced in relation to written communication within the online learning environment’.

They report how participants ‘struggled as they felt written communication was ‘not real’ and ‘unnatural’ and often felt vulnerable when ‘talking’ publically on discussion forums.’ (p. 540). These feelings include those of ‘exposure’ and ‘students’ trepidation and reluctance in posting answers on the forum’ (p.542). They argue that students’ reports of negative emotional states ‘supports the need to recognise emotions as fundamental to social and academic aspects of online learning’ (p 543). Their finding regarding the role of having to write in a forum in engendering feelings of anxiety is an important one, and although there has been much research into student writing on online contexts, the emotional impact of having to do this online has been less of a focus.

The risks and challenges of writing forum posts

As Symeonides and Childes found, the prospect of writing in forums presents some students with a task they find daunting, and which they may therefore avoid. Recent research which has centred on student writing in online discussion forums has focused more on the forms and structures of the writing they produce, for example syntactical structures (Mancilla et al , 2017), rather than the challenges it presents to students. Other recent research focuses on students’ written participation in much more highly populated online environments, such as MOOCs. For example, in their study of student participation and links to performance in a peer review of written summaries, Meek, Blakemore, & Marks, (2017) suggest that more guidance or support might be needed for some groups of students, especially as some did not participate in the task. Academic writing demands of students that they develop skills and confidence in a wide range of academic written genres, including ‘ the expression of point of view in speech and writing’ and ‘the ways we engage with others’ (Hyland and Guinda, 2012,p.1), including attention to stance and voice, which are ‘central to ways of looking at written texts as social interactions, where readers and writers negotiate meanings, and to how

students can be taught to convey their personal attitudes and assessments and appropriately connect with their readers'. Students will be expected to express often complex abstract ideas which may be new to them, and there is useful advice available to practitioners in Higher Education on how they can help students develop their academic writing, (for example Coffin et al, 2003). It is, however, acknowledged that this is not a straightforward task since 'written exchanges are frozen in time and can be analysed in greater depth, thus laying students open to greater critique' (p.145). In addition, the authors explain, writers are required to develop a style which is partly conversational and informal, yet at the same time academic, a complex 'hybrid' form which only more experienced academic writers might achieve. It is therefore unsurprising to find that the demands of such a task can lead to non-participation and avoidance of forums altogether by more novice academic writers who may feel they lack the skills needed.

Tutor role in encouraging forum 'presence' in new contexts for learning

Recommendations in the literature reviewed often contain sound advice on 'good practice' in forums, and some of the literature presents recommendations which place the onus on the tutor to address student concerns. Dennen (2005) in a case study of nine online courses across seven universities, suggests that, in the contexts studied, the use of guidelines, deadlines and feedback, as well as the 'type of instructor presence' and the kind of learning activity used affected the online discourse. This can result in a 'true learning dialogue' (p. 127). Kear (2010) and Kear et al (2014) note that for online learning communities, such as those that develop around online forum use, 'One significant difficulty is a lack of 'social presence''. They go on to note that 'low social presence can be a particular issue in text-based,

asynchronous systems such as discussion forums, leading to feelings of impersonality and disengagement from online learning', and suggest tutors might employ personal profiles and pictures to help reduce this. However, such remedies assume that students feel confident in joining such forums in the first place, and are indeed 'present', rather than experiencing the anxiety and reluctance to engage that some of our respondents reported. Hew et al (2010) include useful 'good practice' tips, which place the responsibility on the tutor to make changes in their practice, e.g. for addressing the '*behaviour of other participants*' suggestions include tutor involvement in discussion, the use of ground rules and use of controversial topics.

However, some researchers (Beaudoin 2002, Dennen 2008, Symeonides and Childes, 2015) have also focused attention on students who do not post on the discussion forum, and therefore present challenges for tutors due to their 'lack' of presence. These are sometimes referred to as 'lurkers', but Dennen notes the possibly negative connotations of the term, and Fritsch (1997, cited in Beaudoin 2002), offers the alternative term 'witness learners'. Symeonides and Childes (2015) refer to 'reluctant' participants. Beaudoin (2002) focuses on understanding the factors that contribute to students keeping a 'low profile', though nevertheless they are 'still engaged and actually learning when not actively involved in online discourse with other students and faculty.' (p.147). Beaudoin's questionnaire on reasons for non-participation highlighted (p.150) that students simply preferred to read what others wrote, or did not comment in time, as others made the same point. In their open responses, 'the factor cited most often is that online learning is a new experience and students need time to become acclimated to using it.' (p.151). Symeonides and Childes (2015) also refer to participants' lack of familiarity with the online environment (p. 539), which can be little improved even by the time a course is completed. Time to develop skills and understanding is

therefore needed. For example, work by Scheja and colleagues highlights also that learning in higher education is a complex process through which students build personal contexts for interpretation and understanding (Scheja & Pettersson, 2010; Scheja & Bonnevier, 2010; Halldén, Scheja & Haglund, 2013), providing a lens through which they can make sense of learning material. Arguably, the newness of working in online forums as part of the learning process may add to the inherent complexity for such distance learning students and possibly provides a background to some of our findings around negative feelings and anxiety.

Johnson (2017) highlights the benefit of what she calls 'Thinking time' when students are working in online forums: 'Having written records of conversations that learners could revisit at their leisure meant that they became much more meaningful. It also provided an excellent opportunity for the tutor to review discussions that would otherwise have been missed....' (p.11), though as mentioned previously, it opens students up to sometimes unwelcome critique of their writing. This approach also places the emphasis again on the tutor's active 'presence'. Indeed, Johnson (2017) and Yaunken (2012) both found that learners valued clear directions from tutors, including deadlines being given for postings, as this was seen by learners as motivating. Salmon's (2011) model for effective use of online forums for learning included a requirement for there to be support from a tutor at all times, so that learners' posts would always be acknowledged and actively encouraged, leading to discussions being developed. There are, however, clearly workload implications for tutors, especially part-time ones, and again, the focus in such recommendations is upon changes to be made by the practitioner. We would argue that such 'tips' and recommendations do not fully address the challenges students face when asked to participate through the written medium with others in new and unfamiliar contexts. If, as is argued, writing lies at the heart of teaching and learning in Higher Education, then we would suggest that institutions could and should do more to

support and guide students as they enter such contexts, and are required to develop their online academic writing practices in such ‘exposed’ places as tutor group forums.

In sum, the literature highlights some assumptions about forum use by students and tutors with a clear need for a much closer consideration of the students’ experiences of using forums, particularly in relation to their emotional responses, i.e. their reporting of what it ‘feels’ like to participate. In the next section, we outline how we set about focusing specifically on how students say they feel about using the tutor group forum.

Methodology

As mentioned in the previous section, recommendations for changes in practice are sometimes made following module evaluations, and such evaluations are clearly also an important source of finding out about the student experience of using online discussion forums. The examples presented in this paper were originally collected in July and August 2015 for such a purpose. During the process of analysing student responses, the authors encountered some which expressed an emotional, and often highly personal account of their experiences. As we progressed through the analysis of the written texts in the initial evaluation, the experiences we had encountered, such as lack of tutor and peer use of forums, and on the other hand, forums as a place of community, echoed those already identified by other researchers. However, both authors were struck by the responses, often in lengthy narrative form, which expressed how the writers ‘felt’ about being asked to participate in a tutor group forum. The keywords *felt/feeling* were used over 100 times across the data set, at all levels, in the context of reporting both negative and positive experiences, and some students (14) used them more than once in their responses. However, a detailed linguistic

analysis has not so far been conducted, and so detailed discussion of language use would be a focus of further and future research.

Background: module evaluations

For the initial module evaluation purposes, a sample of nine modules of varying sizes in terms of student numbers and level of study had been selected, though all were from within one faculty. Two short questions were sent out to 5748 students at Levels 1 (equivalent to year 1 of an undergraduate course), 2, 3 and postgraduate. The questions were: ‘What did you like about using your tutor group forum on x (module) and ‘what did you not like about using your tutor group forum on x (module)?’ These were administered via email in order to allow for more open, narrative responses and freedom of expression if preferred. In doing so, the authors sought ‘rich and varied insights’ (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 126).

The responses received ranged from just 2-3 lines of comment, to responses of over 700 words. Overall, this resulted in over 58,500 words of data, which was compiled into a 134-page document, organised by module, to aid analysis. The decision to address students directly via a personalised email from one of the authors [*James Roy*], was taken as a way of hopefully encouraging more responses as well as to convey the significance of the study as having a role in informing future presentations of modules (Dörnyei, 2007, p. 114). Emails were sent after the undergraduate modules had finished, which may have affected response rates, though postgraduate students were still engaged with their modules as they were working mostly independently on their final research projects. The questions were sent 3 times to all students. All student responses were personally followed up with a ‘thank you’ message from James Roy. The authors received a 7.5% response rate with 429 responses from students. In addition, one email was sent to all 317 tutors on the 9 targeted modules,

which included the question ‘*What works for you in managing your tutor group forum?*’ We received 61 responses (19%). However, tutor responses are not discussed in this paper.

The modules

Two postgraduate Masters in Education modules were targeted: E854 (*Investigating Language in Action*) and E852 (*Language, Literacy and Learning in the Contemporary World*). Both were at the time modules on the ‘Applied Linguistics’ pathway. The others were three modules at level 1, two at level 2, and two at level 3.

[table 1 here]

The overall response rate was 7.5%, and as table 1 shows, some module responses were higher, e.g. postgraduate modules. These 2 modules were still in presentation during July/August, and are presented online, i.e. they do not offer ‘face to face’ tutorials. Tutor responses are also included in this table, for reference.

Organisation of student and tutor responses

When we carried out the evaluation of faculty modules, responses which arrived via email were initially collated and then students and tutors were anonymised as S1, T1, etc. The authors were essentially dealing with a large volume of written data. The two authors initially worked independently, carrying out a close reading of all the responses in the emails, until we reached a point where the written data did not add further to identified themes. This initial reading was then discussed, and the authors agreed on the key themes that we could report back to colleagues, i.e. those which emerged often, and these were labelled using students’ own words as far as possible. These were identified as either ‘positive ‘ themes, for example building a sense of community/group / support from each other, seeing the forum as a social

tool which reduces isolation, and positive comments on the tutor's role, i.e. valuing guidance and information and a speedy response to posts, or 'negative'. Less positive themes to emerge included poor student, i.e. peer uptake and use, dominance by 'the few', the demands on students' time, lack of tutor pro-active presence and engagement. However, we also found that some student comments resisted easy and neat categorisation. For example, they sometimes reported on the potential for a positive experience/feeling to become a negative one (see for example number 1, below). Comments which reported feelings of nervousness, anxiety, insecurity, isolation and a sense of 'exposure' when using or being required to use tutor group forums were also reported. Several of the themes, both positive and negative - for example students liking forums as somewhere they could build a sense of community, but also disliking the limited use of and sometimes dominance by individual peers in their group - came as little surprise, and have already been identified by others, as reported in the literature. However, what struck both authors in particular was the detailed nature of responses which reported how students felt, which addressed what we originally labelled the negative theme 'nervousness, anxiety, insecurity exposure'. Our knowledge and understanding of the literature suggested that this was an aspect of student experience that would benefit from closer consideration, once the faculty evaluation was complete. Though it was a less common theme to emerge, we would argue that it is an important one and more challenging to address, and as the literature suggests, the emotional aspects of learning have been less of a focus. In the next section, we present some examples of student responses.

Findings and Discussion

Student responses

In this section, we present examples from both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ themes, and these are included to give a sense of the kinds of responses received from students across the modules. We begin with an interesting example, which illustrates the way some comments from students crossed boundaries thematically, as ‘helpful’ would suggest ‘posting guidance’ (its thematic location) is a positive. (Examples are anonymised with a letter/number reference and level, where S= student.)

(1) I think if the tutor was not warm and helpful I would have dropped out. Important to have a human tutor who has empathy with students (S195, level 3)

However, the notion of a ‘human tutor’ might express a need to connect, and a view of the forum as a ‘social tool’ is reflected in the next examples:

(2) It feels like there is support there and everyone is in the same boat with the studies (S132, level 2)

(3) it made me feel that I had others around me who were experiencing the same highs and lows alongside me (S150, level 1)

(4) ‘I liked the interactivity of the forum, the possibility of exchanging perceptions and enriching my views with the hybridity of thoughts. I felt the TGF was a space of honest enquiry, of trial and error and of growth’ (S382, postgraduate)

Examples 1-4 focus on the notion of forums as a community, with their reference to ‘everyone’, and ‘others’ and a common experience, ‘the same boat’/ highs and lows. Student 4 also refers to the benefits for learning that engagement in forums can bring, through exchanging views in order to enhance their own understanding. However, students also

commented on their feelings about less positive aspects of online experience, as the following examples illustrate.

(4) *'It personally really was a lonely negative experience, when you're studying after being out of study for a long time and you can't get to tutorials as they are too far away you look to the forum for support but there was none there'.* (S68, level 1)

This student also reported attempts to start discussions, and receiving few replies. Indeed, Kear et al (2014, p.1) note that 'in asynchronous online environments (for example, discussion forums), the possible delays between a contribution and any responses can exacerbate the problem' of feeling disengaged and isolated, a finding supported by this example:

(6)*I didn't much like having to communicate through the forum and consequently hardly took part at all - and nor did many other people, either. Whenever I did it felt like sending messages to outer space as there was very little response from other students, though my tutor always responded.* (S46, level 1).

The positive aspects which other students highlighted seemed to be missing from these students' experiences, whilst several of the negative themes were experienced, including lack of social presence and lack of support (example 5). Limited participation clearly can potentially impact on learning, too, as such experiences develop into a reluctance to engage, which can lead to the empty forums which some students reported as something they did not like.

In our data, poor uptake by other students, combined with lack of tutor presence seems to have resulted not surprisingly in negative experiences:

(7) *'no topics raised, no discussion, has made me feel very uninvolved with the course and as if I'm studying totally alone'* (S379, postgraduate)

And one student avoided the forum:

(8) *'To be fair, I only used this forum a few times - I think I'm a bit of a 'forumaphobe''*
(S302, level 3)

By contrast, some forums were well used, but in a way which resulted in 'dominance by the few', and the 'tone' of responses by other students was also commented on as a negative aspect of the experiences of some, e.g. one noted that 'students with more experience would sound condescending' (S64, level 1). The challenges faced by students when writing messages, in terms of getting the tone and style 'right', was also reported on, and led to a range of feelings:

(9) *'I haven't used it often as I'm not entirely comfortable using it because I feel a little intimidated by it. I'm mainly concerned about sending a message which would come out wrongly. Perhaps, this feeling will improve with time.'* (S44, level 1)

(10) *'I liked the fact you got a quick reply if you asked a question the negative to that is you feel a bit stupid if it's an obvious question'* (S295, level 3)

(11) *'I also feel people are a little shy using them as the tutor is included and they don't want to say anything that may appear silly or make them look stupid.'*(S324, level 3)

Students also show awareness of the presence of what are referred to in some of the literature as ‘lurkers’. Indeed for some students, the awareness that others might read their posts, but not engage, elicits feelings of discomfort. As one student commented, ‘Knowing people would be reading but not adding is a bit uncomfortable’ (S261level 3). Such experiences seem to lead to anxiety and a reluctance to contribute for some, enabling dominance by the few. Given that they also report the challenges of finding the appropriate academic writing style and ‘voice’ in this context, and awareness of a ‘presence’ which might not directly respond to them, a range of barriers can start to build up. In trying to ‘sound’ right, the challenges of finding the appropriate register were commented on:

(12) *‘I generally don't like participating in the TGF. I find online debate stilted and awkward and I struggle to express myself. I'm never quite sure of the register.’* (S383, postgraduate student)

Issues such as this, where some students have to face the ‘struggle’ to write, alongside other negative issues, can combine to make some students view forums as a burden. This is even more so when the module assessment required them to make contributions, which they did not see as ‘work’, as the following level 1 students comment:

(13) *‘What I did not like about the tutor group forum was spending too much time sometimes on it when I needed to do work.’* (S61,level 1)

(14) *‘I hated that some work had to be posted into the forums, I felt it was unnecessary stress and it made me very anxious and self conscious’* (S91, level 1)

Students at different levels of study identified this particular negative, and as this postgraduate comment shows, not only the time involved, but the value of student posts is questioned:

(15) 'I recognise the usefulness of peer comment but it was far too time consuming trawling thru all the postings- due to job, family and other parallel commitments. Reading every single posting became unmanageable- and I enrolled to read professional articles, not peer opinions.' (S397, postgraduate).

Along with this anxiety around selecting the right language before posting, some students, once they took the plunge, viewed writing on the tutor group forum as an 'exposure' of the self, as these undergraduate students put it:

(16) 'I felt I was publicising how stupid I really am' (S186, level 3)

(17)'These forums always made me feel stupid and I avoided them like the plague. The occasions we were asked to use them and leave comments would create great anxiety for me. I always found, 'perhaps unfairly', that people used them to show off how unbelievably intelligent they were. This made me feel inadequate and inferior. I avoided reading the threads because I would be left feeling I had no business doing an open university course' (S87, level 1)

Such feelings were also partly echoed by a postgraduate:

(18) 'The TGFs feel more formal and I feel Im (sic) in the spot light' (S398, postgraduate)

These students include very powerful accounts of how they ‘feel’, which moves beyond describing what they simply dislike or think about forums. There is, for some, a feeling not only of isolation induced by lack of forum activity, but also, for those who attempt to address this, experiences which can lead to negative self-evaluations. This can potentially impact upon how they view themselves as learners, for example as ‘stupid’, and having ‘no business doing an open university course’.

Clearly, the role of the tutor as moderator and manager of their tutor group forum is important in trying to establish, encourage and maintain a welcoming ‘sense of community’ as well as helping to prevent and address any issues such as those illustrated above. However, the student voices in the examples from our data highlight that much more than a set of ‘icebreaker’ resources may be needed to help prevent the negative feelings experienced by these students when they visit forums, read posts and attempt to write their own in order to participate. We consider possible ways forward in the next section.

Recommendations to improve the student experience of online learning

Our data reveals the sense of trepidation and almost fear reported by some students around posting to an online forum. Significantly, this was mentioned across all undergraduate levels and even at postgraduate level. One tutor (T11) even describes setting up an individual meeting in the tutor group forum to help a student who ‘did not dare go in’ to what some students conceptualise as a ‘place’, or a ‘space’, which for some is socially uninviting. The student and tutor data serve to reinforce the existing arguments for the ‘social presence’ of a

responsive and sociable tutor, who engages in dialogue, however brief, with each individual student. Some examples above indicate student dissatisfaction directed at tutors, as references to over-dominance by ‘the few’ suggests a continuing need for tutors to be as pro-active as possible in finding friendly ways to draw in other students to a discussion and to skilfully manage discussions that are dominated or ‘monopolised’. Nevertheless, such interventions by tutors, however welcome, would need to come at a stage when students are already using a forum; our research implies that those who never cross that threshold are unlikely to see any benefits from more careful management of forums and the discussions held there. The obstacles faced by those who feel and experience anxiety surely need to be tackled *before this stage*. Much emphasis is given to inducting students and preparing them for study in higher education, yet preparation for entering those ‘spaces’ might come too late for reluctant and often inexperienced participants.

This study therefore highlights some important issues which have implications for those who teach and support students in online contexts. We have not reported in detail on the tutor responses in this paper, but our findings suggested that there is (a) a need to clarify the *role* and *purpose* of the tutor group forum, as appropriate to the level of study, and the role of tutors who manage it and (b) this needs to be communicated to students more effectively. Most importantly, though, students need to be supported in preparation for writing in online contexts such as small group discussion forums, so that they can develop their writing practices in ways that enable them to express academic ideas and their own views with confidence, and without feeling they will be ignored, ridiculed or made to feel unworthy. This is a responsibility which goes beyond the tutor group level and needs to be addressed by institutions as part of ongoing support for students.

Conclusion

Our study reinforces the arguments that the need for students to learn how to use, and tutors how to manage, online forums is still ongoing, despite the wealth of good practice and recommendations already available. Online tutor group forums at all levels potentially offer students a context in which they can become a part of an academic community of practice. Given the perception by students of this 'space' as a rather public one, then how to provide appropriate support to enable learning in such contexts, and what form it should take, continues to be an issue that needs addressing and will apply to any provider of online learning and tuition. This study has provided some insights into the current tensions which exist across a wide range of undergraduate and postgraduate modules in one context. These include tensions between forums as a place where there can be too little or too much participation; tensions around what to write and how and finding the right 'tone'; tensions around the degree of tutor social presence or absence; and as generating tension as a place of both support and anxiety. We would therefore argue that institutions who are increasing their online provision, such as the Open University, and who wish to continue to develop a positive learning environment for their students, need to consider the feelings experienced by students and ultimately, offer better support in developing appropriate strategies to improve the learning experience of all students.

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Module	Number of students (2015)	Responses/Response rate	Number of tutors (2015)
E100: The Early Years: Developing Practice	654	32/4.6%	31
E111: Supporting Learning in Primary Schools	450	17/3.8%	28
E102: Introduction to Childhood Studies and Child Psychology	2268	123/5.4%	137
E210: Extending Professional Practice in the Early Years	387	27/7%	15
E212: Childhood	659	23/3.5%	37
EK313: Issues in Research with Children and Young People	623	65/10%	35
E301: The Art of English	518	100/19%	22
E852: Language, Literacy and Learning in the Contemporary World	96	19/19%	6
E854: Investigating Language in Action	93	23/21.5%	6
Total students surveyed	Responses received	Overall response rate	
5748	429	7.5%	
Tutors surveyed	Responses received	Overall response rate	
317	61	19%	

Table 1: OU modules

